Preparatory and skills' courses in higher education

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1. Introduction

Higher education institutions perform their learning and teaching activities within a rapidly changing higher education sector. They are challenged by escalations in the number and diversity of students, stronger demands for professional accountability, thinning resources and increasing 'marketization' of the whole field. Such profound changes raise discussions on quality, competition and efficiency.

This paper is about skills development courses or programs that prepare students for more effective and successful study. Higher education institutions in different countries offer students all kinds of programmes and courses to help them cope with a variety of problems during their studies. This paper presents some international experiences in this field and 2 case studies from Slovenian higher education: the Faculty of Management in Koper and the International School for Social and Business Studies in Celje. Both have implemented "Introductory skills' workshops for effective study". The introduction of such courses in Slovenian higher education have to be understood in the context of increased competition between higher education institutions, the expanding number and diversity of students, the introduction of quality assurance and changes in the funding mechanism where not only the number of enrolled students is important but also the number of successfully graduated students is an important parameter.

The paper is structured according to the following research questions:

- What kinds of courses do higher education institutions across the globe offer their students to enhance their learning skills for successful study?
- What training provisions for students are currently offered at the Faculty of Management and the International School for Social and Business Studies in Slovenia?
- What are the preliminary outcomes of these workshops?

The answer to the first question is given in Section 2 which provides an overview of types of practical skills courses of higher education institutions around the world. Section 3 describes and evaluates the study skills courses at the two selected Slovenian higher education institutions. In Section 4 some final remarks and conclusions are presented.

2. Institutional experiences in the field of improving students' learning skills and capacities

This study focuses on training, programmes, courses, seminars or workshop designed for students during their studies to improve their study skills and capacities. We used web pages of many higher education institutions around the world in order to benchmark the experiences and practices at Slovenian higher education institutions. Due to the limited scope of this paper we searched the internet for interesting examples and patterns in the types of courses offered for these purposes in a range of different countries rather than thoroughly exploring all institutions in a limited number of countries.

2.1 Some international experiences

The field research on international experiences with "study skills courses" shows that there is a growing interest in helping students to prepare for entering regular study programs or to support and improve their learning skills. International practice shows 2 main strands of such programs. Many institutions offer extensive support to their students in almost all aspects of student life (not only on academic issues but also personal and welfare) and focus on needs of specific groups of students like international students,

those with disabilities, families, psychological problems, etc. These courses often require a few months of work that can be taken alongside regular studying.

A second type of courses more focuses on a smooth entry or transition into regular study programs for students who are coming from slightly different disciplinary backgrounds or have lower level of academic credentials than the official admission requirements. The content of such courses mostly cover subjects which are directly linked to the discipline of the study program in terms of theoretical or factual knowledge and methodological skills. Such preparatory programs often take between half a year or 1 year full time study. Examples are pre-bachelor or pre-master programs, or 'transfer' courses. These are for instance found at many Dutch universities (e.g. Delft University of Technology, Erasmus University, University of Groningen and the University of Twente).

Universities in New Zealand show another interesting approach by offering so-called 'Bridging programs'. As such, the University of Waikato, University of Canterbury and the University of Auckland for example offer bridging programs to students who have not studied for a while and would like to refresh their skills or they do not meet entry requirements for their aimed degree program. These universities offer programs of different kinds. They aim at improving study and learning skills and to gain fundamental understanding of particular areas of study. Examples of such programs are:

- There are courses which provide academic preparation in English language for students who speak English as a second language. Students are taught skills that they will need to study in New Zealand or Australian universities like: research and library skills, seminar presentation techniques, essay and report writing techniques, computer skills and group work.
- A variety of courses aim at improving students' study confidence and to develop study skills, including: note taking, writing essays, reading effectively, critical thinking, time management, questioning and discussion and the student role.
- Some courses are designed particularly to prepare women for study at a university.
- Foundation courses are for those who want to study science or engineering and need or want to refresh their knowledge in Biology, Chemistry, Physics, Mathematics, etc. Some universities offer also optional courses like Literary Study, Pacific Peoples and Cultures, Individuals in Society and alike.
- Some courses lead to certificate of attainment in English language.

Universities in the UK offer a big variety of courses. Many of them are similar to those we already mentioned. Special attention is put to preparatory programs for international students (e.g. University of Hertfordshire, University of Bath etc.). Some are designed to encourage students with non-standard qualifications to embark on certain degree courses (e.g. Oxford Brookes University, School of Technology). Universities like the London South Bank University run several workshop sessions which include topics like Learn to Learn, Essay and report writing, Speaking skills and also skills for postgraduate students to write dissertations and theses. Students can also get individual advice on any study skills topic or on practical writing and speaking skills. For example the Bristol University, University of Central Lancashire, University of Wolverhampton and similar offer all kinds of programs for different groups of students on all aspects of university life like on study, personal and different practical problems. The most individual approach to students have the prestigious universities like Cambridge and Oxford where colleges provide their undergraduate students small-group teaching ('supervision'), individualized academic support through 'directors of studies', and individual pastoral support through 'college tutors'. Indeed in this case we do not talk about extra courses but on a well established supervision which help students in their academic progress as well as to cope with welfare and financial problems.

2.2 Some Slovenian experiences

In Slovenia the approaches to support students' study skills mostly depend on internal institutional policy. The responses to these challenges vary substantially from one institution to another.

The CERŠ (Center for consultancy and development of students) at the Economic Faculty of the University of Ljubljana is definitely a good practical example. The center offers support and consultation activities to students through the whole study period. The center implements up to 30 workshops per year with a variety of content like computer skills, academic writing (essays, thesis) and learn to learn workshops. There are also workshops for personal and career development (how to handle stress, rhetorics, team-work, interpersonal relationships, how to search employment, employment interview,

business negotiations employment contract etc.). Additionally, they offer students support in writing CVs and application letters. They offer an electronic database of students searching a job or internship at potential employers.

An important step forward was made by the central administration of the University of Ljubljana by the decision to implement a *tutor* system across the whole university by the year 2009 based on the model of prestigious western universities. For this purpose the University of Ljubljana issued a handbook for tutors and students. There will be two basic forms of tutors. First, student tutors who will advice and help other students in academic and other life problems and second, academics (assistants, assistant professors) who will guide, advice and support students in their academic path. Both types of tutors will get special training to perform the task.

Also various forms of tutors can be found at some other higher education institutions like at the Faculty of Humanistic Studies at the University of Primorska, where the system was implemented in the academic year 2001. Also the University of Maribor has some experiences in this respect, particularly technical faculties like the Faculty of Civil Engineering, the Faculty of Machine Engineering, the Faculty of Electrotechnic, Computer Science and Informatics and the Faculty of Chemistry and Chemical Technology. About ten years ago they were challenged by a rapid decline in students' interest to study technical sciences compared to social sciences. To make the technical studies more attractive they decided to offer students tutors and supervisors and to offer additional help to less academically capable students at the beginning of study. The University of Maribor in general and particularly the Faculty of Civil Engineering adopted special regulations on tutor system.

The students' organization of the University of Maribor and the Student Association Viva initiated in 2005 the establishment of an educational developmental centre Univerzum Minerva. This centre offers students training in skills necessary for successful study, personal life and career development. They offer seminars and workshops like rhetorics, communication, reading, computer skills, foreign languages and individual help at study.

Some other Slovenian higher education institutions also pay attention to this issue within the framework of their quality assurance mechanisms like for example the University of Nova Gorica, which stimulates students and teachers to intensify the number of contact hours. The student office has started to work particularly to help students at the end of their study with career development and job search. In addition they keep track of the employability of their students.

In the following sections we will take a closer look at two case studies of the development of mechanisms to help students to become better learners: the Faculty of Management Koper and the International School for Social and Business Studies, Celje.

3. Introductory skills workshops at two higher education institutions

3. 1 Introduction of the two higher education institutions

The Faculty of Management Koper (FM) was established in 1995 as a free-standing higher education institution and became a member institution of the University of Primorska in 2003. So far, more than 2,500 students have graduated from the Faculty, with 2,000 undergraduate students and 1,000 graduate students are currently studying at the Faculty. The FM teaches programs in the area of social, business and administrative studies, focusing on management, bringing together economic and business as well as legal, organisational and cognitive sciences. In addition to teaching, the activities of the Faculty of Management include research and development, consultancy services to companies and other organisations, publishing and library services. The Faculty offers undergraduate and graduate study programs in Koper and three study centres across Slovenia but also stresses the importance of international activities at all levels.

The International School for Social and Business Studies (ISSBS) is a private higher education institution, located in Celje. The Faculty implements and develops study programmes in the field of social sciences, economics, business and management on undergraduate and graduate level. In its first academic year, 2007/08, the ISSBS enrols 85 undergraduate (bachelor) and 104 graduate (master's) students. Faculty

staff is engaged in a diverse research work at local, national and international level, including dynamic cooperation with the local economy and social milieu. The ISSBS was founded only in 2006 and aims to become recognized and intensively involved in the local, national and international higher education field.

3.2 Introductory courses in study skills at the FM and ISSBS

Both faculties, the FM and the ISSBS, introduced introductory study skills' workshops to students at an early stage of their operation, the FM in 1997 and the ISSBN in 2007. They had the same motivations to do so. The management of both institutions was aware of increasing competition between higher education institutions, the needs for quality assurance and to minimize drop-out from students because the number of graduates became an important element for public funding.

Therefore the main objective to implement introductory study skills workshops were to enhance study skills of students, to smoothen the transition from the secondary to higher education and to stimulate students' active involvement in their studies straight from the very beginning. Lecturers at the FM realized that a student lost in the first weeks of a study process almost always meant they were lost for the whole year or, even worse, forever. Another interesting and important benefit of these workshops is supposed to be a better employability of graduates as they get additional useful skills next to the expert knowledge of the field of study programme.

In the period of 10 years, FM developed its own approach in designing introductory skills' workshops for the needs of its students. Nowadays the FM offers practical training to students. Some important workshops are performed at the beginning and some throughout the academic year, some are obligatory and some optional. Workshops are divided in two fields:

- *Information and computer skills:* Word, Excel, Access, e-learning, tools for making presentations, use of Visio, autoCAD and Picassa programs;
- *Skills of learning, working and living in the community*: Successful learning methods, writing skills for seminar papers/assignments, forthcoming employment, business etiquette and others.

In the first week of studies all are first-year students are welcomed by the Dean and take part in workshops like Introduction to study, e-FM – how to use all internet facilities of the faculty, Successful learning methods and How to use the faculty library and search for study sources. Finally they get a Presentation of the Students' Council and student associations.

The ISSBS decided to oblige their first year students to attend the introductory and training workshops in the first three weeks of the academic year. In October 2007 students attended:

1. *Introduction to study* which provided students with information on the ISSBS, library, study programmes, study process, examination regulations and student organization.
2. *Successful study methods*: Students learned methods and approaches for effective study.
3. *Computer skills 1 and 2*: Word, Excel and PowerPoint.
4. *Freakonomics*: amusing introduction into the field of economics.
5. *Academic writing*: Instructions for preparing written assignments.

Both schools gathered some information on their workshops in the academic year 2007/08. By means of a questionnaire they asked students about their satisfaction with the given possibilities, the amount and benefits of the received information in the introductory skills' workshops, why they chose the school and what their expectations are from the study program they enrolled in. The questionnaires used at both institutions were slightly different. For this reason we present the results in different sections.

3.3 Analysis and interpretation of received data at the FM

<u>Demographic and education related data:</u>

In total, 248 students responded to the questionnaire at the FM at all three study centres; Koper, Škofja Loka and Celje. 168 of all students were full time and 80 part-time. First year students were on average 21 years old, but there is a difference between full-time (20 years old) and part-time (24 years old) students.

About 49% of students finished secondary education in the field of economics, 21% general education (gymnasia) and the remaining 30% of students in other specialized secondary education like tourism, health care and others. The main motivations to enrol at the FM are the location (25%), employment

opportunities after graduation (18%), interest for management and economy (16%), the opinion that programs are interesting and good (15%) and many other reasons. The most important expectations about the study program are to finish studies in time, gain new knowledge, good relationship with lecturers and interesting lectures.

Quantity and quality of received information

Students estimated the quantity and quality of information received in their first week of studies on the value scale between 1 and 3 (1 – not enough information, 2 – just enough information, 3 – too much information or very useful information)

Most students estimated the quantity of information with 2,101 point. Most frequently they mark 2 points (just enough information), only 1 student marked 1 point (not enough information) and 26 students pointed out that they received too much information.

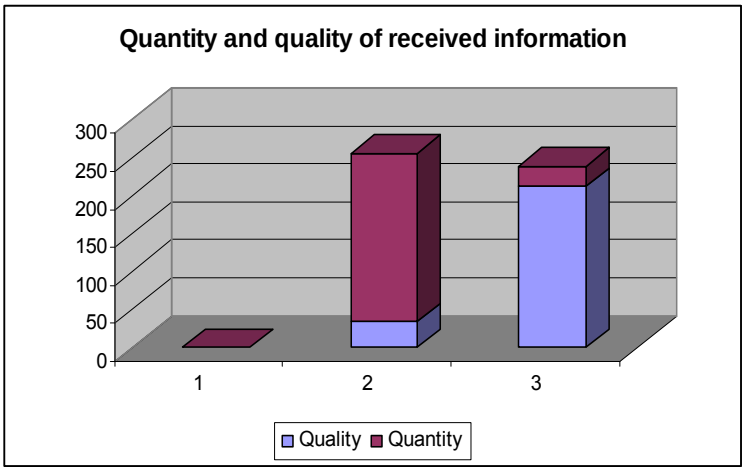

Figure1: *Quantity and quality of received information*

Students estimated the quality of information even better - with the 2,862 point. This meant that 86% students marked 3 points (very useful information) and 14% marked 2 points (useful information) on the value scale between 1 and 3 (1 – not useful information, 2 – useful information, 3 – very useful information).

In addition, students wrote their own advices, observations and appreciations about their first week. Most of them (209) appreciated the first week. They praise the kindness and accessibility of lecturers and staff, good atmosphere and contents of lectures. To what extent the given information will help the students in their studies, to prevent drop out and to upgrade their future employability has to be studied later.

3.4 Analysis and interpretation of received data at the ISSBS

Demographic and education related data:

36 students out of the 62 enrolled in the study program Economics of Modern Society responded to the questionnaire (58.1% response rate). 75% of respondents are female and 25% male students. Most of the first year students belong to the age group (19-21 years).

All students enrolled in higher education immediately after their secondary school and matura examination. Slovenia offers several types of higher education institutions which differ in discipline orientation and pretentiousness, but here 50% of respondents are having a background in economics, 47% in general secondary education (gymnasium) and the rest other types of education.

Also here, the most important reasons[1] to study at the ISSBS are location (66.7%) and an interesting study program (55.6%). Most students (91.7%) expect to gain new knowledge from their study and

[1] Students could choose multiple answers on reasons to study at the ISSBS and about study expectations.

secondly new contacts with professionals in the study field (66.7%). Other expectations are to finish study in time and to listen to interesting lectures.

Introductory skills' workshops assessment

More than three quarters of the respondents (77.7%) attended four or all five workshops. On a scale from 1 to 5, the Introduction to study scored highest (mean 4,77) and also Freaconomics (mean 4,48) was most positively evaluated. The other three workshops also gained means higher than 3 (figure 2). So we can conclude that students positively reacted to the workshops.

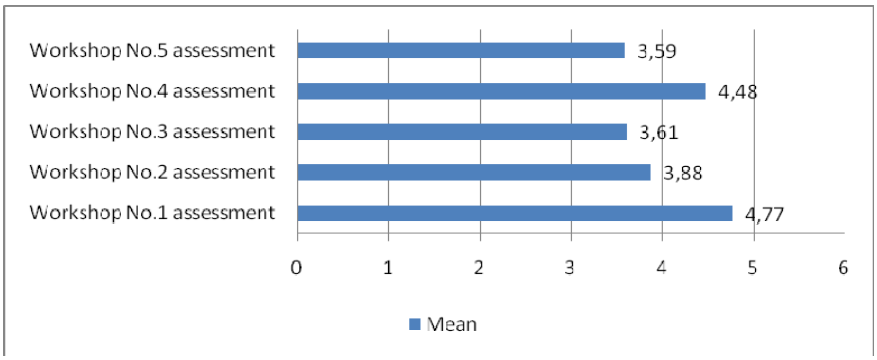

Figure 2: *Introductory skills' workshop assessment*

Students assess the workshops as a foundation for their further study years (mean 2,41 on scale 1 to 3, where 3 means extreme usefulness of the received information). A similar good result was given to the amount of received information in the workshops. Students evaluated the amount of information satisfactory (mean 2 on the same scale 1 to 3).

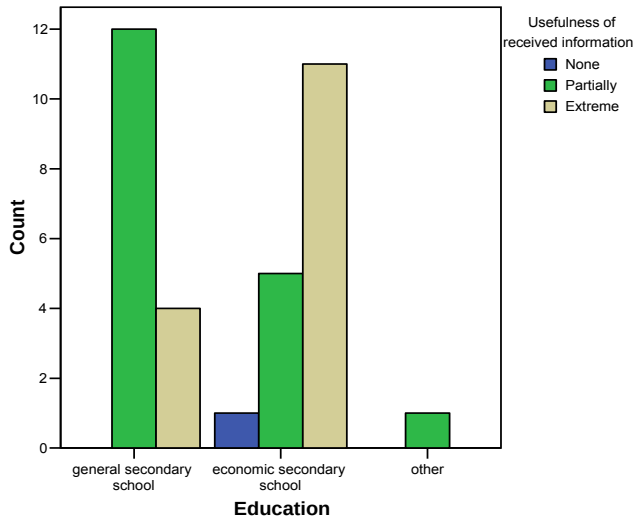

Figure 3: *Usefulness of received information by previous education*

An analysis of the correlation between previous education and usefulness of the information received in the workshop shows interesting differences between students, who finished general secondary school (gymnasium) and those who finished economic secondary schools. 64.7% of latter group evaluated the received information as extremely useful, while students from general secondary school mainly evaluated the received information as only partially useful (75%, see figure 3). We estimate that students with previous general secondary school diplomas gained a better preparation for successful study in higher education. These schools (gymnasiums) are most demanded secondary schools in the system and attract best pupils. Based on the results, in the future more attention will be devoted to the quality and content of the workshops for the needs of different groups of students. What the workshops mean in terms of higher success rates and employability will have to be studied in the future.

5. Conclusions

Regarding the first research question we observed a wide variety of programs and workshops offered to students by higher education institutions around the world. Many institutions offer students help and support along the whole period of study by offering courses, workshops, consultation and other help to cope with all aspects of study and private life in this period and not only on their academic performance. Help is offered to specific groups of students like international and disabled students or those with children.

Another approach different from courses, programs and workshops is tutoring system which help students in academic development, personal and financial problems through personal help and supervision of academic staff and fellow students.

The two case studies in Slovenia mostly focused on help for students to improve their study and academic performance. Both observed institutions, the FM and the ISSBS offer introductory skills' workshops for effective study like necessary information for study at the institution in a particular discipline, computer skills, learning methods, writing skills and at the FM also on career development. Special for both cases is that these workshops are offered to all students in the first weeks of the study program. This is good as that may help all students in the rest of their studies. It may be bad as this could be some overkill of information for better prepared students. This is for example shown in the ISSBS case where students from general secondary education found some of the information irrelevant or superfluous.

First year students at both institutions evaluated these workshops positively. They found that they got enough and good quality information for successful study. However, it seems that students with previous general secondary education (gymnasium) already posses skills necessary for successful study. Thus, it would make sense for both institutions to rethink the content of offered workshops and provide them according to segmented needs of students. It would also be useful to measure the impact of these workshops on students' performances during their studies and to monitor the potential effects on their future employability. These are topics for future research, though they may be difficult to study.

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