

Creating systematic guidelines for student engagement at the Aalto University School of Science

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Introduction and description of the project

In spring 2010 Teaching and Education Evaluation (TEE) project was done at the Aalto University. The TEE project produced information for developing teaching and education. As a result of the ongoing project 'Student care and support' was launched. The project was one of strategic initiatives in autumn 2012 at the Aalto University School of Science (Aalto SCI). The project is focused on students, their studies and well-being and creating practices to support them. Aalto University strategy calls for a learning-centred culture where students are guided towards a strong commitment to their studies and to taking responsibility for their own development. Student care and support in the first academic year has been shown to be a key factor for the engagement and success to studies (Reason, Terenzini & Domingo 2005 & 2007).

Aalto SCI listed eight theses of 'Student care and support' as

1. Goal: rapid progress of studies
2. Systematic handshake and student care to enable efficient study processes
3. Personal commitment to study planning and monitoring
4. Student centric learning environment
5. Fact based, focused study counselling
6. Application of activating participatory teaching methods
7. Creation and maintenance of social support networks
8. Beneficial use of working life relationships

In order to bring these into reality, two new persons were hired to the project. The work of two employees covers both student and teacher side support, and combines them in tutoring.

Description of the environment and students

Aalto University School of Science (Aalto SCI) is the largest of 6 schools at Aalto University with over 3600 students, 1200 employees and 79 professors (2011). There are four bachelor degree programmes (with yearly intake): Computer Science and Engineering (100), Engineering Physics and Mathematics (65), Industrial Engineering and Management (45), Information Networks (40).

Students entering our four programmes have highest exam points in Finland (universities of technology). They are talented and ambitious. Most new students come from Helsinki region and are at age of 18-20. Most of them are motivated to their studies and there are only few who change their study field during their studies. The flip side is that when students are used to cope well in high school they might feel more pressure to succeed in university studies where everyone has a background of a good student.



A badge "SCI" for students' overalls.



Signing the agreement between student guilds and the dean. Standing: Joel Lehikoinen, Jukka Kujala, Jori Jämsä, Piia Näränen; sitting Dean Kimmo Kaski.

Advancing personal study skills

- Advance and support students' personal study skills as a way to help new students to adjust university studies (Purnell, McCarthy & McLeod 2010).
- Learning counselor available for students giving face-to-face guidance, e.g. study techniques, planning studies, time management and coping with studies.
- Workshops on study skills.
- Study skills part of the orientation course for new students.

Orientation to studies

- Systematic handshake by orientation week and orientation to studies.
- SCI orientation week includes department and programme-specific orientation lectures, SCI Get-together event, lectures about data systems and also study planning practicums.
- All new students received a new badge of SCI for the overalls and a key neck strap with a memory stick with useful information.
- Orientation to studies courses including, for instance, study planning, tutoring and introduction to studies

Students' well-being

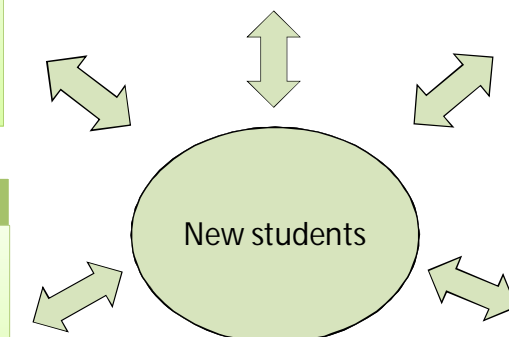
- Training for staff tutors and guild members about students' well-being and what kind of guidance and support services there are available for students.
- Ongoing survey on SCI students' well-being. In autumn 2013 results are available and every degree programme will put together actions for advancing students' well-being together with students, guilds and faculty.

Monitoring students' progress of studies

- Every new student has a staff tutor and peer tutor from guilds.
- Aim in staff tutoring is to monitor students' progress of studies, notice if student has any challenges and guide student to the right support service at need.
- Preventive interventions: progress of first year studies has been proactively monitored by looking credit units and personally contacting students if there are any alarms, e.g. zero credit point (e.g. Nelson, Duncan & Clarke 2009; Purnell, McCarthy & McLeod 2010).

Advancing learning community by students

- Guilds offer new students, e.g. peer tutors, student activities and social support which are shown to be important aspects of students' first-year experience (e.g. Wilcox, Winn & Fyvie-Gaud 2005).
- Co-operation between guilds and faculty is strong including collaboration agreements between guilds and degree programmes
- Ongoing project called POP (Paremman Oppimisen Puolesta = For better learning) in which students and staff members carry out concrete projects together, e.g. changing library into a learning space and redesigning courses to more student centric



GOOD PRACTISES OF STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

Achievements of the project

As a result of this project one goal is to create systematic guidelines of how to engage students to university community and studies. In addition one achievement has been and will be to highlight the importance of students' personal study skills and well-being and create practices to support them during the whole student's study path. Focus is on preventive actions and ability to spot possible difficulties as early as possible. This includes developing systematic model for monitoring students' progress of studies. By hiring two persons to this project it has also been possible to enhance co-operation with different staff members, e.g. co-operation with experts in the pedagogical unit of Aalto has increased. Thus creating and maintaining support networks both students and staff members is important.

References

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