

ACADEMIC DIFFICULTIES FOR UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN THE FACULTY OF AGRICULTURAL, FOOD AND ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCES, DEBRECEN UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

Our previous study discussed the first results of a survey on the academic competencies of L2 medical students (DEOEC, University of Debrecen) from non-Hungarian countries, who pursued their undergraduate medical diploma courses in English. Our present study envisages exploring the academic competencies of the first year students of the Faculty of Agricultural, Food and Environmental Sciences, Debrecen University. Our goal is to establish a network of group-leaders (helpers) from among lecturers who might provide useful support for first year students in relation to the above mentioned skills and competencies to make our students more successful during their academic years and to provide them with marketable degrees.

Key words: academic competencies, students of agricultural economics, students of rural development, learning skills, learning strategies

INTRODUCTION

Providing care and support for students to cope with a new environment and the requirements of university education has become focal at the Debrecen University due to a number of cases that suggest students have problems with integration into a completely unknown social and academic system and with their basic language and learning skills as well (Tar-Wiwczaroski, 2010). At present, the Faculty of Agricultural, Food and Environmental Sciences, attempts to create a network of helpers (group leaders) who introduce first year students into the world of the academe, providing them with the necessary assistance in terms of integration, the development of responsible, adult behaviour, learning skills, strategies and methods as well.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

Focus group interviews and a questionnaire on learning skills were carried out to explore how students cope with learning requirements on academic level. The focus group interviews sought to find out students' beliefs, expectations, daily practices and methods in relation to their studies, while the questionnaires aimed to explore students' habits, individual patterns of time management, preparation for learning, learning styles, memory styles, self-reported learning difficulties, opinions on testing (oral

or written) and knowledge assessment at the Faculty of Agricultural, Food and Environmental Sciences, University of Debrecen.

Group interviews were carried out by the group leaders and the questions focused on the following issues:

1. students' independent way of life (how to live and cope with everyday problems on their own, learning-time management)
2. social life, free time (common programs, leisure time and recreation activities etc.)
3. education, learning
4. the structure of education, access to information

The questionnaire survey included 159 first year students of the Faculty of Agricultural, Food and Environmental Sciences, Debrecen University. The evaluation of answers was carried out by the help of the EvaSys program. For some questions, students were allowed to give more than one answer. The first set of questions focused on students' general interests (fields of science, potential future carrier, free time activities, whereas the second set targeted learning habits and skills (difficulties, note-taking in the classroom, preparation for exams and tests). The results are presented in percentages.

RESULTS AND DISSCUSIONS

The focus group interviews highlight that students have significant problems with their independent life style development (just like medical students, Faculty of Medical Sciences, Debrecen University) and they do need the mediation of helpers (group-leaders, respected senior lectures or peer-help) when they try to integrate in academic life following their secondary school period. The respondents pointed out time-management problems (preferring watching TV, going out, wasting time through unnecessary activities) and a significantly high level of anxiety when taking exams or writing tests. As for social life and free time, inactivity was predominant as opposed to active spare time choices (sleeping, "doing nothing", and watching films instead of recreation, sports and trips). Most of the respondents mentioned the lack of consciously used learning strategies. "Learning or instructional strategies determine the approach for achieving the learning objectives and are included in the pre-instructional activities, information presentation, learner activities, testing, and follow-through. The strategies are usually tied to the needs and interests of students to enhance learning and are based on many types of learning styles (Ekwensi, Moranski, & Townsend-Sweet, 2006). Their lack among students calls lecturers' attention to the fact that even on academic levels

these skills are to be evolved or further developed. About the structure of education and access to information at the university, students revealed the disadvantages of the Bologna-type system of tertiary education, the lack of teachers' personal caring about students' individual development and that of free Internet access in the campus area. The evaluation of the questionnaire has produced quantifiable results. The study group consisted of approximately the same amount of male and female students (48.3%, 51.7%, respectively). All the students took part in BSc education, representing the following majors: experts of animal husbandry, food engineering, environmental management, agricultural engineering, environmental protection and game management. The respondents gained information of the Faculty of Agricultural, Food and Environmental Sciences, mostly from the Internet (64.8%), but many attended the "open" day organized by the Faculty to advertise its diploma courses (44%). Also, many were encouraged by their families (28.3%) and friends (34%) and the media (newspapers) proved to be the least informative for them (7.5%). They were motivated to choose our Faculty by their interests (58.5%), the marketability of their future degrees (41.5%) and the professionally renowned name of the University (40.9%), which guarantees a high level of education for them. Students are mostly interested in plant protection and animal husbandry, and they seek employment later in agriculture or on family farms. In their free time, most of the respondents (66.7%) spend time with friends, on sport activities (49.7%), on trips to nature (47.8%) and only 27% read regularly. The next set of questions focused on learning activities (strategies, techniques). 79.3% of students do not spend too much time learning certain study materials and fortunately only 27.9% swot the night before examinations. 85% find their note-taking skills satisfactory for their academic studies, and only 12.7% complain about their problems with memorizing what they have learned. Similarly, merely 11.9% have difficulties with highlighting the most essential parts of a study material for making learnable summaries. However, the number of those students who prepare for examinations by randomized methods instead of conscious, well-organized schemes is 34.3%. Also, 30% of students get lost in details and end up daydreaming while reading textbooks or their own notes. The respondents dominantly list themselves into the visual category of learning types, with 12.9% auditive and 9.4% kinetic. Many find the teachers' explanations significant (83.6%), while 39.6% claim that they can easily learn from books or from the Internet as well. Almost 100% (95.5%) think they have no learning difficulties whatsoever, but this positive evaluation is unfortunately not verified by their classroom activities. Our students prefer written exams as opposed to oral ones (deterioration of oral skills) and opt

for continuous testing during the semester rather than taking exams at the end of each one (twice annually).

CONCLUSIONS

The evaluation of the above findings incited our Faculty to develop a carefully planned support program which might provide students with the necessary practical and theoretical knowledge as well as social support in their integration process into university and adult life (system of group leaders-helpers). Group leaders will participate in trainings of time management, learning techniques and strategies, coaching and of all the required skills and areas that they might successfully use in creating a well-operating system of support and individual development testing for our students. Setting realizable goals is also a skill that can be taught for students in order to break their tendency to pursue inactive activities and to raise their consciousness of meaningful learning, career and lifestyle options. Students will be encouraged to take up courses of carefully selected learning strategies to ease their learning-time management and test/exam anxiety, to improve their note-taking and memory skills. The group leaders will also participate in trainings on the new partner-type role of teachers in the process of education. This is a new tendency in university education “seen as a shift from focusing on teachers and teaching to learners and learning.” (Saleh, 2006). Cohen (1998) defines such a shift when he states that “one potentially beneficial shift in teacher roles is from that of being exclusively the manager, controller and instructor to that of being a change agent – a facilitator of learning, whose role is to help their students to become more independent and more responsible for their own learning. In this role the teachers become partners in the learning process”

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