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CLOSING DOORS -STUDENTS IN A WHIRLWIND OF CHANGE AS A CAMPUS MOVES

Abstract:

Since new autonomy-increasing university legislation (2010), three satellite teacher education departments located away from their parent university have been closed. In April 2016 the University of Eastern Finland decided, for financial reasons, to end all activities at Savonlinna Campus and to transfer to the Joensuu campus, 150 kms away, beginning in autumn 2018. Thus, the neoliberalist-inspired concentration of education into larger units also reached academia (e.g. Kretchmar 2011; Autti & Hyry-Beihammer 2009).

Our study focuses on how Savonlinna campus staff and students experienced this closure. Two sets of data were collected using free-form responses to e-questionnaires, the first set one month after the decision to close, the second ten months later. The first questionnaire asked respondents about their feelings anticipating and hearing the decision; the second, about everyday life at university after the decision. Here we examine these experiences in the light of organization theories (e.g. Ruoposa 2016). 76 students completed the first questionnaire, 32 the second.

The first data set exhibited the students' anxiety and fear. Of concern were both the new study environment with its changing routines and reorganizing one's own life. There was also fear about losing a small campus's sense of community and flexibility. The reactions are understandable since for the individual the move means uncertainty, abandoning the familiar, which can feel perplexing (Ylikoski & Ylikoski 2009). The sense of meaningfulness and equilibrium can be upset, and the experience of involvement and feeling of control decrease.

The same topics recurred in the second data set, although some stabilization of feelings was also apparent. It was important to see things through honourably. This can be understood as identity work included in organizational change, expressed as the need to preserve a sense of control and continuity, as well as to reduce uncertainty. Since group identification reduces the threat felt at the changeover phase, emphasizing group spirit is a normal reaction in processes of change (Ruoposa 2016).

Accelerating studies to avoid moving, already apparent in the first data, had taken place, causing many students pressure and worries about coping. Despite the university's promise to transfer its activities as such, mistrust increased when certain minor subjects came under threat.

This study reveals the problematics of closing a unit from the student's viewpoint and encourages us to consider the human implications of these often economic decisions.

Keywords:

teacher education, neoliberalist-inspired school policy