

Inspirational session 20

Session's theme: Best practices

Paper number: 46

Presenters: Laura Hirsto

Presenters' Organisation: University of Helsinki/ Faculty of Theology

Session's chair: To be announced later.

Session title: Practices of personal study plans and self-regulated learning

Abstract:

In this presentation, the practices and processes of personal study planning in a Finnish theology faculty will be presented. These practices have been developed on the basis of follow-up as well as various cross-sectional studies on theology students' motivational and learning processes during university studies. Through the studies it has been possible to identify certain challenges and motivational dynamics theology students face. These dynamics have many similarities with general university study-paths according to earlier research, but also some special features.

Theology students in this context have to make many decisions concerning their studies such as their curriculum path, future career prospects as well as their major subjects during the course of their studies. When they have entered the faculty through an entrance exam, they have a possibility to choose between three different curricula: 1) a general theological education, 2) the education required to become a teacher of religion, and 3) qualifications for students wishing to become pastors in the Evangelical-Lutheran church. There are five possible majors to choose from for the bachelors' degree and generally eleven possible majors in the masters' degree.

It has been shown that a considerable amount of theology students have difficulties in the regulation of learning (e.g. Hirsto, Alanne & Huttunen, 2012; Parpala, Lindblom-Ylänne, Komulainen, Litmanen & Hirsto, 2010). This means, for example, difficulties in setting goals for their studies and engaging in the aims to progress with their goals. Goal setting is an important phase of self-regulated learning (e.g. Zimmermann, 2002) and the personal study plans are designed to facilitate this process during theology students' study paths.

The emphasis in this presentation is on the practices during the first two years of the theological studies, but also the whole process and its developments will be described.

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Session's theme: Best practices

Paper number: 47

Presenters: Rebecca Roper, Michael Carr, Tara Cusack, Mary Gilmartin, Yseult Freeney

Presenters' Organisation: IADT, Dun Laoghaire, Dublin Ireland

Session's chair: To be announced later.

Session title: What Makes the Best First Year Experience?

Abstract:

The importance of a good first year experience in higher education institutions, has been increasingly recognized by higher education institutions, in terms of laying a sound foundation for educational persistence and completion. The institutions that compose the Dublin Region Higher Education Alliance (DRHEA) proposed, through a teaching and learning fellowship scheme, to examine what constitutes a good first year experience. Five teaching and learning fellows, from different institutions and disciplines, were appointed for a six month period to examine this topic.

The fellows undertook (a) a systematic review of the literature and (b) and examined regional initiatives intended to enhance the first year learning experience. (a) The review focused on two key aspects of the literature interventions and outcomes. (b) Regional initiatives have been sourced in the form of exemplar case studies from across the eight DRHEA institutions and from across a variety of disciplines.

A number of institutional initiatives emerged as key in terms of better enabling first year engagement, these included: the establishment of learning communities, the conduct of first year seminars, the introduction of mentoring programmes and changes to the academic curriculum.

We reflect upon the strategies that are most effective in producing tangible results for learners in facilitating social and academic integration into higher level education. We also identify aspects of this transitional period that extant initiatives fail to take into consideration. The importance of committed participants or champions for first year enhancement from all staff, including academic, professional and support staff, should not be underestimated. Successful institution-wide interventions aimed at creating a best first year experience require strategic and concerted efforts from a majority of stakeholders.

This session will invite participants to investigate the question 'What Makes The 'Best' First Year Experience?' within the framework of the systematic literature review undertaken by the DRHEA (Dublin Regional Higher Education Alliance) Fellows, and will feature information from focus groups and case studies within the 8 institutes of higher education in Dublin, Ireland. Participants will be able to share their own experience, and will be encouraged to consider fresh thinking in approaching the challenges unique to their own institutions.