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Academics' experiences of university-wide top-down curriculum reform in Finland

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ABSTRACT

Current global drivers have challenged higher education and increased institution-wide top-down managed reforms, including curriculum reforms. As academics are vital in curriculum development, listening to their voices is essential for understanding actors' experiences of curriculum change processes in top-down managed reforms. The present study examined spectrum and qualitative differences in academics' experiences by analysing seven group interviews ($n = 35$). Using phenomenographic analysis, four different ways of experiencing the curriculum reform process were identified: (1) stilted adoption, (2) conciliation, (3) active development and (4) collaborative renewal. The categories differed according to six dimensions of variation. The study shows that top-down managed and supported curriculum change was rather well accepted by the academic staff, but several features in the function of the university administration aroused criticism and resistance among academics. By revealing the critical aspects of the curriculum development process, the study provides both a theory of curriculum development from the participants' point of view and conceptual tools for the management and guidance of curriculum reform.

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Curriculum change; higher education; academic staff; top-down curriculum reform; phenomenographic analysis

Introduction

In the 21st century, higher education (HE) curricula have faced broadly acknowledged challenges. While the Bologna Process has brought coherence to HE degree systems across Europe, it has required national stakeholders in HE institutions to harmonise their curricula and substantially reform their degrees (Huusko and Simola 2014; Kehm 2010). Moreover, external pressures from different sources, including employers, professionals and external quality teaching standards, have caused competition among HE institutions, leading them to seek distinctiveness in their education (Beerkens and van der Hoek 2022; Fahey 2012). Furthermore, ideas of managerialism spread in universities favouring top-down management and goals that can be quantitatively measured, (such as the number of completed degrees) can overshadow the qualitative and substantial endeavours which are typically under academics' responsibilities and autonomy (Pearce, Wood, and Wassenaar 2018; Shepherd 2018).

Developing curricula as an organisation-wide reform is a complex process involving interactions within and between different social contexts in the institution (Barnett 2000). Demands for curriculum change are conveyed through university policy and strategy, quality assurance and professional development needs (Fahey 2012). When curriculum development has traditionally involved

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academics' discipline-based activities, it is now a topic of strategic interest for HE institution administrations (Beerkens and van der Hoek 2022). Therefore, university-wide reforms have increased globally (Anakin et al. 2018; Annala et al. 2022), including in Finnish universities, where structural and major curriculum reforms have recently been implemented.

In Finland, the tensions between accountability and universities' freedom have provoked debate in university communities and increased resistance among academic staff (Kallio et al. 2022; Siltaloppi, Laurila, and Artto 2022). Similarly, the strategic management of experts and expert organisation in curriculum change can be perceived as problematic (Tirronen 2014). Pearce et al. (2018) stated that faculties want to be consulted on changes before administrators take any actions. Otherwise, teachers could threaten the reform's success (Rahimi and Alavi 2017). Therefore, listening to academic staff and better understanding their situation in the curriculum change process are essential. This study aims to scrutinise how academic staff experience the curriculum change process in the context of a top-down directed reform in one Finnish university.

University leadership and management in educational development, as well as curriculum planning or implementing of specific programmes, have been recently analysed (Beerkens and van der Hoek 2022; Fahey 2012; Patria 2012). However, only a few studies investigate large-scale curriculum reform implemented throughout the university. These studies have revealed factors promoting and inhibiting curriculum change (Anakin et al. 2018) and analysed academics' agency (Annala et al. 2021, 2022) and perceptions of curriculum reform management (Honkimäki et al. 2022). The present study continues research on these little-discussed topics by investigating the academics' experiences of curriculum reform, where the curricula were developed and directed for the first time by a top-down approach and launched across all faculties simultaneously. Our study adds to previous investigations in two ways. First, our present qualitative analysis deepens and specifies the findings of the quantitative survey by Honkimäki et al. (2022). Second, while Annala et al. (2021, 2022) have centred on teachers' agency profiles, our research examines in more detail curriculum developers'/actors' experiences in a way that reveals not only variation in experiences, but also factors on the background of different experiences.

This study employs phenomenography as a methodological approach, which has seldom been utilised in research related to curriculum development. To our knowledge, only Fraser and Bosanquet (2006) have used phenomenography to examine academics' conceptions of HE curricula. Their study analysed how teachers understood the curriculum concept, whereas we focus on academics' experiences of the curriculum reform process. Using phenomenography, we displayed the spectrum of the staff's experiences and identified the most critical factors in the curriculum change process. In this way, the study serves both practical and theoretical purposes.

Though academic staff are vital in curriculum change, they are in a complex situation between global, national and institutional drivers and their own endeavours as experts, researchers and teachers in their field (Fahey 2012). Additionally, curriculum development is affected by several contextual factors, including how reforms are managed, how academics are enabled to engage in and own the reforms, the conditions that exist for academics' agency and how disciplinary and pedagogical cultures impact the reforms (Anakin et al. 2018; Mikser, Kärner, and Krull 2016). The subsequent sections elaborate on these contributing factors based on the previous literature.

Factors contributing to academics' curriculum development

One of the most important factors affecting academics' work is the direction of the educational reforms (Cummings et al. 2005), especially whether these reforms are directed top-down or managed locally in faculties or departments. Although HE administrations seem to attempt to work with the teaching staff, the collaboration between faculty and administration in comprehensive reforms, such as curriculum change, is challenging (Oliver and Hyun 2011). In a study of language teachers' perceptions of a top-down curriculum change (Rahimi and Alavi 2017), the teachers had positive attitudes towards the change, but their teaching

conditions and contextual constraints were not considered, and their responsibilities and workload increased. In particular, experienced teachers were critical of the top-down approach. When academics' resiliency was challenged in managerial interventions, they reflexively constructed different versions of their professional selves to minimise the tension between their coexisting yet contradictory identity claims (Shams 2019). They undertook a discursive strategy of either embracing or distancing. Similarly, in another study (Siltaloppi, Laurila, and Artto 2022), academics' resistance against managerial control was analysed and three forms of resilience were identified: protective, independent, and adaptive. Thus, academics could find new ways to promote their professional agendas and independence.

Several studies have emphasised ownership in educational/curriculum change processes (e.g. Anakin et al. 2018; Patria 2012). Patria (2012) found that successful top-down managed change requires integrating academics' personal goals with the changes by creating opportunities for shared ownership. Similarly, Roberts (2015) found that institution-wide curriculum change was more successful when a broad framework was offered for change work because it could be interpreted as developing ownership of the change at the local level. In the worst case, when a contradiction exists between academics' values concerning teaching quality and the values actualised in the curriculum reform, individual staff members may feel that their opportunities to influence are lacking (Annala et al. 2022). However, if individual and institutional goals align, academics' abilities to act and influence remain the same in the new context.

Annala et al. (2021, 2022) investigated academics' agency in two different curriculum development processes. The first context was a traditional departmental curriculum change, and the second was a comprehensive organisational reform launched, supervised and coordinated by the university management. Five agentic profiles were identified: Progressive, oppositional, territorial, bridge-building and accommodating agency. They appeared in both contexts but were unstable. In the context of university-wide change, transformations occurred in progressive, territorial and bridge-building agency, and a new, powerless agency emerged. The representatives of this profile had the interest and desire to participate in the development work but no position to influence it, which caused frustration. Another survey on top-down directed university-wide reform found that although academic staff were discontent with the university management, they proceeded according to the university's guidelines (Honkimäki et al. 2022). This may be interpreted as reflecting a combination of oppositional and accommodating agency.

Teachers' wide-ranging engagement in curriculum development has been considered desirable (Mikser, Kärner, and Krull 2016). Although the contexts of compulsory education and HE differ, similar problems can appear in curriculum change. A study on Finnish school teachers found that the nature of teachers' participation in curriculum development depended on how local processes were organised (Heikkilä 2021). The principal's role as a pedagogical leader was viewed as essential for teachers' engagement. In addition, effective time management was a significant factor in their participation. Unstructured and insufficient time use created frustration and resignation.

Roberts (2015) found that academics' branch of science influenced their curriculum decisions more than the institutional and sociopolitical contexts. By utilising Bourdieu's field theory, Annala et al. (2022) perceived the university as a power structure where the struggle for disciplinary status and position in curriculum change affects both individuals and the institution. They found that strategic guidelines and structural frames benefited some fields but had the opposite effect on others. In the university-wide curriculum reform context, disciplines valuing functional and hierarchical qualities differed from those valuing dialogical, inclusive and pedagogical qualities. Academics with intellectually and pedagogically ambitious visions of curriculum change often failed in their struggles in the field. Those who had established positions and statuses or various forms of capital seemed to be successful, partly due to a collaborative work approach.

Purpose of the study

This study aimed to examine academics' experiences of curriculum development in the context of university-wide top-down reform. It aimed to increase the understanding of critical aspects related to curriculum development and thereby contribute to developing curriculum change processes in the HE context. The following research questions were addressed:

- (1) How did the academics experience the curriculum development in the context of university-wide top-down curriculum reform?
- (2) What qualitative differences can be found in the academics' descriptions of the curriculum development process?

Methods

Context of the study

The present study was conducted at a Finnish research university (seven faculties, 15,000 students and 1,660 academics). Like other Finnish universities, the university can autonomously decide on the contents, practices and development of its education under the steering and financing of the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture.

The university-wide curriculum reform involved a two-year curriculum planning and preparation process until all faculties implemented the new curricula. The earlier curriculum rounds had been quite independently managed and scheduled by leaders of different faculties and departments; this time the reform was implemented using a top-down approach: it started as an initiative of university management and the administrative staff, and was coordinated and led by them. Furthermore, the renewal was for the first time implemented in all faculties at the same time. The renewal based its rationale on the university's strategy, which directed the development of the degree programmes towards addressing societal challenges and meeting future competency needs. Otherwise, the actual grassroots-level planning and decision-making of contents of study programmes took place at the level of faculties and departments by their teaching staff as usual, from junior and senior lecturers to professors.

To ensure the curriculum renewal's consistency across faculties, the central administration published the guidelines showing key points in the global trends and research-based development in HE pedagogy. The guidelines focused on a multidisciplinary approach, students' well-being and quality learning environments in all bachelor's and master's degree programmes. In addition, the guidelines emphasised comprehensive bachelor's studies, continued by more specialised master's programmes. All these themes included detailed suggestions for curriculum revisions. Concerning quality learning environments, for example, suggestions included new pedagogical solutions, explicit competence goals and versatile evaluation practices, technologically supported solutions, university – industry collaboration, employability, entrepreneurial approaches and internationality.

A standard Annual Planning System of Education and Teaching (APSET) for documenting the requirements of the degree programmes was introduced to create uniformity in the curricula across all faculties. Its goal was to enhance the transparency between units, prevent overlapping study paths and facilitate cooperation and communication. In addition, university support services organised seminars on curriculum topics and delivered a lexicon of the central concepts to be used in the curriculum development.

Participants and data collection

Seven groups of academics were interviewed to collect data. The researchers asked pedagogical leaders¹ from different departments/faculties to gather groups of academic staff who had attended the curriculum development in their unit. All faculties were represented: Humanities,

Information Technology, Business School, Education, Sport and Health Sciences, Mathematics and Science, and Social Sciences. The interviews, which lasted one to two hours and were conducted by two or three researchers, included 35 persons (24 females, 11 males; 4–6 in each group) with varying positions, from university teachers to professors. The interviews' critical principle was to give all interviewees equal opportunities to freely express their experiences of the curriculum development process.

The interviews were semi-structured, dealing with four key thematic areas: (1) the curriculum development process in interviewees' own units, (2) management and leadership of the process, (3) challenging versus supportive factors in the process and (4) the reform's outcome. The interview questions were open-ended and allowed for free responses. For example, the interviewees were asked to describe how they experienced management in the curriculum process. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.

As to the research ethics, The Human Sciences Ethics Committee at the university in question works in accordance with the guidelines issued by the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (TENK). Ethical reviews are guided by the TENK's Ethical principles of research with human participants and ethical review in the human sciences in Finland (2019). According to these principles, ethical review is required only when the research project contains specific conditions. None of the conditions applied in the present study. Therefore, the ethical review was not required. The participants were informed about the voluntary basis of participation and other ethical principles of the study in the invitation letter, and at the beginning of the interviews.

Method of analysis

Phenomenographic analysis relies on inductive reasoning based on empirical data. The object of the study is the relationship between the participants and the theme. The analysis focuses on the variations in understanding across the whole sample rather than the characteristics of individuals' responses (Tight 2016). The outcome of a phenomenographic study presents participants' experiences as categories of description on a collective level, describing the variation in a certain group of people (Åkerlind 2012). In other words, individuals may present experiences belonging to multiple categories.

In the analysis, the data are organised as empirically interpreted categories of description that differ in their essential features, called dimensions of variation. The goal is to have as few categories as possible. Categories are logically related, typically by hierarchical relationships, and categories lower in the hierarchy represent less complex or sophisticated ways of experiencing the phenomenon compared to higher categories. The analysis results are presented in a table (Åkerlind 2012; Han and Ellis 2019; Kettunen and Tynjälä 2022; Tight 2016).

Phenomenographic data analysis of the present study began with the first author repeatedly reading through transcripts, followed by all authors familiarising themselves with the transcripts and gaining an overall picture of the data. Using the team approach (Green and Bowden 2009), the data were coded by searching for relevant expressions regarding the research questions. Because the main interest in phenomenographic analysis is to discover variations in the data rather than individual descriptions, the entity constructed by expressions and codes was examined. Then, codes with the same meaning were grouped. The preliminary categories were created by investigating the similarities and differences between the groups of codes and combining these groups. In addition, the characteristics by which they differed were identified by comparing the categories.

When the categories were formulated, the first author reviewed all the transcripts again to ensure all relevant observations had been considered, and some changes to the descriptions were made. In phenomenographic analysis, data interpretation continues throughout the study's different phases. The whole process is strongly iterative and comparative, involving continual data sorting and

resorting (Åkerlind 2012). Categories were tested and retested against the data, and further changes were made during the reporting.

Results

Based on the phenomenographic analysis, the interviewees' characterisations of the curriculum development were compiled into four categories (Table 1). The curriculum development process was experienced as (1) stilted adoption, (2) conciliation, (3) active development or (4) collaborative renewal. These qualitatively distinct categories differed on the following dimensions: University-level guidelines, leadership and management, university-level support services, engagement of participants, working atmosphere and outcome. The first three dimensions relate to institutional-level administration, whereas the last three pertain to local-level matters.

Curriculum development as stilted adoption

In this category, the academics approached the reform process by rigidly adopting the university's expectations. Criticism was largely expressed. The *university-level guidelines* set by senior management were considered unnecessary, complicated and more confusing than useful, and the *leadership and management* were seen as unclear, inadequate or even controlling. Furthermore, the *university-level support services*, including guidance and time management, seminars, lexicon and technical devices, did not meet the staff's needs, as illustrated by the following statements.

At some point perhaps, if I look at it critically, I might have such a feeling that the management by the leadership is also a sort of control.

This undertaking was sort of too polygonal and massive.

Somehow, it felt at times that we were meeting there just for the fun of meeting, so that it was not always clear to me what the purpose was there.

Table 1. Academics' experiences of the curriculum development: categories of description.

DIMENSIONS OF VARIATION	CATEGORIES OF DESCRIPTION			
	Stilted adoption	Conciliation	Active development	Collaborative renewal
University-level guidelines	Complicated and ambiguous document	Common framework for the development	Guide to the desired change	Expression of shared university mission and strategy
Leadership and management	Criticised for top-down approach and controllability	Consulted and mediated by local management	Supported by the university and faculty levels	Shared, distributed leadership and responsibility, leaders as coordinators
University-level support services	Thoroughly inappropriate, wavering	Help in single occasions and problems	Structuring the work and providing forums for sharing good practices	Providing forums for sharing and constructing new collaboration networks
Engagement of participants	Only a few academics take responsibility	Establishing working groups comprising mainly academics	Effort to broadly involve academics and students	Highly collaborative, strong involvement of academics and stakeholders
Working atmosphere	Uncertain, frustrating, prone to conflicts	Varying from desperation to hopeful	Positive and trustful	Enthusiastic, high motivation and open minds for renewal
Outcome	Complying with the external objectives	A mindset change	Teaching innovations, including seeds for future renewal	Teaching innovations and increased collaboration across various levels

It was unclear whether the guidelines were mandatory or just recommendations. The dissatisfaction with the leadership was directed both at the university's senior management and the faculty management or the lack of seamlessness between management levels.

For example, it was instructed that optionality must be reduced [...], and then simultaneously, we ought to enable flexibility. Like two mutually totally contradictory aims.

Faculty-level management or steering was not transmitted to the department level. It showed as a sort of the department's own work.

The university's support was perceived as either inappropriate or wavering. Academic staff found instructions to be unclear and/or contradictory, and they did not understand the aims of the events organised by the university, as illustrated below.

And we received different instructions there, and then they were changed, and then we again received different ones ... I felt that different work groups hadn't discussed clearly between each other. The APSET [= technical system] was the final point to which it culminated.

In the stilted adoption category, the *engagement of the academics* in the in-depth curriculum development was scarce, with only a few people taking responsibility for promoting concrete steps towards the reform. The participants found the *working atmosphere* frustrating, uncertain and prone to conflicts. In addition, the *outcome* of the curriculum process was perceived more as complying with the external objectives than accomplishing participants' goals.

The truth is that it was an accomplishment of a small core group, although everybody was given a chance to participate.

At some point, I felt, though, that it won't succeed; so I felt quite distressed and was afraid that people will start to turn their backs already in the corridors when they see me.

Keeping, in a way, in line with these guidelines. It's then about implementing somebody else's vision. And people have spent fairly much time and energy on it, so that we were able to respond to these hopes and expectations coming from administration.

In summary, the stilted adoption category reflects the most critical experiences of the curriculum change process. The process was described as confusing and unproductive due to external objectives. Overall, the reform's top-down approach was questioned.

Curriculum development as conciliation

In this category, the participants' experiences of curriculum development can be characterised as conciliation. The process was perceived as very top-down, including work division and staff-burdening processes, but with good local management. The *university's guidelines* were a starting point for the curriculum development and a common framework for university-wide reform. Regarding *leadership and management*, the academics trusted local management and perceived that it represented a consultative and mediating role between the academic staff and university administration. Furthermore, *university-level support services* were conceived as helpful on single occasions.

So, we started from the university guidelines. [...] And then, based on those we started to consider what requirements those set for our unit's curriculum development.

The university-level seminars were truly good, particularly the one where the two experts were telling about their research related to it.

The guidelines were also seen to offer a unified picture of the university to external stakeholders or anticipated students, as illustrated below.

In principle, I find this very good that whole university would act approximately within the same frames from a student's point of view and from the viewpoint of student recruitment.

In this category, working groups were described as the means to *engage academics* in curriculum development and ensure their voices are heard. Sometimes, external stakeholders also attended the groups. However, the *working atmosphere* varied considerably. The key *outcome* of the curriculum development process is a mindset change.

Of course, it's also a sort of, perhaps, a bit challenging issue when there are plenty of people and there's little time, so how people can find the efficient working methods for the hearing of everybody. But here, too, we had those workgroups.

Briefly: hopeful at the beginning, relieved at the end [...] distressed in between. So, at times, I got frustrated, but at times, there were also such inspiring new ideas, so that it was like up and down.

The traditional discipline-based thinking was challenged, especially in the working groups with teachers from different disciplines.

People have considered teaching and curricula in a rather subject-specific way. Now, the striving was [...] to see the entity of the whole department and make use of the resources of the whole department as efficiently as possible so that everybody's best expertise would come into use.

Altogether, the academics' relation to the top-down managed curriculum process was slightly more positive than the perceptions in the first category. They perceived the involvement in the process as a group-based productive endeavour rather than individual participants' effort.

Curriculum development as active development

In this category, the academics' experiences of the curriculum development process were increasingly more positive than in the previous categories. In addition, their reactions showed more activity or initiative. They conceived that the *university-level guidelines* supported and guided them in achieving their own targets. Similarly, *leadership and management* were experienced as firm facilitation. Moreover, they believed that *university-level support services* structured the curriculum development process.

There was the university's letter [guidelines] [...] and then there was this national plan for our own field. So, I had a very good backup. It was not me who was demanding it, but the university and the national plan.

We had interpreted the curricular spirit of the university guidelines so that, okay, we can now implement our visions, which we have already had in our staff for a long time.

Leaders' collaboration and mutual support were considered important. University-level support services were experienced as useful in providing forums for sharing good practices.

There was strong support from the steering group [...] In the meetings with pedagogical leaders one gets such support [...] and can hear ... what type of discussions they have somewhere else.

I think the basic system was quite good. The essential point is that there is a forum [...] where we have representation from all faculties, where then these shared matters are dealt with.

These kinds of good practices did come up there. [in curriculum seminars]

The academics perceived the broad engagement with students as essential in curriculum development. Additionally, concrete steps were taken towards the *engagement of the participants* by organising panels, discussions and enquiries involving all personnel groups and students. Compared to the two previous categories, the *working atmosphere* was generally thought positive and trustful. As an *outcome* of the curriculum process, teaching innovations were emphasised.

It was fair, [...] not like it's among professors only that the decisions are made. I think that all levels became equally heard there.

We collected student feedback covering the whole department about these curricula of that time and about different courses.

I'd say that, under the circumstances, we accomplished quite a few reforms. We got seeds for such reforms that would now be good to continue further.

A valued positivity among participants was acquired by trusting other colleagues. The involvement in the working process enabled the academics to restructure their teaching.

Surely there is a kind of trust in other people or the groups. [...] At least I didn't feel at any point that I couldn't trust in the other players.

Yes, I fully agree that people had a positive spirit here. It was certainly the most important promotive factor there.

We developed such a course where the subject matter is lectured simultaneously, at both the advanced and general levels. [...] And another new thing are courses with several teachers. [...]

In summary, the academics reported actively taking advantage of the university's offers in the reform for their benefit.

Curriculum development as collaborative renewal

In this category, the academic staff experienced the curriculum work process positively as a collaborative renewal (Table 1). They aimed to ensure the *university's guidelines* aligned with their aims. Thus, they saw university-level guidelines as an expression of the shared university's mission and strategy. *Leadership and management* were perceived as distributed, shared, dialogical and inclusive. *University-level support services* were described positively, providing forums for sharing and constructing new collaboration networks.

So overall, in my opinion, somehow those basic-level guidelines were really useful. [...] In a way, the whole strategy process was kind of clear when the university had clear strategic guidelines, and then, we looked at our own ones and their congruences, and thus, it should in a way trickle downwards.

In some interviews, shared leadership was considered exceptional in the university's actions. The academics expressed appreciation to the university management for their coaching during the curriculum development process.

We truly have a really collaborative way of working compared to the university in general, I guess. So many people are involved, and not only the leaders are responsible for reaching results, but everybody is responsible.

So, the discussion was going on in quite a few different forums. And then, of course, we must also remember to mention this joint group of pedagogical leaders. Then there was at some point a group focused just on this curriculum development coached by [name]; it too served as such support and like a sparrer, along with other things there.

The academics perceived the *engagement of the participants* as highly collaborative, with a stronger and broader involvement of all teachers and stakeholders than in the third category. The *working atmosphere* was considered enthusiastic, and high motivation and open minds for renewal among the academics were emphasised. The process *outcomes* were depicted as teaching innovations and increased collaboration across various levels.

There was a large panel with working-life representatives. All teachers were involved, and we sought to also hear students as much as possible, which also makes it sort of arduous and hard, but [...] also makes everybody committed to what is accomplished.

In our unit, everybody participated in the curriculum planning [...] and everybody was involved in it all the time and knew where we were going, and what is expected at which stage.

The curriculum process was seen as the development of the academics' own work, diminishing resistance to change and opening new paths for teaching collaborations.

I feel that people, anyway, have a desire to develop their own work. [...] Every workgroup had a good spirit. Yes, the workgroups in which I was involved myself now have been well motivated.

My colleague said that it's so wonderful to teach this course [...] now, when we are teaching it together. [...] [...] it's now like an actual concrete result from this curriculum process, how it is manifested. And we have some examples that we are engaged in cooperation for teaching between faculties as well.

In summary, this category represents the most involved/motivated, active, advanced and comprehensive experiences of the process. The university's actions were taken as possibilities to harmonise the academics' endeavours with the university administration's or to start and gather support for new activities.

Discussion

This study had two objectives. The first was to scrutinise how the academics experienced the curriculum reform implemented university-wide and led by the top-down approach. The findings showed that academic staff experienced the curriculum development in diverse ways, ranging from a confusing process causing stress and frustration to an inspiring and innovative collaborative enterprise. Four categories describing the experiences of the process were identified: (1) stilted adoption, (2) conciliation, (3) active development or (4) collaborative renewal.

The second objective was to analyse the qualitative differences among the descriptions. The analysis revealed six variation dimensions on which the categories differed. One pertains to the perceived outcome of the curriculum development; the other five relate to the curriculum development process. These five dimensions are critical aspects from the curriculum development perspective (see Tight 2016). We discuss these aspects in depth below.

Three critical aspects related to central administration were the *meaning of the university-level guidelines*, *experiences of leadership and management* and *perceptions of university-level support services*. The experiences of the university's guidelines varied from seeing them as a confusing document to regarding them as expressions of the university's mission and strategy. The academics' leadership and management experiences varied from criticism, especially towards top-down university management, to trusting in shared leadership and responsibility. The characterisation of the support offered by university services varied from seeing the support as thoroughly inappropriate to discerning it as providing forums for sharing and networks for collaboration. This variation in the experiences shows that the reform based on the university's strategy did not reach all academics. Similarly, in earlier studies, strategic guidelines have been shown to work as assets for some academics but not for others and other disciplinary fields (Annala et al. 2022). Top-down curriculum reforms do not appear to change the curriculum process in environments where the local working culture and leadership are traditionally highly shared. This finding is supported by studies where academics found new ways to promote their professional agendas and independence (Siltaloppi, Laurila, and Artto 2022) or constructed different versions of their professional selves (Shams 2019) under new and possibly contradictory conditions.

The critical aspects related to academics' activities in their community include, in addition to leadership and management, *engaging participants* and the *perceived working atmosphere*. For many academics, it is common that only a few people took responsibility for reforms such as curriculum renewal. This situation, combined with negative leadership experiences, seems associated with uncertainty and frustration. Instead, shared local leadership and responsibility were related to high motivation and enthusiasm, referring to clear ownership of the reform work, as Anakin et al. (2018) described. Although reforming the curriculum is demanding, it is most successful when academic staff are all engaged, and its leadership is decentralised and functional (see Oliver and Hyun 2011; Pearce, Wood, and Wassenaar 2018).

In this studied curriculum round, the curricula were reformed simultaneously and at the same pace across faculties. The results indicated contentedness regarding the common framework, which brought coherence within the university. This contributes to making the programmes and degrees more transparent, aligning with the objectives of the Bologna Process (Huusko and Simola 2014). The university's mission, strategy and shared endeavour were also highly appreciated. This concurrence makes educational development more of a joint matter of the university and reinforces its importance. Additionally, it can also open new interdisciplinary opportunities for faculty collaboration.

While the study revealed the qualitative differences in the participants' experiences, their prevalence remained unknown, as the analysis focused on the variation in the experiences rather than the number of expressions. However, during the analysis, it was visible that when moving from left to right in the outcome space (Table 1), the number of expressions decreased. That is, the critical comments were easier to find than the positive ones. This suggests that experiences of stilted adoption and conciliation were more common than those of active development and collaborative renewal. A parallel quantitative study (Honkimäki et al. 2022) supports this notion: university management and the support they provided were perceived as inadequate by the academics in general, although differences between the faculties in the perceptions of the staff were found. For example, staff of the Faculty of Education and Business School reported more positive experiences than participants in other faculties. However, all proceeded along the guidelines set by the university.

As all studies, this study has certain limitations. Although the study provides a way of holistically looking at participants' experiences at the collective level and revealing variations in experiences in a certain group of people, different people under different circumstances may perceive the same phenomena differently. The present study was implemented in one Finnish university. A similar study in two or three universities with the same contextual characteristics or in a cross-cultural setting could provide a more multifaceted picture of this subject.

Another limitation pertains to the selection of the participants. The number of participants comprising seven interview groups and 35 interviewees is sufficient for phenomenographic analysis (Tight 2016). However, the interviewees were chosen based on their participation activity and involvement in curriculum development in their departments. The question arises as to how well they represented the university's entire academic staff. A comprehensive survey could shed light on this issue.

Practical implications and suggestions for future research

Practical implications of the study can be drawn, especially from the first and fourth outcome categories. In its entirety, the first category of stilted adoption is negatively tinted, showing the experienced failures of the top-down management but also demonstrating actions to be avoided in the future. If the university senior management expects more than resisting or superficially adopting the guidelines from the teaching staff, the document introducing the guidelines should be formulated by carefully avoiding incoherencies and clearly outlining the guidelines' binding nature. Careful consideration is needed so that guidelines are not directed towards subject content areas under academics' field expertise. In addition, simultaneous complex guidelines and multiple reforms strain the academic staff. Studies have shown the importance of listening to the teachers (Rahimi and Alavi 2017), integrating academics' personal goals with the changes (Patria 2012) and providing a broad framework which allows the academic staff to interpret and own the change (Roberts 2015). Timing and time management are also crucial (Heikkilä 2021). The interviewees presented one proposal for improving the top-down process: The whole process could be introduced in advance as a flowchart with all the schedules. This would make it possible to progress smoothly and integrate management at different levels.

The fourth category of collaborative renewal demonstrates that the focal point in curriculum development is the communities' work in faculties and departments. The best ways to support

the process are forums and networks provided by the university. The leadership and management in this category were described as decentralised, referring to disciplinary or pedagogical cultures and practices (see also Roberts 2015). Regarding the conceptions of the curriculum, the academics' experiences in the fourth category resemble that in Fraser and Bosanquet's (2006, 271) study, which viewed the curriculum 'as a dynamic, emergent and collaborative process of learning for both student and teacher'. Earlier studies suggest that combining top-down and bottom-up approaches in leadership and management could create more trust between the staff and senior management (Cummings et al. 2005; Oliver and Hyun 2011). Thus, creating possibilities for sharing good practices and collaboration seems crucial for the development process. However, it requires engaging grassroots-level teachers from the beginning of the process by organising forums where the strategic goals of curriculum change can be discussed.

A comparison of the present study's findings with the academics' agency profiles demonstrated by Annala et al. (2021, 2022) shows similarities. The experiences described in the category of stilted adoption have features of oppositional or territorial agency. Academics with territorial agency protect the boundaries of their disciplinary fields and are not accustomed to following university-wide policy guidelines. Both categories of active development and collaborative renewal describe experiences belonging to the progressive agency. These educational developers are dedicated to helping colleges and universities function as teaching and learning communities (Sugrue et al. 2018). Pedagogical leaders clearly represent progressive agency (Annala et al. 2021). They were appreciated among the interviewees, and their difficult position of lacking the mandate to carry forward the emerged ideas was recognised. This lack of position to influence among highly motivated people can, at worst, lead to frustration, referring to the powerless agency, which is connected to top-down curriculum change (Annala et al. 2021). This could be avoided by increasing the collaboration between academics and administration (Oliver and Hyun 2011).

Future studies are needed to explore possible background factors of identified differences in academics' experiences. Could the differences be found in attitudes towards developing teaching, departmental or working culture, in conceptions of curriculum, or in attitudes towards the role of university central administration in curricular decision-making?

Previous studies (Honkimäki et al. 2022; Oliver and Hyun 2011; Shams 2019) have shown that top-down managed curriculum reforms are prone to tensions and confrontations between the university senior management and the teaching staff. However, university curriculum reforms could at their best be collective enterprises of both partners with mutual interest, not a struggle to cope with. To be able to understand the roots of the contradictions more investigations are needed. What are the possible explanations behind the emergence of these tensions both among academic staff and in administration?

We also call for research and development projects which apply the main findings of the present study (summarised in Table 1) in designing and implementing a curriculum development process. In particular, we recommend paying special attention to the critical aspects identified, and utilising both qualitative and quantitative approaches to investigate the process and its outcomes.

To conclude, this study not only increases understanding of different ways how top-down curriculum development process can be experienced by participants, but the findings also can be regarded as a theory of curriculum development, identifying the aspects that are critical for ensuring as functional process as possible. Together, increased understanding and the theory provide conceptual tools for practical curriculum development processes.

Note

1. At the time of data collection, the title 'pedagogical leaders' was used to refer to academics who led the education and curriculum development in the units but were not necessarily in the official position of deputy head of a department.

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