

Imagine

- elements for a good first year experience

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Introduction

Higher education is at a crossroads. The development of competences required both in studying and in working life has become a personal project of the student. (Stelter 2014.) The students expect and demand support and guidance which meet their specific needs. These expectations cannot be responded with conventional "one size fits all" approach but student's experiences have to be taken into account. (Morgan 2012.)

Student experience has been studied mainly from the point of view of the students. Nevertheless it is important to know about the viewpoints of the personnel, too. This research focuses on what is important for a good first year experience in a university of applied sciences according to students, teachers and other staff.

Objective and Methods

The research was carried out in a university of applied sciences and the purpose was to provide understanding and insight about the assumptions concerning good first year experience. The research question is: **What is important for a good first year experience in a university of applied sciences?**

Methods

Instead of asking retrospectively, a future-oriented perspective to first year experience was used. The second year students (n = 121) and personnel (teachers and other staff, n = 523) were asked to imagine the desirable future by answering one question: **What would the students tell about their first year experience if everything had been ideal in our university of applied sciences?**

The data was produced in small group discussions and it was analyzed by identifying topics, expressions and meanings given to a good first year experience.

These were classified into three themes

- *psycho-social*: including personal and vocational development, emotional atmosphere and social relations
- *material*: including physical spaces, equipment and meals
- *pedagogical*: including planning and curriculum, methods and action, assessment and feedback

Results

On the basis of psycho-social, material and pedagogical themes five basic elements for a good first year experience was identified.

Basic elements for a good first year experience

Personalization

Personalization means that the student becomes a co-creator of plans, action and the content of their experiences. (Pahalad & Ramaswamy 2000.)

Personalization

- enables students to have personal learning paths that encourage them to set and manage their individual goals

Mentoring guidance

Mentoring guidance is a form of dialogue where participants are focused on creating space for reflection and meaning-making on the basis of experience, speech and action. (Stelter 2014.)

Mentoring guidance

- encourages learners' goal orientation and engagement in their own learning and supports the ability to apply skills, knowledge and experience to new situations

Authenticity

Authenticity occurs in the dynamic interactions among the learner, the task, and the environment. It is the cognitive authenticity rather than the physical authenticity that is of prime importance in the design of authentic learning environments. (Herrington, Oliver & Reeves 2003.)

Authenticity

- enables learners to engage in activities which present the same type of cognitive challenges as those in the real world (cognitive realism)

Collaboration

Collaboration is a process by which individuals negotiate and share meanings relevant to the problem-solving task at hand. (Roschelle & Teasley 1995.)

Collaboration

- requires working together toward common, clearly defined and challenging goals utilizing digital and mobile tools

Adaptability

Adaptability can be understood as a capacity to deal with new, changing, and/or uncertain situations (Martin 2010).

Adaptability

- demands for modifying thinking, attitudes, behavior, plans, curricula and organizational structures to the changing demands in different situations



Conclusion

The results of the research highlight the importance of student agency, responsibility and partaking in decision making. Five basic elements for a good first year experience help to understand how to enhance engagement to the process of studying, what is important in encountering and interaction and what should be taken into account in executing plans and processes. These elements can be applied in any discipline, should be applied at any stage of the student journey and can be applied in different student services.

The results of this study are significant in that they give voice both to the students and to the personnel by allowing them to set the elements for a good student experience.

Next steps

Further research is needed to investigate how the five basic elements are implemented and what is their effect on students' experiences.

References

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