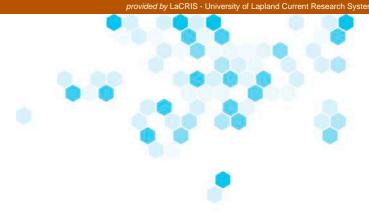LAPIN YLIOPISTO
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STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF FACTORS SLOWING DOWN THEIR STUDY PROGRESS: THE CASE OF UNIVERSITY OF LAPLAND

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Abstract

Fast graduation, smooth studies, and fluent study progress are the goals of today's university education. How do students themselves perceive their study processes and what do they think about the factors hindering them from succeeding? The purpose of this research was to find out from the first-year-students of one Finnish university their experiences and opinions. The research investigated what the most difficult issues the students have faced during their first year of university studies have been and what factors have hindered their study progress according to their own perceptions. The students (N=186) answered to an internet-based open-ended questionnaire. The data were analysed in a qualitative data-based manner which resulted in seven most frequently mentioned hindrances in the questionnaire data. The main hindrances were deficiencies in study skills, difficulties in adjustment to academic studies, unclear directions in studies, difficulties in making study plans and scheduling, lack of guidance in studies and difficulties in finding help, lack of community, and overlapping courses and busy study periods. Based on the findings, it is possible to pay attention to the difficulties mentioned by students.
Key words: *university education, study process, smooth studies, university teaching, study skills.*

Introduction

Not only university administration but also students themselves hope and aim at smooth progress in university studies. Prolonged study processes do not serve anyone: they decrease students' motivation to perform and complete studies and discourage university teachers. Decrease in graduating students means decrease in universities' funding, too, and therefore, it is crucial to pay attention to the smoothness of studies from a student's point of view. This is the purpose of this research. The objective was to hear from university students themselves what the most important factors hindering them progressing in their studies are.

A glimpse in previous studies and theories shows that success in studies is a sum of many factors. We have previously presented four core factors that direct students' study process: a student, university community, study plan, and university teacher (Määttä & Uusiautti, 2012). Although they may not explain successful study paths and learning comprehensively, they function as the basis of theoretical outline of this research.

Perhaps, the most important factor in the study process is the student himself or herself. Students' study skills, self-regulation, and attitudes determine their studying styles and skills and, thus, opportunities of succeeding (Dresel, Schmitz, Schober, Spiel, Ziegler, Engelschalk, & Steuer, 2015; Phan, 2008). Likewise, students are heterogeneous, whose unique personalities have their own influence on studies (Duff, Boyle, Dunleavy, & Ferguson, 2004). Success in previous education levels (Busato, Prins, Elshout, & Hamaker, 2000), including even experiences in elementary school, direct performance in university studies, as well (Hébert, 1993). These experiences in students' learning and study history can either strengthen or

sap their self-efficacy beliefs or self-confidence as learners (Furnham, Chamorro-Premuzic, & McDougall, 2002). Therefore, for example, university entrance tests do not predict well students' study success at universities (Beenstock & Feldman, 2016). Previous experiences have created students a conception of themselves as learners, who can become questioned at the university (Cano, 2005; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). In addition, students' expectations and understanding about the length and demands of studies can be unrealistic (Brunello & Winter-Ebmer, 2003).

Motivation to perform well and complete courses also makes an important ingredient of study success. Students' motivation reflects in their way of performing studies and their persistence (Mills & Blankstein, 2000; Pintrich, 1999; Salmela & Uusiautti, 2015). Strong intrinsic motivation makes coping with study-related challenges easier because then learning and acquiring knowledge and skills are considered rewarding as such (see also Ryan & Deci, 2000; Salmela & Määttä, 2015). However, outer rewards can boost motivation, too: positive and encouraging feedback is important as it improves one's receptiveness to new learning experiences and tolerance of failures (Aoun, Vatanasakdakul, & Ang, 2016). It is important to remember that students do not just live for their studies, but their lives are filled with other important areas, too, that are equally important for their comprehensive positive development (see e.g., Lerner et al., 2011). Indeed, studies should also be in balance with other areas of life: interesting hobbies, good human relationships and family life, versatile and relaxing leisure time act as a good counterbalance to studying (e.g. Lowe & Gayle, 2007).

Students' personal features are not, however, the only thing influencing their success: they are always a part of the university community that surrounds them and that either enhances or hinders their chances of succeeding. Many characteristics of university community influence on their study process (Chamorro-Premuzic, & Furnham, 2003; Conard, 2006), and one of the closest features to students is teaching. Numerous studies have outlined the features of teaching that enhances the study processes the best (DePillis & Johnson, 2015; Uusiautti & Määttä, 2013; Äärelä, Määttä, & Uusiautti, 2016). Findings have shown the importance of a positive study atmosphere (Shahidi & Sobhani, 2015), the level of face-to-face teaching (Symonds, 2014), the supervision of Master's theses (Chogyi, 2004), the significance of the first study year (Keup & Barefoot, 2005; Schellenberg & Bailis, 2015), and the level of interaction between the teaching personnel and students (Bowman & Akcaoglu, 2014; Määttä, 2015).

When it comes to the curriculum planning and teaching arrangements, faculties and departments vary from authoritative to democratic. The curriculum provides both teachers and students with clear goals, and current renewals of university curricula aim at enhancing work-life knowledge and skills across studies (Chappel & Johnston, 2003; Fallows & Steven, 2000; Xu, 2004). Curriculum planning can also pay attention to the study progresses and their phases, and therefore, turn curricula into more student-centred in nature (Valle et al., 2003).

Yet, the completion of an academic degree is the student's responsibility because even the most skilful teachers cannot learn on students' behalf (Määttä & Uusiautti, 2012; Äärelä, Määttä, & Uusiautti, 2016). Teaching skills, teachers' ability to be in an appreciating interaction with students and to guide students are still the bedrock of university education. Teaching skills can be practiced and developed. Often, it is the students who are expected to perform more and better (Stellmack et al., 2012), while the necessity of teachers' development may be forgotten (e.g., Hargreaves, 1997). Within the pressure of increasing extrinsic demands and personal goals, students' motivation becomes tested (Reiss, 2012). At its worst, bewilderment can result in dropping out from education (Cortes, Mostert, & Els, 2014; Stratton, O'Toole, & Wetzel, 2008) or in fatigue (Galbraith & Merrill, 2015; Olwage & Mostert, 2014).

Problem of Research

University teaching and various teaching methods have been studied abundantly. Likewise, university teachers' perceptions of the developmental needs in university teaching

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is a much researched topic. The purpose has been to find out how to enhance smooth study processes through various teaching arrangements and practices. This research contributes the students' viewpoint to the discussion.

The following research questions were set for this research:

What have been the most difficult issues the students have faced during their first year of university studies?

What factors have hindered their study progress according to their own perceptions?

Methodology of Research

General Characteristics of Research

The main purpose of this research was to know what factors make studying and study progress difficult. First-year students from the University of Lapland were selected as research participants. This selection was based on the findings according to which the first study year is the most important for the smoothness of forthcoming study years as well (e.g., McKenzie & Schweitzer, 2001).

Sample of Research and Instrument

The data collection happened via an Internet-based questionnaire called "Webropol". The questionnaire was sent to 506 students who had registered as present students for their first study year at the University of Lapland. Of them, 186 replied. The questionnaire was sent May 6, 2014 and a reminder note May 13, 2014 was sent to those who had not replied. The due date for participation in the research was May 20, 2014. The participation rate was 36.8 % which was considered sufficient for the purposes of this research. The timing of the research at the end of the study year might have influence on the participation because in May already many students return to their home places across Finland or start their summer jobs, and thus are not actively involved in studies.

Those who participated in the research were mostly women: 74 % were female students and 23 % male students (3 % of students, n=5, did not report their genders). The distribution resembles the actual distribution of female and male students at the University of Lapland. Of the participants of this research, 67 % were under 24 years old; 18 % were 25-29 years old; 4 % were 30-34 years old; and 6 % were over 40 years old. The median of students at the University of Lapland is 27 years.

The participants of this research also represented the four faculties (= departments) of the university relatively well. 44 students (23.7 %) were from the faculty of education, 49 students (26.3 %) were from the faculty of law, 27 students (15.5 %) were from the faculty of arts, and 66 students (35.5%) were from the faculty of social sciences.

The University of Lapland is the northernmost university of the European Union. It is a small university with about 5,000 students. Even though small university enables open and easy interaction between students and the teaching staff, university studies are still demanding. In order to be able to develop teaching further, it is important to listen to students' experiences. Therefore, a qualitative research approach was chosen in this research. Due to the high number of students, an open-ended questionnaire was considered the best research instrument for data collection in order to address students and reach their perceptions and experiences (Denscombe, 2008). Even though loss was relatively loss, the number of participants and quality of data were still considered satisfactory for the purposes of the research, because their answers were long and profound. Excerpts from the data are included in the results section of this article. As the objective was to give voice to students themselves, the main emphasis in the data collection was to receive descriptions rich in content and variety.

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Data Analysis

The data were analysed with a content analysis method that was qualitative data-based analysis (Kolbe & Burnett, 1991). First, the students' statements were connected into several subcategories. Then, the analysis continued with a more specific categorization into main categories that would include items that resembled similar theme (such as deficient study skills). Eventually through reduction, seven main categories could be distinguished. They form the most important factors hindering smooth progress in studies according to students' perceptions.

When it comes to reliability in studies like this one, some basic issues can be evaluated. First, the reliability of the data collection method must be assessed. In this research, the internet-based questionnaire was considered the most suitable way of contacting students: they could be easily reached via email. Another advantage was that they could fill the questionnaire whenever the most convenient for them. However, this always causes some disadvantages too: many respondents may easily forget or ignore the request to participate in the research, or answers can remain short and superficial. In addition, the researcher cannot be certain who has actually answered the questions (although it is highly unlikely that someone else could answer in behalf of a student) and how, for example, the circumstances of the answering moment (e.g., mood, motivation, satisfaction of studies or latest courses, or other factors in students' personal lives) have influenced the students' answers. The quality of research is, therefore, mainly based on the quality of data, in this case the content of answers (Couper, Kapteyn, Schonlau, & Winter, 2007). This evaluation showed that the students had contemplated profoundly their study experiences and written about their difficulties and other adversities in an open manner. For example, their ability to notice shortcomings in their study skills showed that they did not just blame teachers or unpleasant teaching arrangements for the hindrances they had faced.

In addition, the reliability of this research was pursued to strengthen with collaboration of two researchers (Wray, Markovic, & Manderson, 2007). This enhanced the analysis by making sure that interpretations were not just based on one person's preconceptions but on data. Yet, it is still possible that some other researcher or research group could categorize or interpret the data differently. However, for the purposes of the research, the analysis showed what the crucial factors that hinder smooth study progress in students' opinion are. The categories are therefore strictly based on the frequencies of occurrence in the data.

Results of Research

Deficiencies in study skills required in university studies formed the main category in the students' answers. This was the main hindrance of smooth study progress during the first year of university studies. Most of the students did not have previous experience of university studies and, even if the university arranged orientation lectures that discuss relevant study skills, adjustment to the new study environment did not happen immediately or even easily. In general, study methods needed in university were reported unfamiliar, and therefore, the beginning of the study process was slow and tangled for many first-year-students:

> *"At the beginning, it was difficult to get in to the various learning environments."*
> *"To learn new study methods; lectures, making notes from speech and not directly from transparencies, preparing to exams with huge pile of literature."*

Sometimes, new students may find it difficult to find and learn new study techniques that suit them best. They would like to know exactly how to prepare for exams or how to write answers to essay questions, and what is an essay or learning diary.

> *"To find a reading style that fits. I have not been able make good plans of how to read to exams. Neither have I found a suitable study method and therefore my success in exams has been quite lame, and I have not obtained too much study points."*

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Adjustment to academic studies had been difficult at the beginning. The general university practices were not familiar and adjustment to the academic atmosphere took time. Studies at a university require more self-control, independence, and initiative than previous studies in upper secondary education. Numerous students mentioned how hard it was to impel themselves to study and find a study rhythm. The ability to carry on studies after failing in exams was also mentioned as a very demanding situation that decreased motivation and required extra-effort.

> *"At first, finding a study rhythm (different / more relaxed / more responsibility than in the general upper secondary education)."*
> *"Familiarization with more freely and voluntary studying was simultaneously liberating and, at times, problematic."*
> *"Too often have I started to read to an exam a couple of nights before it but toward the end of the study year, I have tried to mend my ways."*
> *"Finding a reading rhythm in independent studies; maintaining self-confidence, and spurring myself after getting an F and restarting studying."*

Unclear directions in studies had caused problems as well. Students reported that they had found guidelines for exams unclear, insufficient, and confusing. Likewise, guidelines of how to write essays and learning diaries were considered ambiguous and difficult to understand. Students complained that teachers' requirements for parts of a course had been diverging and that they are not always aware of what kind of performances teachers actually expect.

> *"Unclear directions regarding exams. In my first exam, I wrote too long answers and lost points. In the next one, I wrote more shortly, and then required information was missing. Each exam should have their own separate directions of how to perform in that exact exam."*

Study plans and scheduling were mentioned as one of the core issues hindering smooth studies. Independence in studies necessitates skills to plan one's study schedules. Students considered it difficult to perceive their study paths and the workload in their plans. Students had encountered trouble sticking to their study schedules or sparing enough time for studies and preparation for exams.

> *"The most difficult thing has been to realize how much work each task requires (essays, exams, seminars, etc.) because different teachers demand different kinds of input."*
> *"You have to plan everything by yourself and, every now and then, you relapse into too ambitious performing which tests your coping."*
> *"Adjustment to university studies, time management, and reasonable distribution of your resources."*

Lack of guidance in studies was mentioned as a hindrance. Students reported that they had not received enough guidance in how to select courses and minors as well as in planning of their studies in general. They mentioned that they had not received sufficient information beforehand about courses available and what the course contents are and what they should select.

> *"Starting your studies was the most difficult at first. I felt that I did not get enough guidance for planning my studies."*
> *"In the fall, I was not certain which courses I could already select [in my study plan]."*
> *"There has not been much study counselling."*

Lack of guidance and difficulties in finding help at the beginning of studies are major problems and can cause long-lasting trouble because some courses should be studied in a certain order. There are also courses that are offered only every second year. Therefore, it would be important to provide students with these kinds of information clearly and promptly straight at

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the beginning of the first study year. On the other hand, these are also details that students easily have forgotten in the middle of the start of their studies when they have numerous other issues to solve and think about, too. Therefore, guidance should be available through the school year so that the students could return to these questions when they need help with them the most.

Many students were also disappointed with tutoring. Both student and teacher tutoring were considered insufficient. Students considered group meeting important and they wished that they would be regularly arranged and offer more help with study planning.

"Teacher tutors more efficient recruiting to motivate students and plan their future."

Lack of community or one's own group and loneliness were also commonly mentioned in the data. Many students arrive to the university from across the country and therefore, they have to start building new friendships and other relationships at the same time they start their new, demanding studies. Student tutoring, in which older students guide the newcomers, has proven a good way of getting new students to familiarize with their new study place, the university and the city, and their new study groups. Still, experiences of the start varied among the participants and the loneliness of university studies had surprised many of them.

"Studying is somewhat lonely business."
"Adjustment to this new place, which I, however, knew already beforehand."
"The most difficult thing for me has been to get to know my own group, the other first-year-students. I took so many different courses than the others, and therefore, I met hardly anyone after the orientation week in the fall. This is greatly my fault too."

Finally, *overlapping courses and busy study periods* were reported to hinder smooth progress. Students had found it difficult to determine when to take or attend courses if there were, for example, two courses going on at the same time with partly or mostly overlapping lecture times. Some courses did not allow absences, and thus, students had to make difficult selections, especially if the ways of performing courses could not be negotiated with teachers. Some periods had been extremely busy and toilsome because of numerous lectures, exams, and other tasks. Another big problem was difficulty in getting exam books from the library; students may have to queue for certain much used books for a long time.

"Teaching is accumulated. I have really full months with lectures and exams, and then months that I have not have suitable lectures available at all. Many study groups have too little space and I have not gotten in in them."

Discussion

Students' descriptions of the factors that hinder their smooth study progress were varied. As the results show, they vary from their study skills to more general problems, such as overall scheduling of courses at the departments. Most of these hindrances are as unnecessary, which means that they can be addressed and that there already are suitable, well-known ways of fixing these problems.

One of the ways to improve students' study progress can happen through the university teachers and professors. They are responsible for the development of their own disciplines and fields of research, and that cannot happen without proper guidance and education of new generations of students. The quality of university teaching can be evaluated with many criteria: substance knowledge, breadth, topicality, theory versus practice-orientation, necessity versus redundancy, interesting versus platitude, difficulty versus intelligibility, fragmentariness or structure, hastiness or concentration. Ideal university teaching is based on research (Määttä & Uusiautti, 2012) and shows students how university research interacts not only in the field but

with the teaching at universities as well. Shulman (1987) argues that content knowledge should merge with pedagogical knowledge in university teaching.

Määttä and Uusiautti (2016) have divided the resources of a good supervisor of doctoral students into four dimensions that can also describe good university teachers and professors when it comes to their abilities to interact with, pay attention to, care for, and teach university students. The dimensions are knowledge (substance knowledge), proficiency (positive and supportive methods and personality), will (commitment to teaching and guiding students), and actions (pedagogically and scientifically qualitative teaching).

Still, just good teaching is not enough (Helmke & Schrader, 1988) and it might be even more important to know how students perceive their education and how capable they are to plan their studies and achieve their goals. Indeed, students' worries are not just related to teaching. For example, one reason for prolonged studies is that students want to study extensively and this way guarantee their employment (Dolton & Sillos, 2008; Hartog, 2000). This kind of over-education can also hinder the smoothness of studies in many levels, such as too burdensome studies and consecutive fatigue, and imbalance between studies and other areas of life (Budria & Moro-Egido, 2014; Sánchez-Sanchez & McGuinness, 2015; Tarvid, 2013). On the other hand, for some students other areas of life may leave studies in the shadow (Chesser, 2015). Finally, sometimes studies become hindered by financial problems (Dockery, Seymour, & Koshy 2015; Reed & Hurd, 2014).

The findings of this research are supported by several earlier studies on the importance of positive feedback, constructive evaluation, and mentoring or tutoring. At their best, they improve students' initiation and activity in their studies as well as their ability to self-reflection and evaluation of their own learning and study skills (Boud & Molloy, 2013; Carless et al., 2011; Ćukušić, Garača, & Jadrić, 2014). Students need endlessly feedback in order to develop as students, learners, and members of an academic community (Winstone et al., 2016), which sets demands on university education. Actually, Winstone et al. (2015) point out that many students actually perceive feedback from teachers merely as luxury than necessity for their studies. New methods of student counselling and guidance (see e.g., West & Turner, 2015) can provide some means to address these needs but they necessitate plenty from teachers too. Teachers can be seen as the service providers who have to serve the students and consider them as customers. Actually, students need to be served: otherwise, the universities cannot fulfil their obligations and responsibilities for producing certain amounts of graduates (Bunce et al., 2016). Roughly stated, this is why universities have to be interested in hearing students' perceptions of the factors slowing down their study progress and prolonging their graduation.

Conclusion

As the conclusion, it can be stated that the most important thing in university studies and study success are the students themselves. Without their own activity and commitment, students' studies are not likely to proceed and become completed. Without their own effort and concentration, students' study points will not accumulate. Feedback and counselling by teachers are certainly important as well, but students' own willingness to learn from the feedback, to reflect their experiences are equally crucial. However, a university that fosters students' development as academic learners and pays attention to students' needs, shows interest in learning from their experiences and, first and foremost, shows willingness to improve teaching practices according to students' suggestions and feedback, may be regarded as a luxurious study place. Indeed, universities should be competing which one of them provides this kind of luxury the most.

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