A change to the organisation of ULLL: case study from the University of Tartu, Estonia

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Changes have became an inseparable part of the higher education, at least this the Estonian experience during last 15-20 years. There are changes that can be first and foremost associated with the political and economic development in the country (e.g. quickly increasing number of (adult) students (who pay themselves for their studies)), the ones that relate to the fast development of ICT-based technology (e.g. establishing of Estonian e-University), changes that got their start with Bologna declaration (e.g. changing the degree structure from 4+2 to 3+2), and the ones in case of which one cannot refer to the particular reason or starting point. Programme-based management of tuition is one of these. It means complex management of the content of a curriculum (including e.g. plans for internationalisation) and its related practical matters, e.g. its financial cost-effectiveness, marketing, solving students’ socio-economic problems etc. Started with an aim to respond better to the needs of students, society and employers, it relates also to the development of learning outcomes, need to make university more entrepreneurial and international.

Programme-based management started in 2005 with appointing programme managers for Open University degree programmes. Since 2006 Fall all degree programmes have got programme managers and in Fall 2006 also continuing education at the University of Tartu was reorganised according to the concept.

Previously, academic departments/ faculties were responsible for teaching. They did it with the staff they had, the way they have used to do it. They did not care too much about the cost-effectiveness of their work nor did not, as a rule, took responsibility for marketing the curriculum. There was no systematic way to take into account employers opinions. If the curriculum was taught by different departments, there was usually no systematic coordination between these that resulted in overlapping or gaps in the programme.
UCE organisation was based on traditions that meant that some departments/faculties organised short courses independently, some did not do it at all and several topics were covered by the courses organised by central unit – Distance Education Centre. With the increasing numbers and importance of LLL (adults degree and continuing education) and UCE in particular in the university and a need to relate it better to the degree education, university came to the conclusion that so called programme-based management was also a solution for UCE. One central unit cannot know the needs of very different target groups (more than hundred Bachelor’s and Master’s curricula and 35 PhD curricula in 11 faculties) and relate closely to respective employers and professional associations, fit the retraining and continuing courses with the degree programmes etc.

Programme-based management in UCE means that each department or faculty got their programme manager who is responsible for initiating and organising CE courses on the respective topic. Practical support in organising could be obtained from the secretary or special staff in case of bigger units. The task of the central structure – Open University Centre is to support programme managers in faculties. The support consists of creating the rules and system for UCE management in the university (information system for CE courses’ descriptions and registration to the courses, data-base and archive of students, form for certificates, system to calculate costs and allocate prize for courses, ways for payment etc), analysing wider trends and markets, marketing UCE centrally and targeted marketing in companies in different regions, organising seminars and training events for programme managers but also offering practical support in running the courses. Open University Centre also managers its own UCE courses that do not overlap either with the format or topic of the courses organised by the faculties. There are three bigger groups of courses. Firstly, Summer School (incl International Summer School) that takes place in July and August when the rest of the university does not work. Summer School offers mainly so called hobby courses for the wide audience in Estonian and a part of the Summer semester for mainly American students in English. The second group are e-courses that is an increasing trend in CE and that’s development and running are supported by educational technologists and tutors working at the Open University Centre. Thirdly, interdisciplinary courses mainly oriented to companies.
In parallel to the changes in the structure of the management, there is also process in place to describe CE courses (as well as degree programmes) in terms of learning outcomes, and to describe the outcomes and content of the courses on the certificate (or certificate supplement). The last one is a joint initiative of Estonian University Continuing Education Network that aims to agree the common format of CE certificate for Estonian universities. One of the major aims of this process is to facilitate recognition of prior and experiential learning.

As said before this is one of the changes that have got different driving forces. Besides others, it is also related to the several aspects in Bologna process. One of them is describing the new Bachelor and Master programmes in learning outcomes, relating university teaching more closely to the needs of students and employers, supporting transparency and comparativeness of programmes, and last but not least enhancing university LLL and mutual recognition.

As the new system is in place only since Fall 2006, it is difficult to make conclusions on its strengths and weaknesses. It is obvious that its successfulness depends on the people who realise it. Thus, in some faculties active programme managers have made considerable progress already. In others, programme manager is overloaded with other tasks and do not see a motivation for initiating CE courses. Coming years should show give the answer.