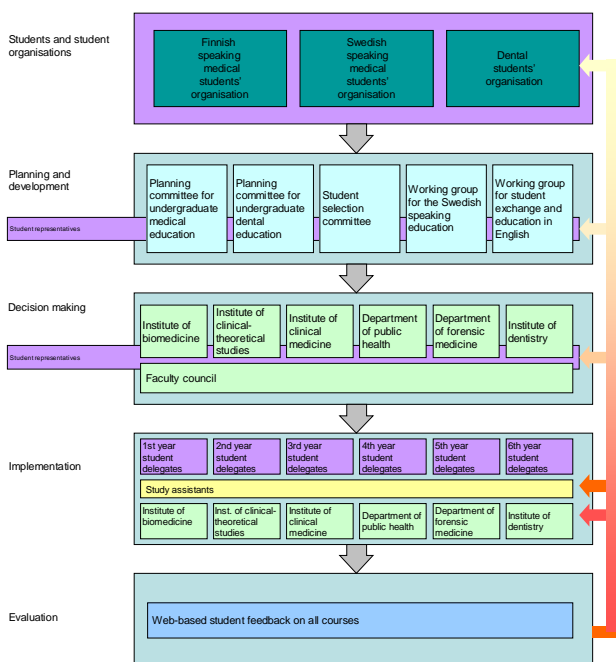


Students play an important role and are strongly committed in curriculum development at the University of Helsinki. Student representatives are active in the planning committees for medical and dental education as well as in various working groups. Students have among themselves a well-functioning representative network. All students contribute to curriculum development by giving course-specific feedback.

Student involvement in curriculum development at the University of Helsinki

Student involvement in curriculum development



GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF STUDENT INVOLVEMENT IN THE CURRICULUM PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT

The structure of student involvement in curriculum planning and development is outlined in the figure. First, the student organisations are presented. These organisations have student boards that choose the student representatives in the boards, committees and the faculty council in the Faculty of Medicine. Representatives are chosen for an average of two to three years at a time. Student representatives are members of the decision making committees at the different departments in the Faculty of Medicine. They are important members in the faculty's planning committees which are in charge of the planning, development and co-ordination of undergraduate education and develop the curriculum and required study regulations. Students are also represented at the highest decision making level, the Faculty Council. This system allows students not only to be aware of all changes and development plans for different levels of the curriculum but also to affect the decisions made.

The students have played a very active role in the curriculum development at the University of Helsinki. In the 1990's the initiative for renovating the curriculum into a PBL-based one was presented by them. Thus, the students have been active agents in development of the entire medical and dental curricula in Helsinki. In this process they have provided new ideas, given good feedback and brought up the important experiential point of view of learning and studying medicine and dentistry.

Each individual student in the faculty is also given a chance to express his or her opinion about all courses through a web-based course-specific feedback system. The feedback rate is high, about 80%. This is partly due to the fact that giving feedback has been made obligatory for passing the courses. The feedback is firstly processed by the course coordinators. Then, the problems and subsequent improvements are discussed within the department. Development suggestions are brought to the faculty's planning committees which often establish separate working groups with student representatives. The working group seeks for possible solutions and presents them to the faculty's planning committee. Final decisions are made in the Faculty Council. Thus, student feedback can play a crucial role in curriculum planning and development. Small scale improvements are made on regular basis. However, the students who have brought up proposals for a renovation of a course seldom find out about the improvements made as they have already moved forward in their studies. It is important to create a better system of informing the students about the improvements made based on their feedback.

STUDENT REPRESENTATIVE NETWORK

There are three student organisations in the Faculty of Medicine at the university of Helsinki: the Medical Students' Organisation, the Swedish Speaking Medical Students' Organisation and the Students' Organisation of Dentistry. The student organisations have a Standing Committee on Education, and the committee's director is a member of the organisation's Student Board. Student representatives are regularly elected. The Student Board looks at the candidates merits and support from other students, and seeks representatives from all stages of the medical curriculum in order to secure a comprehensive representation and continuity in the students' participation of curriculum planning.

The Standing Committee on Education Director is in charge of all student representatives and aims at increasing their awareness, interest and active involvement in curriculum planning and development. Also, the Standing Committee on Education Director acts as a link between the faculty, student representatives and all members of the Students' Organisations. The communication between all student representatives is mainly carried out via e-mail. The aim is to spur the student representatives to report about the decisions made in each of the faculty's planning committee meetings. However, this aim has not yet been entirely reached. The e-mail board of the Standing Committee on Education is also used for discussing current issues and propositions made by faculty representatives. Furthermore, an introductory meeting for all student representatives is arranged at the beginning of each calendar year. In the last study-year the meeting was combined with a training dealing with the duties of student representatives and general meeting procedures.

FACTORS AFFECTING THE STUDENTS' OPPORTUNITIES TO INFLUENCE

There are many factors that affect the students' opportunities to have an influence on curriculum planning. A positive attitude in the faculty and among its representatives is crucial. In general, this aspect is taken into account quite well in our Faculty, starting from the encouraging attitude of the Dean, who regularly meets with the student board of the Medical Students' Organisation to discuss current issues. The other personnel involved in curriculum planning also generally shows an encouraging attitude towards student involvement and is interested to hear the students' perspective.

The most crucial factors contributing to the individual student representative's degree of active involvement in curriculum planning are, however, his/her own willingness and motivation to be involved in curriculum development, combined with his or her other personal traits and time resources. The best motivating factor for the student representative in the curriculum development is to experience that he/she as a student representative can in fact make a difference. The student must have examples of cases in which taking the time to bring about change has been worth the trouble. They should also recognise that the students' point of view concerning learning and teaching in the faculty and their constructive feedback and criticism leads to changes and development of the curriculum.

The attitude towards curriculum planning and developing among the students and the student representatives is of no less importance. It is important to constantly keep the student representatives informed about the curriculum changes planned and carried out. The creation of an atmosphere open to discussion and suggestions from all representatives has a positive influence.

Asking the students in a face-to-face manner in everyday conversations about their opinions on courses or other current issues has also proven to be a valid form of acquiring feedback. That is why the social involvement of student representatives among other students beyond the borders of the Standing Committee on Education is important and should be encouraged.

The appropriate division of labour between the student representatives is also an essential factor contributing to student activity in the faculty boards and committees. A single student's work load should not be too heavy. Thus, a sufficient number of student representatives is beneficial for all, the representatives themselves, the faculty and the whole student body.

FUTURE CHALLENGES

Firstly, one of the main future challenges of the student involvement in curriculum planning is to improve the feedback system. In particular, the information given to all students about the actions taken to improve teaching should be increased. This requires detailed and open processing of the student feedback and more straight-forward steps towards improving the unsatisfactory courses and other areas of studies. This demands a tighter cooperation between faculty boards and planning committees. Still today, despite a good feedback rate and relevant information given in it, the feedback is ignored or forgotten.

Secondly, it is important to encourage students to give more informative and constructive feedback with suggestions on how they would like the current practice to be enhanced. In order to accomplish this, the students must be aware of the concrete examples of changes that have been implemented.

In the end it comes to creating a positive cycle between the students' willingness to give feedback and the faculty's willingness to actually consider the feedback given and take immediate action to bring about change and to inform about the amendments made.