

IMPROVING STUDENT GUIDANCE PROGRAMMES AT LATVIA'S INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract. *The aim of this study is to outline possibilities to improve and develop the student guidance system at Latvia's higher education institutions, linking these to the main principles of management sciences. Certain problems and weaknesses related to the existing student guidance and support system at Latvian universities have been analysed. The results of a research project aimed at determining the needs of students of guidance showed that the services are very much appreciated among them. The author of this paper offers a series of suggestions and recommendations as to improve student guidance and support services at Latvia's institutions of higher education. With an eye toward improving these systems, the author proposes the implementation of systematic analysis of the student guidance system, as well as implementation of the results at the national, institutional and individual level.*

Keywords: Student guidance, career guidance, academic support, student guidance systems.

Introduction

Numerous educational documents, reports and research projects in Europe have provided evidence to show that universities tend to develop and offer a wider variety of student guidance services and activities. An efficient student guidance and support system is considered to be a core factor in the growth and development of universities. This has been emphasised in the annual reports of the OECD (2004, 2006), in the Bologna Declaration, in reports prepared by the European Union of Students (2007, 2009), and in recommendations from the European Association of Universities (EAU, Trends, 2012). The main guidelines from Bologna and other European agenda indicate that many higher education institutions in Latvia are moving toward a student-centre concept, also trying to support the development of student personalities, skills and competences with the help of various student guidance services.

Sadly, there has been an insufficient number of students and conclusions to speak to the capacity of universities to prevent the termination of studies by improving their student guidance and support systems and services. Although principles related to the student guidance and support system in Latvia have been analysed in the context of distance learning, it should be noted that the author of the relevant dissertation, Kristovska (2005) has mostly focused on the role of administrative and academic advice, as opposed to the role of psychological, career and educational guidance and counselling. Jaunzeme (2011) has analysed aspects of career management and guidance, then developing a model for career guidance at Latvia's universities. This author's doctoral dissertation (Smitina, 2001) actualised the need to improve student guidance so as to reduce the number of students who drop out of Latvia's institutions of higher education. Because of strong competition among

universities, and also given the current economic situation, it is very important to ensure that the strategic guidelines for educational management are reviewed alongside with required improvements in student guidance and support at the institutional or national level. This author believes that the development and/or improvement of effective student guidance and support systems leads to greater efficiency at institutions of higher education, thus creating a more positive and supportive study environment. This would allow universities to provide support and assistance to students in more complicated situations, thus certainly contributing toward the retention of students. The aim of this study is to outline options for the improvement and development of student guidance systems in the context of the major principles of management sciences.

The importance of student guidance activities is also seen in information obtained from a survey on the subject of student needs that was taken by students at the University of Latvia (n=1,464). The study also includes interviews with experts from four of Latvia's higher education institutions.

The concept of student guidance

Much attention has been devoted to the issue of student guidance when it comes to various theories and the experience of foreign universities. Foreign education centres which are involved in the elaboration of recommendations for the reduction of dropouts at educational institutions insist that these institutions must develop strategies to deal with this issue at the institutional, public and individual level, also thinking about an assessment of risks and reasons in this regard (Centre for Child and Family Policy, Duke University, 2008). The provision of student guidance services at European universities has been emphasised and considered in relation to changes and alterations in the world of higher education and under the framework of the Bologna process. The expert committee of the Bologna process issued guidelines for higher education until the year 2020, indicating that institutions of higher education must ensure that much better student guidance and support services are made available, especially in terms of promoting the availability of career development and guidance services. The author's personal visits to foreign universities and international conferences have shown that there are numerous student guidance activities focused on the maximal encouragement of each student's individual academic and professional growth, also facilitating the retention of university students. In her dissertation, Kristovska (2005) focused on the guidance system of distance learning, distinguishing between academic and non-academic advice. The notion of academic advice, according to American scholars, has been more extensively defined, thus implying that counselling and guidance services embrace various areas and target groups by applying and utilising all of the resources that are available at universities (Kramer, 2000). Creamer and Creamer (1994) have elaborated a model of academic advice, speaking to ways

of strengthening student goals in professional or personal life, improving their self-confidence, widening their interests, strengthening their interpersonal relations, and enabling students to define their personal values and lifestyles. European researchers and practitioners, in turn, have focused on four major types of student guidance and counselling – educational guidance, psychological counselling, career guidance and advice, and provision of guidance to differently abled people who have special needs (Katzensteiner, 2006). Tinto (2006) has argued that the role of social support is extremely important in research studies. The notion of social support has been explained in various ways – support provided by important people, or else social support which relates to social security or guarantees. These are types of support which universities can influence only to a certain degree. Jaunzeme, a researcher at the University of Latvia, has analysed issues related to career management and guidance and has also developed a model for career guidance at universities in Latvia (2011).

The situation with student guidance at higher education institutions in Latvia

Latvia's law on higher education explicitly states that universities must provide guidance and support to their students. It became clear in the past that each university interpreted this requirement in a different way, with many institutions taking a very formal approach toward it. After reviewing educational documents related to student guidance and support, the author concluded that Latvia does not have a single and systematic approach in this regard. What's more, the need for student guidance and support is, unfortunately enough, not stipulated by legislation. Therefore, it can be concluded that the notion of student guidance is perceived and interpreted in different ways. The need for such guidance should be stipulated by law, and there must be much greater understanding of this issue among university employees and administrators. In order to summarise information about the types of student guidance services that are provided at universities, this author has reviewed and analysed the Web pages of 18 universities. Student guidance services at the University of Latvia were analysed in much greater detail (Smitina, 2011). Information from the aforementioned Web pages shows that most universities in Latvia do not provide centralised guidance and support services for students. Many of them do not have a structural unit to deal with student guidance, or else there is no special section devoted toward support and information for existing students. Most universities offer administrative and informative support in relation to issues such as the study process and various practical issues. Experts from four universities told the author that in most cases, the provision of counselling and guidance services is an individual issue in terms of every structural unit and its employees; in most cases, such services are provided by a methodologist or by someone from the faculty of the university. In other cases, there are peer-student or peer-tutor relationships in this regard. Educational and informational guidance is often

provided by teachers or lecturers, by heads of study programmes, or methodologists or secretaries. Most universities appear to have fairly comprehensive information about studies and education, but only a few have special information campaigns or events to attract motivated students. The provision of educational and academic guidance during the study process very much depends on the initiative and activities of teaching staff. Several universities have E-services in terms of published study aids and materials. Few universities provide information about the possibility to develop required study skills. The process of adaptation at the beginning of studies is mostly stimulated by organising entertainment events and activities, but information about the development of new academic skills and mastering the role of a student is, in most cases, not accepted. All of the universities try to encourage students to become involved in the social aspects of the study process. Only a few offer advice and suggestions on their Web pages as to how to deal with psychological and social problems. It can therefore be concluded that the E-services that are maintained by Latvian universities are not fully utilised to emphasise the issues of student guidance and support, and students receive no assistance or information about the availability thereof. With a few exceptions, it can also be said that Latvian universities do not provide psychological support, guidance and counselling to deal with emotional difficulties or academic problems (Smitina, 2011).

University of Latvia students (n=1,464) were surveyed about these issues, and the responses show that most respondents agree that there is a great need for student guidance and support at the university (Figure 1).

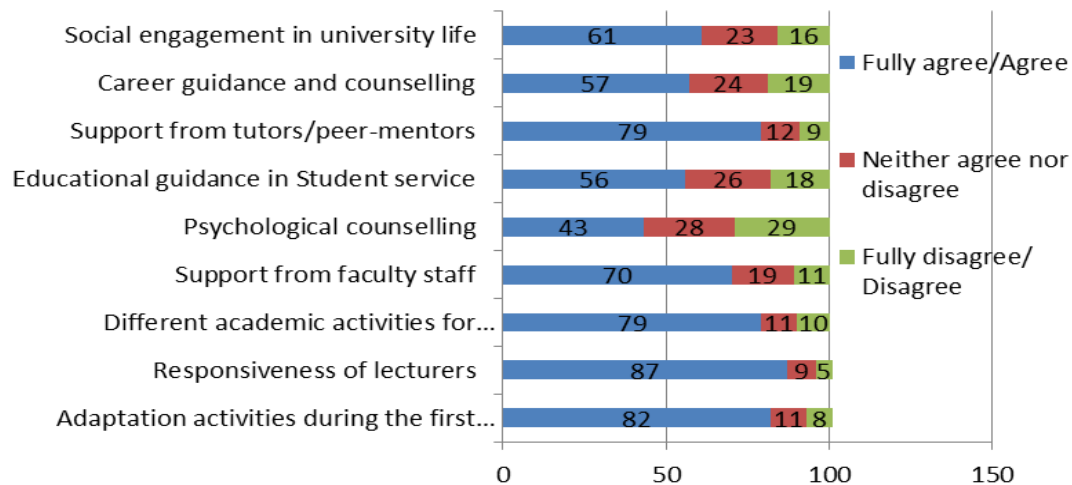


Figure 1 The usefulness of student guidance activities at the University of Latvia (% , N=1,464)

The increasing use of guidance services and activities at the fairly positive assessment of these services by students at the University of Latvia show that the services are very much appreciated among them.

Improving student guidance at higher education institutions: Discussion and recommendations

An effective system of student guidance is one in which the provision of relevant services is consistent and systematic. This must be a carefully considered system involving interrelated elements and activities, and it should lead to common objectives and traits (Kristovska, 2005). In terms of the main principles of management, it should be added that high-quality student guidance means that major objectives, functions, components and activities are determined and defined (Habley, 2000). These principles also indicate that each system and activity in an organisation must be well-planned and co-ordinated, with evaluation of the operation of the relevant system (Praude, Belcikovs, 2004). This author believes that the same principles should be applied to the provision and management of student guidance and support services.

CEDEFOP researchers have analysed lifelong learning guidance systems and evaluated their systematic operations in terms of indicators that define the required contributions, resources and procedures (den Boer, Mittendorff, et.al. 2005). Similar principles regarding a career management and guidance system have been adapted and supplemented by Jaunzeme (2011). This author believes that the same guidelines can be applied to the development of student guidance and support system and that they can also be used for a better assessment of the operations of the system.

The overall objectives of guidance and support must be divided up into social, functional and economic categories, and indicators for the assessment of the process must be identified. This author believes that economic objectives that are related to improvements of a student guidance system should be focused on increasing university revenues while also reducing the number of dropouts. Universities should estimate the cost of terminated studies, also assessing the cost efficiency of services that are provided. Estimates of required financing should be implemented so as to choose and implement student guidance systems and services which are appropriate for the needs, goals and resources of the relevant university. When introducing and improving student guidance services, student needs, student awareness of such services, and the availability of guidance services must be assessed and taken into account, because all of these aspects relate to functional objectives. These imply the availability of and access to guidance services, as well as student awareness about their availability. Academic goals related to the improvement of student guidance and support are aimed at improving study skills, ensuring that students do well in their study work, and looking at academic assessments. These aspects can be evaluated in order to assess whether attainable goals have been reached. General student guidance services at the individual level should be focused on the development of personal skills and competences, the development of individual abilities in the study process, the promotion of learning, understanding, career planning skills,

and solving of problems at the individual and the professional level. Other attainable benefits at the individual level include academic achievements (doing well in terms of studies, making a personal contribution toward the study process, ensuring academic involvement, and assessment of academic performance), as well as personal growth (development of decision-making skills, problem-solving skills, and the understanding and development of one's own abilities needs and interests). These principles have been emphasised in this author's doctoral thesis (Smitina, 2011).

Ensuring the required quality of student guidance services means regular supervision and assessment of the guidance system that is in place. This author suggests that qualitative assessment of student guidance services should be performed similarly to the assessment of other systems in the relevant organisation – planning, analysing and evaluating the required contributions, resources, procedures (the way in which activities are arranged, co-ordinated and announced), and results. The results of student guidance services and the extent to which they comply with attainable and overall objects can be defined at three levels:

- 1) The individual level (students have improved their individual and professional skills and proficiency, the social and academic integration of students has been promoted and achieved, students are satisfied with the guidance services that are provided, etc.);
- 2) The institutional level (a reduced number of dropouts and a higher number of successful students);
- 3) The public and national level (fewer young people without a university degree or a vocational education, a lower risks of unemployment, and a lower rate of emigration in the relevant age group).

The context and significance of lifelong learning should be kept in mind when developing student guidance and support systems, because this emphasises the development of individual learning skills, as well as skills related to planning for the future (attainable goals in life, as well as educational competences and interests). It also emphasises the role of educational institutions in attracting and encouraging pupils and students, also focusing on the attainable goals of educational policy and the sustainable and democratic growth of society via the active involvement of individuals in the process of education (CEDEFOP, 2005). This author believes that the provision of systematic guidance services (student counselling and guidance) requires the main aspects of the aforementioned management procedures, educational management, career guidance, and management theories to be utilised and applied.

After evaluating student guidance and support systems at state universities in Latvia, this author concluded that universities have various views and understandings about the significance of student guidance and support. Guidance measures at the universities also tend to vary in terms of different departments and faculties, and they are provided on the basis of the private

involvement and initiative of individual employees, as opposed to representing a universal approach in terms of rendering the relevant services. Before an effective system of student guidance and support can be set up, there must be a model of guidance which corresponds to the actual situation and study environment of each specific university. The process must be based on an examination of student needs, problem issues, resources, student numbers, etc. The development and improvement of student guidance systems and services should be seen as a major resource for the retention of students, and the work must be based on the best experience of local and foreign universities. This author had developed a model for student guidance and support (Figure 2) with an emphasis on student counselling and guidance as the most important factor thereof. This relates to educational and academic advice, psychological counselling and guidance, career counselling and guidance, as well as administrative support (Smitina, 2011). The author recommends that student counselling and guidance at Latvian universities be improved at the following levels):

- 1) Academic advice during the study process;
- 2) Educational and informational support within and from departments and faculties;
- 3) Provision of centralised student guidance services along with the main types of student counselling and guidance (career guidance, psychological counselling and educational advice).

This model for student guidance and support can be adapted to the needs of each particular university, its size and its resources. Comparatively small universities can provide effective guidance services at the first two levels (academic advice in the study process and from faculties), while it is very much recommended that centralised guidance services are provided at larger universities. The main providers of centralised student guidance and support services can be one or more structural units which offer different types of guidance.

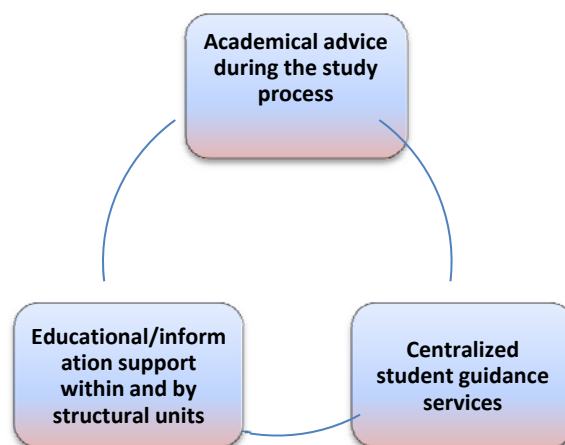


Figure 2 The levels of student guidance at institutions of higher education

Improvements to student guidance and support systems must take into account the general principles of the relevant organisation's management – definition of attainable goals (economic, social and functional), as well as an evaluation of investments and contributions in the process while also defining attainable results at the individual and institutional level. Monitoring the quality of services also makes it possible to achieve goals and complete tasks related to ways of improving student guidance and support. The quality of services also depends on the extent to which they comply with the requirements of particular target groups. Also of importance is the awareness among students of the availability of the services and the extent to which they satisfy student needs.

Major indicators in terms of the efficiency of a system of student guidance include analysis of the number of successful and unsuccessful students, the number of dropouts during various study periods, the number of students who have commenced studies at the next degree level, the variety of guidance services, the extent to which the services are utilised, differentiation among guidance services to serve the particular needs of various target groups, a sense of satisfaction among students, employees and pupils about the guidance services and activities of the relevant university, as well as increased employment options for graduates. This author recommends that universities implement a very detailed and more regular analysis of student needs and satisfaction when it comes to their studies. This makes it possible to summarise information as to why students drop out, also developing strategies aimed at encouraging dropouts to return to the university and recommence their studies.

The provision of guidance services should be particularly intensive during the first year of studies, when students are still adapting to the study process (Balaisis, 2002). Counselling and guidance services should be provided in most cases when a student intends to terminate his or her studies or has actually done so. Universities should develop a better system of attracting motivated students, thus providing guidance services to high school graduates. Here, again, the centralised student guidance and support services can be offered by a single structural unit or by different units which offer different types of guidance.

This author believes that in elaborating a systematic student guidance and support system, the relevant university must develop its guidance system on the basis of capacity and resources, student numbers, faculty numbers, areas of specialisation, and the general approach toward and understanding of the need for student guidance and support. On the basis of these factors, universities can identify priority services in relation to student guidance and support. Furthermore, universities should define the target groups to which these services will be offered.

Another essential factor in the provision of efficient student guidance services that must be mentioned is the qualification and professional competence of university personnel. Improved qualifications and professional competences are very much required among all providers of student guidance and support –

administrative personnel (administrators of educational institutions and their structural units), people who provide support to students (secretaries, consultants and methodologists in each study programme), academic staff, and special support staff (psychologists, career consultants, as well as educational consultants who work with specific target groups such as people with special needs or foreign students). The professional qualifications and efficiency of academic staff are addressed in Cabinet of Ministers Regulation No. 347, 3 October 2000, “The requirements of the educational and professional qualifications of teaching staffs.” The regulation defines the participation of academic staff in efficiency courses and programmes that are related to various innovations and improvements in the field of higher education. It focuses on didactics and educational administration in terms of 160 academic hours (including at least 60 contact hours) before the term of an academic post has expired. This author believes that professional and efficiency courses should also cover the subjects of student guidance and support, explaining the relevant organisational principles, as well as the role of academic staff in the provision of student guidance and the retention of students. The author recommends that a programme of professional qualifications be developed for counselling personnel (methodologists, secretaries, advisers), doing so on the basis of each group’s contribution toward student guidance and support (Smitina, 2011). The system of student guidance and support can reduce the dropout rate by taking into account student needs and the urgency of guidance services. These should be focused on and directed toward the critical stages of studies and the termination of studies.

The author believes that these principles and procedures of management, educational management and career guidance and management theories are determinant factors for the provision of systematic and qualitative guidance services at Latvia’s institutions of higher education.

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