

Starting Points and Possibilities for Curriculum Development in the Modern University Education System¹

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*A mind, once expanded by a new idea,
never returns to its original dimensions.*
(O. W. Holmes)

The authors start from the theoretical assumptions for curriculum development in the system of university education. In accordance with the needs of the modern and knowledgeable society, university teacher has the task to constantly evolve the curriculum that will contribute to the quality preparation of students for future jobs. In such curriculum, the conditions allow creating the development of modern teaching and learning strategies. Modern education involves developing an internationalized curriculum, which establishes a requirement for development on the global competencies of students and their readiness for learning in an international context. It also tends to be the modern curriculum that creates the conditions for identifying, encouraging and directing the creative potential of students and their professional competence and enabling the development of a knowledge and management system. The aim of the research was to determine how students recognize the aforementioned theoretical basis for curriculum development in the system of modern university education. We apply the descriptive method and process of interviewing students with whom we conducted research in the organized focus groups. The survey results confirm that students are very well aware of the concrete starting points for curriculum development, whereby they also emphasize their importance and responsibility for its realization.

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Theoretical approach to the problem

Assuring quality in higher education means determining the standards and guidelines with which it is possible to improve the quality of such education. In contemporary literature and pedagogical practice an increasing need for their harmonization arises, which aims to develop an internationalized curriculum and enables the mobility of students and teachers in the European region. However, such an orientation at the same time presupposes the respect of institutional autonomy, the preservation and actualization of good pedagogical practice. In a situation where attempts are made to make standards and guidelines more concrete at the European level, the possibilities of a unique action in a wider area are being developed. Also, the circumstances in which it is possible to improve the work of university teachers by exchanging their views and ideas are being created. In such circumstances it is important to act in a unique way on empowering and developing contemporary programs, which grow into curriculums. The theoretical model of the curriculum presupposes a technical plan which makes it possible to attain measurable goals. The basic components of the curriculum are a) framework assumptions about the learners and the needs of the community; b) objectives and tasks; c) educational contents (fields, topics, units); d) didactical – methodical instructions and methodical qualities of the surroundings; e) evaluation of achievements. These components are mutually dependent and intrinsically linked (Klemenović, 2009). The assumption is that contemporary curricula structured in this fashion can contribute to a quality education of students, the development of their interest in educational activities and the preparation for quality self-education after formal education. It is therefore significant to develop systems for monitoring the realization of curricula, within which the possibilities and needs for their periodic revisions (alterations and amendments) arise. Both an internal as well as an external evaluation of the quality of curricula makes it possible to develop a system of measures for their development and improvement. In such circumstances the curriculum represents a means for quality and equal education for all, as a reflection of the time, society and culture, but also as a model of projection for the future society and education (Klemenović, 2009).

One of the basic principles of assuring the quality of university education, in Europe, presupposes that academic programs have to be continuously developed and improved. This means that effective measures must exist to support these programs and to ensure their sustainability (Standardi..., 2005). In the mentioned European

standards and guidelines for internal quality assurance in higher education institutions, a standard by which institutions should develop formal mechanisms for the adoption, periodic revision and monitoring of the programs they are realizing is clearly established. The following guidelines have been established in order to achieve this standard: a) ensure effective quality assurance activities, which confirm that the programs are well formed, regularly monitored and periodically revised. This ensures their continued relevance and competitiveness, develops and maintains the confidence of students in higher education; b) clearly establish and declare learning outcomes; c) determine the objectives, tasks, contents and activities of the program; d) determine the teaching forms, methods and means which will be applied / used in educational activities; e) determine the learning resources and make them available to students; f) determine and secure a system for monitoring the quality of program realization by monitoring the progress and success of students; g) determine the temporal articulation of periodic revisions of the program (in accordance with the measures proposed by the internal and external evaluation committee; h) active participation of students in developing programs and activities through which the program is being realized (Standardi..., 2005). A curriculum such as this is defined as a developmental (developing) curriculum in the international context today.

The contemporary programs presuppose content and didactical-methodical diversity and innovativeness, which encourage initiative, cooperation and creativity of students in the educational process (Kopas-Vukašinić, 2012). It is clear that the educational process, as a process of adopting (and transferring) knowledge, skills and habits takes place in conditions that are conducive for the development of students' initiative. In this process, a need of the students arises to learn by doing, to connect theoretical knowledge with examples of good practice and to discover the pragmatism of acquired knowledge. Mutual cooperation of students in the learning process contributes to the development and complexity of their *communication abilities and competencies*, as well as to the development of the *skills of engaging and making agreements inside a team*. These abilities represent a basis for a further improvement of students in the system of social action. The development of their creative potential can also be defined as a requirement in the contemporary curriculum, aiming to develop the *ability for creative expression*. Creativity, as a general human quality, a potential, a universal opportunity and strength, is present in all areas of student activity. In situations where it is encouraged it contributes to their self-realization, not only in the system of university education, but in the system of social action as well. Open, divergent thinking, originality, flexibility, fluency and other characteristics of creativity

determine an individual's ability to create something new, to develop a variety of strategies in problem solving, to produce as many ideas, show various kinds of imaginative behaviour, have unusual perceptions. These abilities enable an individual to come to certain solutions in an unordinary, unusual, unique way. Regarding the content and structure of the curriculum, it is possible to identify in them the conditions for the development of student creativity in relation to the opportunities offered to them in the process of adopting, interpreting and applying the educational content. In such favourable conditions, students continue to express creativity through products that represent the results of their learning and action (knowledge, abilities, skills, habits), as well as in relation to the processes that occur at the level of cognitive operations as they adopt and apply the acquired knowledge (analysis, synthesis, analogy, generalization, etc.). This implies the need for a continuous development of the curriculum, which creates the conditions for identifying, encouraging and directing the creative potential of students and their professional competencies (Barlow, 2000; Milovanovic & Kopas-Vukašinović, 2014). In such circumstances a possibility of lateral thinking arises, based on which an individual analyses a process or a situation and draws conclusions, develops new ideas to reconstruct certain processes, to simplify them and make them understandable and applicable (Dryden & Vos, 2004). In this way, it is possible to develop a knowledge management system within the system of university education, in which individuals will be prepared to make their implicit knowledge explicit, which will contribute to the transfer of acquired knowledge and its application in practice (Mirko, 2013). This implies that the students are willing to develop their own contemporary strategies of teaching and learning, personal abilities to think, reason and connect, to explore and learn through activity, through trial and error (Desinan, 2011; Kopas-Vukasinovic, 2014; Stoicai, Moraru & Miron, 2011).

The developmentalism, openness and explorativeness are just some of the basic characteristics of contemporary curricula, which can lead to an improvement of the existing system of university education with new ways of thinking, reasoning and inferences of students (Dryden & Vos, 2004). At the same time, these characteristics must be the starting point for the design of the curriculum. Its developmentalism in the process of realization implies openness to outside influences, the possibility of students learning interactively, which contributes to the development of acceptable behaviour and effective relationships with teachers, as well as to the realization of mutual achievements in the educational process (Gordon, 2008). In support of these findings we present the results of our research, which we conducted in 2014 with the students of the *Faculty of Education, University of Kragujevac*, in Jagodina (direction:

teacher in preschool institutions). The results of this research have confirmed that students recognize the determinants of the quality of contemporary university education and the quality of the teachers' work, in the context of the preparations for a future profession. Their attitudes about the quality of university education largely correspond to the theoretically established expected outcomes in the system of higher education (acceptable behaviour, management of intrinsic motivation, directing of the potential, knowledge management, etc.) (Kopas-Vukašinić, 2015). The next step in this research involved the examination of the attitudes of students about the baselines and possibilities for curriculum development in the system of university education. The results obtained are presented and analysed in this paper.

Methodological approach to the problem

Research objective. Determine the attitudes of students about the characteristics of quality educational programs (curricula), the starting points for their design and the role of the teacher in the process of curriculum development.

Research tasks:

1. Determine whether students recognize the importance of the content and structure of the curriculum for the development of contemporary teaching and learning strategies;
2. Determine whether students can view their own role in the development of a contemporary curriculum;
3. Examine the expectations of students in the system of contemporary university education in relation to their ability to study in an international context (the possibilities and needs for the development of an internationalized curriculum);
4. Examine whether students recognize the quality of contemporary curricula through the possibility that conditions for identifying, encouraging and directing students' creative potential are made in the process of their realization.

Methods and procedures of research. The research was done by using a descriptive method and the procedure of interviewing students in organized focus groups.

Research sample. An appropriate random sample was selected and it included the students of the second year (direction: teacher in preschool institutions) of the *Faculty of Education, University of Kragujevac, Jagodina* (No=67 students, divided into four focus groups).

Place and time of research. The research was conducted at the Faculty of Education, University of Kragujevac, in Jagodina, in November 2014.

Research results and discussion

In the introductory part of the interviews with the students we obtained information that they are not able to clearly define the terms *educational program* and *curriculum*, nor do they know whether these terms are synonymous. Therefore our first task in the focus groups was to, in cooperation with the students, clearly define the concepts, establish their key determinants and point out their differences, in accordance with the theoretical context which we have presented in this paper.

The next step was to gather information on *whether the students were in a situation where they negotiated with teachers on how the program will be realized during their studies* (choice of content, literature, forms and methods, etc.). Based on the responses of the students we came to following conclusions:

- ⇒ Students have no influence over the selection of content which will be realized during classes, and which they must learn;
- ⇒ The choice of literature implies already established references, proposed by the teacher. However, in the case that the students are unable to obtain the selected literature, the teachers are willing to change their choice of references, offer other literature, procure the missing literature or provide copies of literature to students, in agreement with the Faculty management. It's an interesting information that the students expressed satisfaction with the work of teachers who give them assignments (to find literature dealing with the problem addressed in lectures on their own, to do a display, a presentation and analysis of an article and then to connect the content they presented with the educational content which they dealt with in classes). Through such independent research, in the opinion of the students, the teachers encourage them to be active, they teach them how to find references, they encourage them to think and to connect content, they direct their attention and their interest in educational activities, they teach them independence and provide them a possibility of a free choice of the problem they will deal with, the way they will process it and the way they will present this content. Such activities were recognized by the students as pragmatic and efficient for their further education and specialization.

- ⇒ Teachers usually select ways of realizing the educational content themselves. A smaller number of teachers offer the possibility of selecting forms and methods in classes to students. Frontal lectures and group work are most commonly used in lectures, which can be justified by a large number of students. However, students point out examples of good practice, when teachers encourage them to be active through organized debates, moral dilemmas or discussions.
- ⇒ The students support the initiative of teachers to work in cooperation with them in search for literature, for domestic and foreign authors who deal with the same problem. In this way, students are trying to approach a theoretical problem in different ways and to analyse it based on different views and interpretations. They support and recognize this way of educating as a good way of learning and teaching in the system of university education.

More than half of the interviewed students (55.23%) said that they would like to attend *internationalized programs*, if they had the material resources needed (scholarships for studying at related faculties in other countries, visits to faculties, listening to lectures of professors from other related faculties, exchange of experiences with students from other countries, organizing and participating in projects and research with the professors and students from other faculties, preparations to participate in scientific and professional meetings). In activities such as these they see an opportunity to expand their knowledge and skills, to exchange experiences, learn and grow in communicating with colleagues and teachers from different environments. They find that in this way they can meet new people and gain acquaintances and stay in other countries, which they didn't have an opportunity to visit until now. Also, they consider that they can gain insight into the organization of pre-school education in other countries through mentioned activities and programs, that they can get new ideas for working with children in preschool institutions, improve their knowledge of a foreign language and maybe even find employment.

Students expect from their teachers to give them the opportunity to, in their own way, showcase what they have learned or found out from various sources. This implies that the reproduction of educational (theoretical) content should be kept at a minimum and that students should be taught to connect the content from different subjects and to give concrete examples from practice. They also expect the support and encouragement of teachers in the situations where they themselves initiate activities and believe that these will be useful to them in their future profession. They point out that they appreciate the readiness to give assignments according to the

individual capabilities and interests of students in a teacher. A particularly interesting view of the students is that teachers need to cooperate more with each other, in order to assist them in the realization of tasks they are given within a subject.

Instead of a conclusion

Through the interviews with the students we have indirectly tried to get the data that would be beneficial to teachers in the improvement of educational work, in the context of the preparation, realization and development of the contemporary curriculum. We have determined the attitudes of students about the ways and possibilities of the realization of educational programs, which should contribute to the development of quality teaching and learning models, in order to prepare them for their profession. As future teachers in preschool institutions, the students have basic knowledge about the importance, the content and structure of educational programs. Although they can't give concrete specifics of the contemporary curriculum, they clearly point out the demands from teachers and examples of good teaching practice. In this way they present the key determinants of the curriculum (an individual approach to the student, the possibility of cooperation and creative expression, initiative and autonomy in educational activities). The students stressed out the importance of the quality realization of education for successful learning and teaching. When it is known that the quality of education is largely determined by the quality of educational programs, these attitudes of the students confirm our assumption that they can view their own role in the development of the contemporary curriculum. They are interested in the cooperation with the teachers in the realization of educational content, which also implies their interest in the development of the curriculum. They want to expand their university education with activities in the broader social context, at an international level, which confirms the need for the realization of internationalized curricula. Students are interested in independent research, which they can choose according to their own interests and capabilities and through which they can express their potential in a special, perhaps unexpected, but a constructive and creative way.

The presented research results direct teachers towards the possibilities and needs for a further development of the curricula in the system of contemporary university education.

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