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A Story of an Ideal Study Process at the University of Lapland, Finland

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A Story of an Ideal Study Process at the University of Lapland, Finland

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Abstract- Universities' competition for talented applicants is tightening and many universities have to think about methods to increase their attractiveness in the eyes of students. Smooth study processes are important not only for the continuity of the university but also for the student's well-being and employment after studies. Certain university-level measures can enhance this process, although they alone do not guarantee swift graduation. In this study, student tutors (N=82) from the university of Lapland talked about the factors enhancing study processes from their points of view. The data were combined into one narrative that crystallizes the happy and smooth study process called "the ideal study process".

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1. INTRODUCTION

In Finland, one of the topical themes of university-level education is intensification of university studies. The general goal is to expedite students' graduation and moving in the worklife. The Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture (2010) regulates university funding through various criteria for intensified studies. In order to secure their funding, universities have to think about measures that strengthen the smoothness of students' study processes. Thus, it is important to pay attention to a good startup and progress of studies, and ability to make good choices along studies and guidance regarding study choices and in question of motivational and other problems. This concern is also important in economic sense (e.g., Gilpin, 2008).

The problems in the smoothness of university studies, and prolonged studies and quitting are widely studied internationally as well (Bennett, 2003; Cook & Leckert, 1999; Kuh et al., 2008; Määttä & Uusiantti, 2011; Uusiantti & Määttä, 2013a; 2013b). Likewise, there is plenty of research on the factors that are crucial for the favorable progress of studies. Student engagement has often been introduced as the key factor: For example, Cruce, Wolniak, Seifert, and Pascarella (2006) suggest that good practices in education have a unique, positive impact on student development as they boost student engagement. According to Kezar and Kinzie (2006) such features of a quality undergraduate education are the following:

quality begins with an organizational culture that values high expectations, respect for diverse learning styles, and emphasis on the early years of study; quality undergraduate curriculum requires coherence in learning, synthesizing experiences, on-going practice of learned skills, and integrating education with experience; and quality undergraduate instruction builds in active learning, assessment and prompt feedback, collaboration, adequate time on task, and out of class contact with faculty (see also Kuh, 2003). Theilheimer (1991) emphasizes the influence of a positive learning environment as it can foster study processes through (1) comfort (creating a feeling of safety, accommodating errors, giving students the freedom of expressing themselves without constraints, creating the feeling of belonging to peer group); (2) clarity (providing clear instructions, breaking down material to smaller chunks to maintain the feeling of accomplishment, however small); (3) respect (mutual respect between students and the teacher); (4) relationships (particularly caring relationships between the teacher and individual students, teacher attending each student individually); (5) responsibility (giving students a degree of control over decisions concerning their learning).

University-level studies are demanding and students need special support and guidance (Egan et al., 2009). In her studies on the supervision of doctoral theses, Määttä (2012) represented that the supervisor's resources can be divided into four dimensions of Will, Knowledge, Actions, and Proficiency, each contributing to the supervision relationship. Will means the supervisor's commitment to supervision, whereas knowledge refers to the substance knowledge and/or the mastery and ability to comprehend the overall structure. Actions are to ensure that the contents meet the scientific quality requirements. Proficiency Comprise positive and supportive supervision methods and personality. A supervisor can emphasize different features depending on his or her own style and on the student's work habits and needs (see Richardson, 2005). Supervision is not likely to succeed if one of the aforementioned resources is completely missing.

In addition to student-specific features and guidance and supervision provided by the faculty, many characteristics of university community can also either enhance or hinder students' study processes. Study atmosphere can vary from open and vivid interaction between students and teachers and other personnel all

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to way to distant, minimal, and formal relationships between these groups. Indeed, the meaning of informal student-faculty contacts and learning outcomes has been noted already three decades ago (see Pascarella, 1980). Good and supportive learning atmosphere makes learning and studying seem meaningful according to several studies (see e.g., Egan et al., 2009; Kezar & Kinzie, 2006; Mayya & Roff, 2004).

Previous studies on factors that support and disturb students' study processes do exist abundantly but a new and important viewpoint to the phenomenon is the one of student tutors (Leidenfrost et al., 2011). By the concept of student tutor, we mean students who have enrolled to act as voluntary tutors for new students. The selected tutors represent students who have succeeded well in studies. They also receive remuneration from the university. Because of their tutoring task, the students have to think about possible drags on studies and how to prevent prolongation of studies, and also about those factors that boost studies (Heirdsfield et al., 2008). They are suitable for the task because study processes are part of their real lives.

In this study, we wanted to analyze what the most important factors enhancing smooth study processes are according to student tutors' perceptions. How to have as successful and fruitful study processes as possible? The fundamental assumption was that everyone applying for university studies wants to have a balance study process aiming at rapid graduation.

II. METHOD

This research was performed among students tutors of the University of Lapland (N=82) participating in the fall 2013 tutor training. The university administration organized the training during which the forthcoming tutors had to, among other tasks name the worst pitfalls of study processes. They had to ruminate how to enhance the smoothness of study processes and swift graduation. These questions were to lay the foundation to their work as student tutors.

Students who had studied for 1 to 3 years were selected as student tutors. Their task was to support and guide new students how to get started with studies and help them enter the university world. Naturally, the tutors own experiences of university studies were fresh which helped them to view which are the most important issues to discuss with the newcomers. Simultaneously, they described the features of an ideal study process.

The data were collected in the form of written answers of how to have as smooth study process as possible. The answers were also discussed during the training together with the whole student tutor group. The student tutors represented four faculties of the University of Lapland (Faculty of Education, Faculty of Law, Faculty of Social Sciences, and Faculty of Art and Design).

The data were analyzed with the method of narrative analysis. Narrative research can be defined as a research that utilizes or analyses narrative data collected by narratives (e.g. biographies) or other ways (e.g. anthropologists' observational narratives). Thus, narratives can be either a research object or means to study a phenomenon (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998). Narrative research does not focus on objective and—generalized facts but local, personal, and subjective information this is actually considered as strength in narrative research because informants' voice can be heard in a more authentic way (Guba & Lincoln, 1995). Narratives can also be used when analyzing the reasons for acts.

In this research, analysis was made by narrative structuring that pursues to contribute a cohesive description of student tutors' perceptions of a fluent study process. Likewise, the analysis can be seen as category-content focused approach where parts of narrative are categorized into different categories (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998). Furthermore, narrative categories can be used for constructing consistent narratives (Polkinghorne, 2005). Human experiences and the meanings they give to things have a central role that is their interpretations of life and reality. The approach assumes that there is not any objective reality, but there can be many realities (see O'Shea, 2014). The study contributes one perspective of the research target—in this case, Finnish student tutors' perceptions of successful study process.

After the narrative analysis, we gathered the factors that seemed to form the basis of favorable study processes. Finally, we constructed a narrative of an ideal study process that describes a happy and smooth university study path.

III. RESULTS: A HAPPY UNIVERSITY STUDENT'S NARRATIVE

After graduating from the upper secondary education, the student hoped he could study at a university. He studied for the entrance tests although the entrance test books were rather difficult. The entrance test seemed demanding, he was nervous about the result. Then, one summer day, he got an acceptance and welcoming letter from the university: he was accepted as a student.

He started studies and wanted to perform at least 55 study points per year (1 ECTS study point equals to about 24 hours of studies). After a while, he noticed that many factors made his studies easier, and so he studied, attended lectures and exams, read for exams, and wrote essays. As he gathered study points, his understanding and academic expertise also got strengthened. He also got to know his fellow students and the faculty and other personnel. He enjoyed his studies at the university.

He found the following areas of education especially pleasing.

a) Teaching Arrangements

He was secured with a smooth and balanced study process yearly. Obligatory studies were not overlapping but were designed to be sequential or parallel. Some lectures could be followed from his own laptop at the time he found the most suitable and when he could not attend the lectures at the university.

Courses were offered evenly at various semesters, months, and weekdays, and he had plenty of doing and studying all days long. Likewise, he had good options for having exams, and especially using the exam room. This so-called exam aquarium is a space in which a student can have an exam at his preferred time. The teacher has saved the exam questions beforehand in the exam system. The exam aquarium is equipped with a computer and a surveillance camera. The student found the exam aquarium very useful in times of difficulties getting the text books from the library.

He also was happy of having many optional ways of performing the courses. Sometimes writing an essay was a good way of showing his learning, while at other times a traditional exam could suit better.

b) Curriculum

The curriculum presented the phases of sequential studies in an understandable manner. The model study path also helped him to see which could be a recommended order of performing studies. Furthermore, discussions he had with the teacher tutor were of great help. Every now and then, he could stop and check how his studies had advanced. If some course seemed to be demanding or unclear or he encountered other hindrances, obstacles, or problems, the teacher tutor could help. Other teaching, research, and administrative personnel were also willing to help with any problem he had.

Some of the courses appeared very laborious, but on the other hand, he got plenty of study points from these courses. In all, the study points corresponded to the workload involved in courses.

Text books that were supposed to study for exams were often available online due to which he did not have to queue for the printed books from library. However, the library personnel had always served him in an extremely student-oriented manner and had helped him for searching relevant literature for his theses.

c) Guidance and Contact Teaching

He was very pleased with the plentiful and detailed feedback he received from teachers regarding his progress. The easiest way of having feedback was the exams had in the exam aquarium: the professor or university lecturer gave the score accompanied with written description of what he had succeeded in, what he should pay more attention to, and how he could

improve his scores in the future. Likewise, the teacher's response to course feedback from students written in the electric study service gave him an impression that the student feedback mattered.

His study motivation was significantly maintained by the fact that the exams and essays were scored quickly so that he could move on with his studies promptly. Indeed, his university had distinguished from other universities with its reputation of giving scores without further ado.

He could arrange face-to-face discussions and interaction situations regularly with teachers. If he was not always able to arrange time for face-to-face meetings with teacher, the teacher would still answer to the student's contacts immediately by email. He got the sense of being appreciated, supported and cared for, and that the teachers were interested in his study progress.

One-on-one discussions with teachers and researchers were inspiring. When he was doing his bachelor's or master's thesis, he got from the meetings with his supervisors and the research seminars perspective, guidance, confidence on right direction, and encouragement. From time to time, he did feel surprised how well his supervisor had read his unfinished drafts filled with various defects. The supervisor's advice helped him to proceed with his research work. The student was very thankful knowing that his supervisor had plenty of other teaching, research, and administrative work. He thought that he would always remember the appreciation and support he was provided with. He decided to do his best to spread the positive message about his university to his employer and as an alumni to prospective students.

d) Study Community

The student remembers his first days at the university. His mind is happy but expectant and excited: What will university studies mean and demand? Insecurity and suspense were to fade quickly after well-designed orientation lectures had at the university. Both personnel from study administration and his own faculty, the professor of his field and teaching stuff, welcomed him. Student and teacher tutors answered numerous questions, and the student could notice how many things he had in common with other new students. Spending time together and getting to know his new fellow students helped him to settle in the new place to which he had moved from home, quite faraway.

The first lectures riveted him and he felt that he had made the right decision when choosing this particular discipline at this particular university. He found even reading the text books easier after attending the basic courses held by appreciated professors who explained the fundamental questions of their special fields. Moreover, mutual conversations and co-operation with fellow students in studies and in leisure were

remarkable. Due to communality and shared hobbies, he started to like his study place.

The student graduated within roughly four years, because he would also study during summers. The university offered good chances of performing studies and especially he would use the library and the exam aquarium often during summers. Still now, after graduated as a master, he feels a deep longing when thinking of his study years—doctoral studies looming in his mind.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

This study summoned up factors that the student tutors found the most crucial for prompt and smooth study process and graduation. Their thoughts were combined into a narrative that describes the ideal study process, being a sum of several factors. From a student's point of view, the main factors were the teaching arrangements the curriculum, guidance and contact teaching, and study community (see also Blackmore, 2009).

Naturally, everyone also perceives the smoothness of studies subjectively and evaluates personal achievements in different ways (Maddux, 2002). Expectations for the future affect greatly how people react on changes and challenges (Carver & Scheier, 2002). Everyone chooses their own strategy that makes their study paths meaningful (Carver & Scheier, 2005; Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991). At the personal level, students' study processes vary greatly depending on their backgrounds, starting points, study skills, and experiences they get during their education. Students have certain learning abilities and habits. If successful, they can strengthen their knowledge and self-efficacy. However, students' self-images can be strengthened or dashed at the university (Cassidy & Eachus, 2000; Gettinger & Seibert, 2002), and therefore, it is important to consider the factors that the university can pay attention to when trying to find the ways of supporting swift graduation.

On the other hand, student tutors emphasize students' motivation which reflects in their way of seizing studies and persistence (Allen, 1999). Outer rewards matter too. Receiving positive and encouraging feedback on one's own progress is important as it improves one's receptiveness to new learning experiences and tolerance of failures. On the other hand, it is quite obvious that the perceived feeling of insufficiency, poor performance level, and teachers' inadequate guidance and disinterest decrease motivation (Brew & Peseta, 2004; Pajares, 2001).

At the university level, the professors and lecturers' pedagogical and scientific professionalism, curricula, and the atmosphere and conditions of the university (see Määttä & Uusiautti, 2011; Uusiautti & Määttä, 2013a; 2013b) can be named the core factors.

Basically, the curriculum of the master's degree provides both teachers and students with a clear goal. It answers the questions of what kinds of expertise students will have and what their studies include. Learning goals in the curriculum tell what students are expected to know after taking a certain study unit. Goals also direct working and provide standard against which learning, teaching, and studying can be evaluated (see Blackmore, 2009).

V. DISCUSSION

The ideal study process probably does not exist. Studying and learning always necessitate effort, and personal goals cannot be reached without pains. Neither do hard trying and diligent labor guarantee success. However, good, informed, and student-centered teaching provided by the university are salient (Neumann, 2001; Ramsden, 2003). But ultimately, the completion of an academic degree is the student's responsibility: even the most skillful teacher cannot learn on the student's behalf. The teacher can enhance learning through exquisite teaching skills but also through appreciating interaction with students. Today, it is not enough just to bear the responsibility both for the discipline the teacher represents, but good university teachers are concerned of their students' success and well-being, too (Egan et al., 2009; Mackinnon, 2004; Norton et al., 2005).

The university conditions cover the outward conditions including study facilities and their locations; the number of teachers in relation to the number of students; social, economic, and health services; library services (the availability of books, opening hours); ICT facilities and their sufficiency; the length of study days; and the accumulation of courses versus even division by weekdays and time. It is a known fact (e.g., Greenwald, Hedges, & Laine, 1996) that a broad range of resources are positively related to students' success.

Universities have to compete for studies and have results to show when it comes to teaching, research, and societal influence. University teachers' personal merits are mostly based on research accomplishments but teaching and guidance of students is important for the continuation of the university operation. Teaching and guidance can be the most rewarding areas of work Määttä, 2012. Quality guidance and teaching make a central, valuable part of the whole sphere of academic work (Biggs & Tang, 2003; Uusiautti & Määttä, 2013a; 2013b).

Universities are liable for students: the promises given in the universities application guides must be fulfilled. Each and every student should feel welcome and become convinced that they made a good choice (Cook & Lecket, 1999). On the other hand, the most far-reaching and rewarding part of teaching and mentoring is to make students interested and seize the questions

of their discipline, and finally become enthusiastic about working for the development of science (Schunk & Pajares, 2005).

Student tutors' work aiming at overcoming obstacles of smooth study processes is valuable. Their voices and experiences can highlight issues that the teaching and administration personnel of the university has not paid attention to (Storrs, Putsche, & Taylor, 2008). As manifested in the student tutors' perceptions, caring for students may be the lifeline of the quality and profitability of higher education.

University teachers' work is filled with ever-increasing demands, and therefore, the need for education of the university pedagogy increases. Indeed, university teachers should seize the material aimed for supporting academic teacherhood. University pedagogy can develop if university teachers evaluate their own development as supervisors (Emilsson, 2007), reflect on and diversify teaching practices (McCallin & Nayar, 2012), and plan teaching together with students making them inspired and succeed (Manathunga, 2005).

The smoothness of study process does not only concern university level studies, nor is just a matter of education policy. It reflects on many other areas too. Finally, it is obvious that students want to study, be happy for performing studies and find the joy from progress, gather intellectual capital, develop toward expertise, receive an academic degree, and enter worklife. Study results are related to student well-being as well (Gillman, Huebner, & Furlong, 2009; Gillman, Huebner, & Laughlin, 2001; Natvig et al., 2003). Sometimes, factors hindering smooth studies do not depend so much on students' prerequisites or the measures of university, but trouble of finding economic resources. In Finland, many students have to work in jobs not corresponding to their study fields to earn their keep. Still, the opportunities and student-centered solutions the university can make should not be belittled. Students and their study success make the secret of a good university.

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