

Improving the quality of teacher education

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Some miscellaneous notes about the challenges of improving subject teacher education in Finland and especially at the University of Helsinki.

The memo rests on the conclusions of a recently published evaluation report:

Kaivola, T., Kärpijoki, K. & H. Saarikko (eds.) (2004). *Towards coherent subject teacher education: Report on the collaborative quality improvement process and international evaluation. Evaluation of the quality of education and the decree programmes of the University of Helsinki. Evaluation projects of the University of Helsinki 21.*

Introduction

During the time period starting from 1998, the profile of subject teacher education at the University of Helsinki has been raised considerably. A clear indication of this is that subject teacher education was listed as one of the ten key areas of development in the University of Helsinki Strategy for 2004–2006. Also, many areas in need of development that emerged during the international evaluation of subject teacher education in 2002 have been addressed. The recommendations for intensifying cooperation between the various partners involved in subject teacher education have been taken into special consideration in curriculum development, the subjects applying direct admissions at the Faculty of Science and the Faculty of Arts being the first ones to make serious efforts to intensify cooperation.

The report (Kaivola et al. 2004) has described the development work undertaken by faculties and has shed light on the experiences of developing the studies required of teachers into a prestigious minor subject programme providing students with teaching qualifications. The report has focussed on student recruitment, student selection and the interaction between teaching and research. Special attention has been given to the development and establishment of cooperation between the various departments and schools involved in providing teacher education. Furthermore, the report has discussed future challenges of subject teacher education and the upcoming reforms of academic degrees and curricula.

Meeting the needs of society

The greatest challenges facing subject teacher education are in meeting the need for teachers in the different subjects of secondary and upper secondary education. According to the Finnish Ministry of Education, subject teacher education must in the next few years make special efforts to increase the number of students in the programmes for mathematics teachers and foreign language teachers, especially English teachers. Those in charge of subject teacher education must solve the problem of how to continuously

increase the number of students without compromising the quality of instruction. Also, they must find ways to arouse the interest of students of mathematics, chemistry and physics in subject teacher education. Increasing the number of students in the programme in education required of teachers poses special problems, for even now both teaching resources and premises are stretched to the extreme. As it is quite obvious that the need to expand subject teacher education applies only to the next few years, teaching personnel will have to be hired on a temporary basis. At the same time, however, permanent personnel will, in all likelihood, be required to increase their teaching hours or continue to increase the number of students in their groups. This not only poses challenges to the maintenance of high standards in quality, but also to teaching arrangements in both didactic studies and practice teaching. Furthermore, attention must be paid to the teaching staff's job satisfaction and well-being at work.

The University of Helsinki has already taken into consideration the Ministry of Education's recommendation to consider the needs of the integrated comprehensive school (classes 1 – 9) in teacher education. In practice, this primarily means providing students with teaching qualifications of a wide scope. The extensive minor subject programme (35 credits) to be incorporated into the class teacher's degree is now available in almost all subjects taught in the comprehensive school. In subject teacher education, multidisciplinary studies in the subjects taught in the comprehensive school (35 credits) have recently become available for a small quota of students. However, the Ministry of Education urges that these studies should be offered as a minor subject to students representing as wide a range of fields as possible. The University of Helsinki offers subject teacher education programmes to the art universities as well. Bearing this in mind, the Ministry's plan seems unrealistic at the moment, for the upcoming reform of degree structures has already made it very difficult to incorporate new minor subject options into the Master's degree. Completing studies in only one teaching subject plus the above-mentioned multidisciplinary studies does not seem to be an attractive option for prospective subject teachers at the moment.

In the development of the contents of the curriculum of studies in education required of teachers, efforts are being made to organise courses which would offer genuine opportunities for interaction between students in the programmes for class teachers and subject teachers. The joint modules could be associated with any area of pedagogic studies, but in recent discussions general pedagogics and especially teaching practice have emerged as suitable candidates for such modules. Most naturally, the joint courses would relate to studies preparing for interprofessional cooperation, multidisciplinary modules and curriculum planning.

Reforming curricula and the structure of degrees

The faculties are currently implementing the Strategy for Teacher Education at the University of Helsinki (website; <http://www.helsinki.fi/opettajaksi/strategia>). A common feature for the faculty-specific implementation plans is the effort to raise the profile of subject teacher education by organising, for example, courses relating to the teaching profession and teaching-related field-specific courses. Also, the faculties and departments have appointed teachers and other members of staff to act as personal tutors for students

in the subject teacher education programme and as coordinators of communication among the staff. During the implementation process, the faculties will discuss how the proper allocation of the posts established for teacher education will be ensured. Presently, in all the expansion programmes of subject teacher education at the Faculty of Arts, nearly all teaching posts are for a fixed-term and dependent on project funding from the Ministry of Education.

Various other measures have been undertaken to facilitate the operation of the tripartite collaboration scheme and to ensure students' smooth study progress. It will be of the utmost importance to agree upon the principles and practices of supervision of theses crossing administrative borders between faculties and to sort out how the performance points gained from the completed theses will be distributed between the departments involved.

The transfer to the European two-tier degree system requires extensive curriculum planning. As far as subject teacher education is concerned, the new system seems to lead, at least to some degree, to less freedom of choice, as minor subjects have to be chosen early on in studies for the Bachelor's degree. The studies in education required of teachers must be pursued at both the Bachelor's and Master's levels, as the major subject studies will take an increasingly important position at the Master's level. Personal study plans, teachers acting as tutors and other measures supporting the smooth progress of studies will increasingly concern all parties involved in the organisation of subject teacher education in the next few years. This also entails further development of course and training registration practices, dissemination of information, follow-up of study performance and feedback systems.

More focus on continuing and in-service education of teacher

It has become apparent that universities must increasingly take responsibility for the continuing education of subject teachers. Organising professional development that takes place on a regular basis and focuses on central pedagogical issues at schools and up-to-date subject-specific competence is part of the duties of universities. An extensive cooperation project along these lines has been launched with the municipalities in the greater Helsinki area and the province of Uusimaa. The aim is to make continuing education a regular component of the teaching provided by university departments and to offer opportunities for prospective teachers and professionally active teachers in continuing education programmes to meet as often as possible to share experiences.

The expansion of the duties of the permanent network of field schools to provide basic training for students in the subject teacher programmes also leads to considerations concerning continuing education. The commitment of the supervising teachers in the field schools to cooperation with the staff responsible for teacher education at the University will be encouraged by offering them regular opportunities for training. The aim is to offer all interested teachers in the field schools the opportunity to complete a tailor-made professionally-oriented Licentiate degree, consisting of continuing education courses and field-specific postgraduate studies. The purpose is thus to improve the quality of

supervision provided to students and to support the professional development of teachers as researchers of their own work.

Research-based teaching should be made more visible

The University of Helsinki is a teaching and research environment where all activities are based on research. In subject teacher education, the practical application of this principle means that students will be introduced to research in their fields of specialisation and will form their own professional identity during their studies. In the research-based training of subject teachers, the aim is to bring together recent research information about theories, methods and best practices in both the students' fields of specialisation and behavioural sciences. A further aim is to increasingly strengthen the connections between theory and practice and thus support the growth of students into experts in teaching and education.

The education providing teaching qualifications of a wide scope must be based on the combination of scientific and constructive critical thinking, and practical skills. This will be achieved by organising an increasing number of integrated modules, which will combine aspects of the students' fields of specialisation, subject didactics, and the gathering and analysing of material that is related to genuine teaching situations or is otherwise professionally relevant. Students will also be encouraged to participate in the activities of research groups.

Educating subject teachers who are competent in their fields of specialisation, pedagogically skilful, and who recognise their responsibilities as educators is a challenging mission. The documents and guidelines incorporated into this report point the way towards the continuous improvement of the quality of subject teacher education in the next few years to come. Our greatest resource is the talented and motivated students who are showing a genuine interest in the teaching profession. Studying at the university is, in many ways, a time of moulding an adult personality and forming a professional identity. Therefore, it is of the utmost importance that all staff responsible for teacher education engage in cooperation in a responsible way and thus contribute to the education of this socially significant group of students. The following description of a significant personal learning experience during teacher education, told by a recently graduated teacher of religion, psychology and philosophy in an interview during the research project of Kallioniemi and Kaivola (2003) gives us some clues of the process of capacity building:

What intuitively comes to mind is this practice session in subject didactics, without pupils. We were supposed to have brought in an object representing or simulating our own field, but I had, of course, forgotten all about it. The others had Bibles, crucifixes and candles with them, and I had nothing. I had been to the swimming hall and took out my swim goggles. I was supposed to present this object with a straight face and explain why I had chosen it. After thinking about it for 30 seconds, I stated that teaching was like diving under water in a swimming pool. When you go under, the surface noise is muted and the underwater world has its own pulse. This stimulated quite a good discussion in the group, and at that moment I realised that this was not bad at all. [...] Also, the group was such that this alternative gave food for thought, and the didactician did not lose her temper, quite the contrary. [...] Sure, there were other experiences with pupils and so on,

but at that moment I realised that it is a good and necessary thing to find my own style. I must, in order to be able to be satisfied with my own work. In addition to finding my style, I must establish an ideological foundation for why I am here and what we are all doing. And this foundation must be strong enough to withstand any fierce wave that, especially in our subject, may hit you in the face.

[...] It is no accident that I am in the teaching profession; it was for me a terribly important question of choice. I think that it was good that during that year there was no harsh criticism, but rather, everyone was supported in finding their own personal style. Our teaching methods and choices must fit our personalities. There are no ready-made moulds, and if anyone offers a mould, it should be rejected, because we work with our personalities and are not acting out a role.

References:

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