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## IMPLEMENTING NEW EDUCATIONAL STRATEGIES: SYNERGETIC EFFECTS FROM A UNIVERSITY OVERARCHING PROJECT

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### Introduction

In 2011 Mid Sweden University launched an educational strategy which was prolonged until 2017. The educational strategy was missioned by the vice-chancellor, and it focused on creating active learning environments for the students, on increasing and improving the technical support for teaching and learning and on enhancing the teachers' professional competence (Dnr MIUN 2011/277, 2009/1671). One of the overall goals was that all educational activities at Mid Sweden University should be characterized by professionalism and innovation. This was specified in several objectives to strive for during the period of 2015-2017, such as:

- Educational development should be a clearly prioritized activity at the university.
- The possibilities for professional qualification for teachers should be strengthened.
- Teachers should be given increased prerequisites for continuous participation in workshops and courses in teaching and learning.

In 2016, the unit for teacher support at Mid Sweden University, Teaching and Learning Services, was assigned to implement or support some of the projects that were focusing on enhancing the teachers' professional competence and the goals above. Several parallel university overarching projects focusing on the teachers' professional development were initiated, for example:

1. *A new educational program for the teachers:* Teaching and Learning Services developed a new educational program that offered workshops in active and technique enhanced learning. Teachers at every department (altogether twenty departments) were given time to participate in these workshops or other activities designed to improve their teaching qualifications.
2. *A model for professional qualification for teachers:* A model for teachers' professional qualification (standards for certified/excellent teachers) was developed. In late 2017, the project group suggested a model that was accepted by the university's management. The model for acquisition of qualification is conducted for the first time during the spring term 2018.
3. *Teaching and learning resources:* The project called Teaching and learning resources ("pedagogisk resurs" in Swedish) was based on the idea that cooperation and shared experiences between teachers from different faculties and departments in different ways

can promote educational development at the university. Several subprojects were initiated and some of the preliminary results will be presented here.

### **Aim**

Our aim is to describe the above-mentioned project Teaching and learning resources, and to discuss experiences and synergetic effects that have arisen from this university overarching project where all departments were invited to develop educational strategies of importance to them. The invitation resulted in the development of a number of different subprojects, all with their own purposes and contents, but with the joint intention to develop new educational traits and methods of teaching and learning. A number of these subprojects are useful examples of how teachers can develop teaching methods that can be shared across department and subject boundaries. It is, we believe, of vital importance that there will be a continuous discussion about how this kind of interdisciplinary project, with its elements of peer learning as well as individual and shared experiences, can best be managed and come of use. With our contribution, we want to be part of this discussion.

By now, it should be clear that the aim of this contribution is not to present a scientific evaluation of the project and its effects. Rather, it is to share our experiences and observations from following the process from our positions as managers of procedure and project, respectively. What happens when teachers from various faculties, departments and subjects come together and are assigned to work with educational development? What effects have we noticed and what would be our recommendations for future projects?

### **Presentation of the project**

The purpose of the project Teaching and learning resources was, firstly, to strengthen the educational development at the departments by financing lecturers as teaching resources with 20 percent of a full-time salary, respectively. Secondly, the project was designed to strengthen the continuous dialogue about teaching and learning methods within and between departments and faculties, as well as between departments and Teaching and Learning Services. One important presumption was that the teaching and learning resources should be able to work on issues based on the needs of each department.

An invitation to participate in the project with one or two teachers each was sent to all departments of both the Faculty of Human Science and the Faculty of Science, Technology and Media. In the end, seventeen out of twenty departments joined the project with altogether thirty teachers. The project started in August 2016 and will end in June 2018. The group had regular e-meetings or physical meetings approximately every other month, where the participants were given the opportunity to share their project plans and help each other in solving any problems that arose. The group was led by educational developers at the Teaching and Learning Services.

Each participant focused on one or several projects of importance to their colleagues and departments. This could for instance include teaching enhancement on course or program level, collegial interaction (i.e. teaching and learning fora), or creating a model for introduction of new employees. The teaching and learning resources were suggested to have different roles,

such as supervisor, observer, coordinator and/or educational developer. It was also suggested that the participants could present results of their projects at the annual Mid Sweden University conference on teaching and learning or at other educational conferences in Sweden or abroad.

### **Working process**

The group was first invited to an introduction meeting online, where all participants presented themselves and discussed the framework of the project. The first step was to collaborate on working out its aim. Teaching and Learning Services proposed a formulation, which the participants could reflect on and revise. Thereafter, the text was sent to all participants and their heads of department. In this way, an informal agreement as to the goals and aims of the project was made.

The second meeting was a physical full day workshop, based on active learning methods. The participants were asked to prepare a short presentation of their ideas on subprojects and discuss them in groups. These discussions generated interesting effects of problem solving as well as understanding and consensus between teachers from different departments and faculties. The teachers gained insight into the fact that they are not left alone. Often they faced similar problems (such as the students' poor academic writing or complexity concerning methods of active and technique enhanced learning) and they could actually benefit from each other's experiences and knowledge.

The forthcoming meetings were arranged as online or blended meetings, and the agenda was based on the needs of the participants to discuss and solve any problems that had arisen. Some of the subprojects were discussed more closely than others. The results of the subprojects were summarized in final reports, and here, we would like to highlight a few of them.

One of the subprojects dealt with *academic writing*. Teachers from two departments experienced problems with students who had difficulties both from a linguistic point of view and when it came to adapting their way of writing to academic standards and genres. These teachers planned a series of seminars where they discussed how to collaborate on and manage these problems.

Another example was a collaborative subproject between two departments, which aimed at constructing a *guide for new teachers*. This guide was meant to initiate new colleagues into how the annual planning cycle works and what is requested of them as teachers.

A third subproject consisted of forming *teaching and learning fora*. Several departments had noticed a certain lack of a continuous dialogue about teaching and learning. Their initiative was to create environments for meeting peers, sharing experiences and inviting guests for inspiration and knowledge exchange.

### **Findings and discussion**

The project Teaching and learning resources should be looked upon as part of an educational strategy that is about to form at our university. As we know, many universities are currently

broadening their perspective on academic development. In a recent study, Bilbow et al. (2017) state that the academic development units at many universities gradually have come to be involved in developing strategies about how to form a structured and well-organized educational context. They accentuate that it is preferably done in collaboration with teachers, departments and faculties. Similarly, Mitchell and Sackney (2011) speak of three integrated tracks for capacity development of education; on the individual, group and organizational level, respectively.

Bilbow et al. stress that seven factors are common when institutions form their enhancement strategies (see figure below).

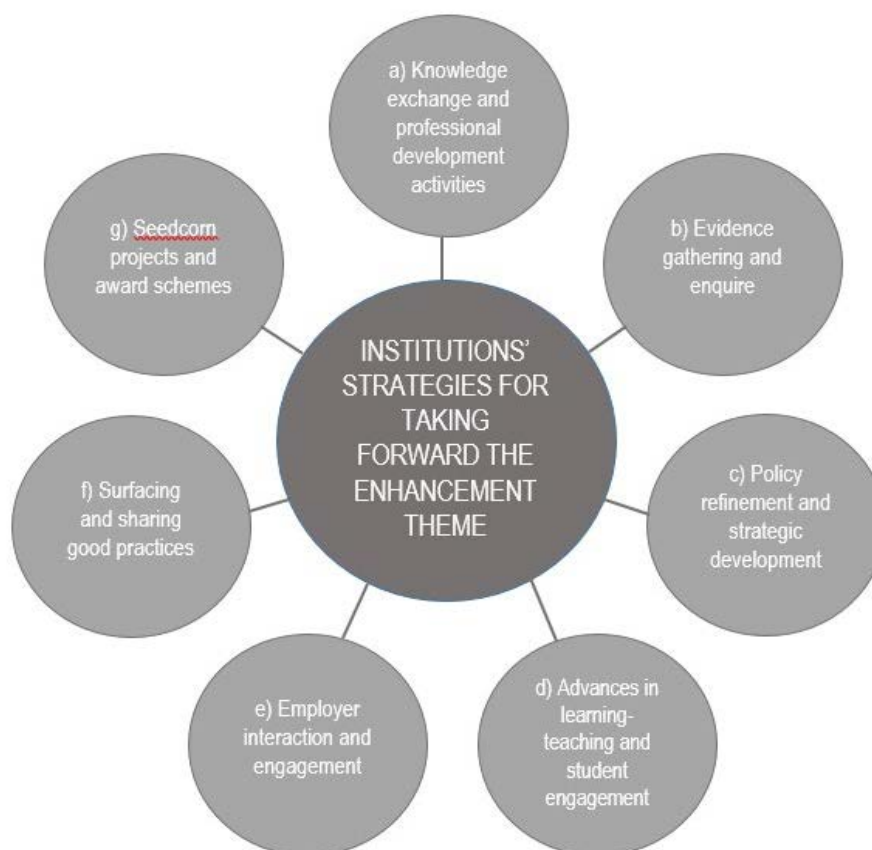


Figure 1. Strategies for enhancement, according to Bilbow et al. (2017; p.163)

Several of these strategies are at work in the project Teaching and learning resources; The project is about exchanging knowledge (a), the subprojects were started by enquiring the departments' needs (b), the project aims at advancing the learning-teaching engagement (d) and we wish to engage the management in forming strategies for a continual teaching and learning enhancement (e). Above all, this project should work as a means for surfacing and sharing good practices (f).

There are on the whole several reasons why we agree with Bilbow et al. and stress the importance of finding ways of interdisciplinary collaboration, not least when it comes to educational development. Firstly, it is a way of bringing together the different subcultures that are always at work at different levels in a large organization, such as in various departments and

within groups of fellow-teachers. Deem and Lucas (2006; p.127) say that cultures within university departments might contain “both enabling and constraining” factors which have an impact on the teachers and scientists. When working on forming a university overarching educational/academic culture, it is vital to bring these subcultures together in order to find out what shared values and norms there are to build on in the organization. This is exactly what happened in some of our subprojects. For instance, the subprojects that initiated teaching and learning fora at their departments aimed at discussing and sharing ideas and experiences of teaching within their group. This increased their understanding of each other’s educational practice and ethos.

Secondly, at our university there are quite a few examples of how similar kinds of developmental projects have taken place at different departments, but without the various project groups having had any knowledge of each other’s existence. When working with interdisciplinary projects, the risk of such tunnel vision thinking is minimized. During the meetings with the group of teaching and learning resources, they spoke about the benefits arising from meeting other colleagues in order to avoid duplication of work. This kind of collaboration could thus save resources for the university. Another synergy effect has clearly been that learning on micro and meso level is broadened to macro level.

Thirdly, at a university like ours, where many teachers are struggling with a heavy workload and symptoms of fatigue and burnout, collaboration and shared experiences might work as tools not only for individual empowerment, but also for group empowerment. The participants mentioned the importance of the project’s structure, not least the fact that they were given specified time to function as teaching and learning resources. This gave substance and weight to their task, and a confidence in that their individual and collective efforts are invested upon. Many studies verify that organizational support, communication and management are related to the experience of job strain and job satisfaction (Karasek & Theorell, 1990; Kuoppala et al., 2008). Therefore, in order to achieve a creative and supportive environment we need to continue encouraging staff collaboration.

Another positive effect that came out of the project is that the participants broadened their view of the university and became more aware of what happen in other departments. They were also shown that others are struggling with problems similar to their own. For example, the subproject of creating a guide for new teachers, which emerged as a collaboration between a few teachers, has resulted in that several departments are now asking for such a guide, but with a university overarching perspective.

In sum, the project Teaching and learning resources has contributed, in our experience, to not only individual professional development of the teachers that participated in the project, but also to educational development and enhancement at group and organizational level. The unexpected forms of collaboration and united action across department and faculty borders has given us an understanding of the importance of structured forms of teaching and learning dialogue and fora. It is surely worth the effort to give teachers time to participate in this type of activity, due to the synergetic effects that are discussed above. Our strong belief is that our

university would greatly benefit from continually providing the prerequisites for the kind of cooperative teaching and learning environment of which our project is an example. For that, we need leaders on all levels who prioritize this sort of activity.

## **References**

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