FCE: A Framework for Curriculum Evaluation

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ABSTRACT

This paper is an attempt to conceptualise the scope of an evaluation framework for curricula in higher education. The framework presented in this paper (FCE) considers static and dynamic aspects of curricula. While briefly showing the state of the art requirements to an evaluation framework are summarised. After introducing the research setting and the methodology applied for this work, the Framework for Curriculum Evaluation (FCE) is presented with its two levels: definition level and execution level. For the execution level the questionnaires used for students, teachers and administration staff are briefly presented to make the utilisation of the FCE explicit. Some of the questions are exemplified to demonstrate their use in real settings. Discussion and conclusions finalise the paper.

KEYWORDS

Curricula, Evaluation, Higher Education, Qualification, Qualitative Methods, Questionnaire

INTRODUCTION

It is still a great challenge to establish an evaluation process for curricula in higher education. Besides developing and providing a new curriculum now and then in universities, for the success of its establishment it is crucial to establish a quality assurance mechanism. On the other hand, introducing a new curriculum is not a one-time activity. It is a continuous process: on the one side, its quality, up-to-datedness and relevance with regards its content and methodologies applied for learning and teaching must be assured; on the other, the quality of its utilisation and execution in real time must be guaranteed. This is a difficult task for the most universities. They struggle with different approaches to find the best solution for the evaluation processes at their faculties, but unfortunately the most of the time with no satisfaction. The complexity lies in the dynamics of the changes needed for the curricula selves, in the unpredictable amount of students and also in the industrial and academic environment which students are educated for. Adaption based on these different aspects is a complex task involving several stakeholders, varying from teachers to students and others outside the universities.

In the literature there is a lack of evaluation approaches on a higher level. The main part of the research on curriculum evaluation is concentrated on competence management or course-based assessment models, without considering the big picture of a deployment of curricula at universities. They do not really evaluate whole processes established in higher education to provide curricula-based studies on bachelor, master and doctor levels. Neither do they use requirements of industries or academic work environments to assess the accuracy, quality or relevance of contents, knowledge, skills and competences that must be included in curricula. However, a few sources show first attempts to suggest how to approach evaluation of curricula as a process and which methods could be useful to gather data or find out what the quality of an established curriculum is. Nevertheless, there is no ready to use framework for curriculum evaluation that is abstract enough to utilise for a specific
setting and at the same time concrete enough to help faculties to set up an adapted evaluation process for their need. This paper tries to fill in this gap by providing a curriculum evaluation framework.

This paper attempts to conceptualise the scope of an evaluation framework for curricula at higher education. The framework presented in this paper considers static and dynamic aspects of curricula. The next section summarises the relevant state of the art literature related to curriculum evaluation. It also presents the main requirements to an evaluation framework that are considered in the Framework for Curriculum Evaluation (FCE) presented in this paper. After introducing the research setting and the methodology applied for this work, FCE is presented with its two levels: definition level and execution level. For the execution level the questionnaires used for students, teachers and administration staff are briefly presented to make the utilisation of the FCE explicit. Some of the questions are exemplified to demonstrate their use in real settings. Discussion and conclusions finalise the paper.

RELATED WORK AND REQUIREMENTS

Curriculum evaluation means a systematic process of collecting and analysing all relevant information for the purpose of assessing the effectiveness of a curriculum to promote its improvement (Al-Jardani, 2014, p.128ff; Nichols et al., 2006). There are different dimensions of evaluation: by focusing on what to evaluate – macro and micro evaluation; by focusing on when to evaluate – pre-use, in-use and post-use evaluation; by focusing on judgement about the quality or adequacy of a curriculum or on forming or shaping the curriculum to improve it – summative and formative evaluation.

The focus of macro evaluation is on general issues, like the format of the modules to evaluate, their relations to each other, general issues of achieving the objectives of a curriculum or the approach used for knowledge transition (Tomlinson, 2001). On the other hand, micro evaluation looks more at the details of the modules and single courses, the learning material, the exact ways of teaching or assessing the knowledge achieved through the module or courses, steps and sets of methods and teaching materials used within a module or a course, etc. (McGrath, 2002; Ellis, 1997). Pre-use evaluation is the most difficult type of evaluation because there is no experience of applying a curriculum to evaluate (Cunningsworth, 1995). The substantial effort and accuracy of this type of evaluation makes its application time-consuming and difficult. In-use evaluation aims to check the decision of the module selection in the pre-use stage of a curriculum (Cunningsworth, 1995; McGrath, 2002). It might also address what worked well and what was changed during teaching the modules in the past. This helps to gather information about all teaching stages – from planning, to implementation and new assemblages. Post-use evaluation is about evaluating a curriculum after it has been already established and there are experiences with its quality, effectiveness, and results. Summative evaluation is the most common type of evaluation and has the purpose of making a summary or judgment about the quality or adequacy of different aspects of a curriculum. This might result in comparing it with other curricula or with standard curricula available by ACM or other central institutions, or judging it as fulfilling certain criteria or not (Nation and Macalister, 2010; Richards, 2001; Brown, 1995). Formative evaluation has the purpose of forming or shaping a curriculum to improve it in order to find out what is working well and what is not and what problems can be identified. Normally with this type, the information collected is used to address problems and ways to improve the delivery of the modules in a curriculum (Nation and Macalister, 2010; Richards, 2001; Brown, 1995).

Besides helping to develop a sense of ownership, the results of an evaluation might affect not only the curriculum itself also the teaching environment and the ways of teaching as well as it might help with the professional development of teachers (Nation and Macalister, 2010). The results of curriculum evaluation must be published in a way that the context and reasoning of the judgement are clearly presented and understandable for all stakeholders addressed. The format can be a combination of oral and written reports. These reports must sum up the main issues and show implications and ways how to improve things. However, there is also a need for a follow-up stage to evaluate the evaluation and to follow-up the possibility for these evaluation recommendations. Moreover, these evaluations and
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