

ON SOME PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF SHORT-CYCLE AND PART TIME STUDIES: THE IMPORTANCE OF STUDENT COUNSELLING

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Abstract: Nowadays short-cycle (SC) and part time (PT) studies are gaining popularity in higher education. Due to the specific nature of these programs, SC and PT studies pose several socio-pedagogical, methodological and psychological problems with a special emphasis on student motivation and life experiences. Further, the authors attempt to suggest solutions including the implementation of a student counselling system. At the University of Szeged this system was originally designed to offer help to all students, but, in our experience, in many ways it can be of extraordinary help for PT and SC students, too. Eventually, the paper comes to the conclusion, that a personalized student counselling system, both online and F2F, can be an example of good practice for all institutions, already running, or planning to introduce SC and PT study programs.

Keywords: part time studies, short-cycle programs, student numbers, personalized counselling

1. INTRODUCTION

Recent challenges in education mainly derive from the impact of globalization in the areas of economy and culture, but, there are political, social, financial and technological implications as well. In addition, the operation of various economic, social and educational subsystems is closely interrelated these days, thus changes in one policy would necessarily generate changes in the other areas. It is this complexity and complicated interrelatedness of factors that explain the changeability and, in a sense, the vulnerability of our educational systems, especially both the form and the content of higher education.

As far as the form of teaching in higher education is considered, it has become obvious that new forms and new programs are needed to meet the challenges of our modern age. Since economy, education and training are segments of decisive significance in the complexity of modern life, it has to be noted that the introduction of new higher educational programs, including part time and short-cycle studies, play an increasingly decisive role in educational policies worldwide. The explanation behind this tendency is that PT and SC programs represent tools in employment policy by making potential employees or inactive work force (re)employable in one or another sector of the job market.

The content side of teaching and learning has recently undergone changes as well. As knowledge-based society is emerging worldwide, the production of values today is synonymous with the production of knowledge. But the word 'knowledge' has to be used in its broad sense here: it is not one hundred percent job-related knowledge, but,

it is vital for job seekers to acquire a variety of non-work-related skills and competencies, and not only at school-age, but throughout their careers. This is one reason why the concept of lifelong learning, including part time and short-cycle programs, play an increasingly significant role in the socio-economic and educational systems of the modern world. [1]

2. EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVES

As it was revealed in the former paragraphs, the concept of lifelong learning primarily considers the human component in education and work, i. e. the knowledge, skills and competencies which are needed by students and employees throughout their working lives.

Considering all these changes it was in 2010 that the European Commission elaborated a Memorandum on Lifelong Learning [2], a 10-year developmental plan in the area of education and training. This document focused on a vision for easily accessible, career-oriented, initial and continuing training programs, flexible and student-friendly systems, including the appreciation of non-formal and informal learning. This document emphasized a learning outcomes approach to evaluation in education, and, most importantly, access to high-quality information and counselling. In the document it is Key Message Number 5 that calls for the rethinking of the theory and practice of guidance and counselling. In the past, as the document also reveals, the transition from education and training to working life took place only once in a person's life. People rarely combined education with a job or family commitments. Today, this pattern seems to be changing radically. People, throughout their adult lives and careers, need up-to-date information and advice on

'What to do and what to learn next' at several times. The transition from education to career has become more prolonged and unpredictable. It is quite common today that young people study and work simultaneously. In general it can be said that it takes young people longer to establish themselves.

On the other hand many middle-aged people seek a return to education to get better qualifications, better jobs, or, simply, to make more money. In short, there is a growing number of students also working and raising families, and a rising proportion of people already in full time employment doing studies simultaneously.

As it is revealed by statistical figures, in Europe there is a growing number of young people aged 20-34 (approximately one in five) who are neither in employment nor in education. For them the most commonly mentioned obstacles according to an adult education survey include the lack of adequate training programs and unpreparedness for further education. For those who want to work and study simultaneously, the lack of time due to family responsibilities, and conflict with work schedules can be mentioned. [3] In addition some psychological factors including the lack of motivation, the lack of self-confidence, the inability to cope with new teaching methods and materials may also represent difficulties for both the young and the middle-aged learners who, obviously, need special help to overcome their own difficulties.

In summary, it can be stated that it is essential for each educational and training institution to implement and operate efficient guidance and counselling services for their students; it is the part time and short cycle students who need this kind of professional assistance the most.

3. THE HUNGARIAN SCENE

In Hungary, due to the periodically changing birth rate figures, the number of school goers is uneven at all levels, a fact, that creates many problems in the national education system, and, which is extremely harmful from the point of view of short cycle and part time study programs. This feature makes long-term planning and the introduction of innovative approaches and new programs extremely difficult.

Today the most important new features of PT and SC programs in Hungary include the increase of the duration of practical training within the program, the support and preference offered to vocations in short supply, the reduction of the time period of training, the simplification of the examination requirements, the development of an external evaluation and inspection system. [4] The proportion of students enrolled in part time and short cycle study programs in Hungary is currently behind expected figures. In addition, dropping out is significant, too. While the proportion of young European men and women who were early leavers from education and training was 10.5% in 2017, the same figure in Hungary reached 12.5 %. [5] The reasons behind these unfavourable tendencies include the introduction of relatively high tuition fees, students' postponement of their studies for one reason or another, too frequent and

often inconsistent changes in the education system, indicative of some kind of instability and changing preferences in Hungarian educational policy. This is why all training institutions in Hungary need to address these problems. At the University of Szeged remedial programs have been introduced; the ones in IT and foreign languages are very popular with all students, including part time and short cycle ones as well. Student counselling is also helpful. A national-level competencies test was also introduced in Hungary. First year students are tested at the very beginning of their first semester and they are evaluated on the basis of their performance. Depending on test results students may be referred to special remedial programmes or personalized counselling services.

4. STUDENT COUNSELLING AT THE UNIVERSITY OF SZEGED

Throughout its more than twenty-five years of operation, the Student Counselling Centre of the University of Szeged has committed itself to the promotion of students' physical and mental health as well as their overall wellbeing. To the end that achieve this goal, the centre provides students such services that serve the maintenance and development of their physical and psychological quality of life. Just like any human community, the group of students studying at the twelve faculties of the University of Szeged is not a homogeneous community but a mini society with a diverse composition, representing different social groups. Therefore, the arising life management problems embrace a considerably wide spectrum but naturally tinted with study field and generation-related characteristics.

Parallel to the university studies, students unavoidably face all kinds of developmental challenges, for example, they have to develop and consolidate their own personal identity, this is the last phase of their separation from parents, this period is also the stage for the adaptation to various communities and social roles as well as for the establishment and strengthening their social relations and networks, they also need to plan their career path, which requires the development of their professional, occupational and vocational identity. Taking the fast changing intellectual, social and economic challenges of our today's life into consideration, as they are formerly detailed, it is essential for these young adults to get prepared as early as their university years to give effective responses to these challenges of life in general and the labour market more specifically, and get enabled to develop their own individual coping strategies by acquiring proper and transferable problem solving and conflict management techniques. No universally applicable solutions exist, therefore, the range of services have been formed and enhanced in a manner to adjust to and meet the individuals' special needs and expectations since such services can only fulfil their essential role if they foster students' quality of life and personal development in an individually-tailored way.

Since the accession to the European Union, the university has taken part in many operative programmes (Social

Renewal, Human Resources OPs, etc.) and has implemented various higher educational development projects, in the framework of which, the Student Counselling Centre has taken an important role in designing and managing subprojects whose aims and objectives are to diversify psychological, special need and learning guidance and assistance in the spirit of tackling and preventing drop outs. The centre operates in three distinguished branches: besides online individual and face-to-face therapeutic counselling, the Equal Opportunities Branch offers services especially targeting at disabled, disadvantaged or special need students, including physical disability, speech impairment, spectrum disorders (e.g. Asperger syndrome, autism), various psychological developmental disorders (e.g. Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder, learning difficulties such as dysgraphia, dyscalculia and dyslexia). As an integrated service provision unit of the university, the centre caters for any full-time student who has an active status in the actual academic year.

In the last few years the number of students conducting short-cycle studies have used the individual and/or group learning assistance training programmes and services in a greater number. Though no exact research has been conducted so far but due to lower threshold of admission to short-cycle studies, the ratio of special need students seems to be higher than in more advanced studies. Among the remedial programmes, they can have access to group training on learning techniques where they can learn how to learn and enhance their learning strategies. Students with dyslexia can join special workshops where they are trained how to tackle their learning disability and develop their skills in a more effective way. For them the innovative juggling workshop was very successful, and they reported positive outcomes in their skill development. Based on indication, the centre can offer various learning aids (Internet accessibility for students with impaired vision, speech recognition devices, dictaphone, massage, physiotherapy, etc.). Students with learning disabilities may be granted concessions or extra time at exams, and can take part in dyslexic language learning courses as well. Supplementary individualized mentoring and counselling services (five-six session in each academic year) are available as well for free of charge. In more severe cases, the centre can mobilize its well-established referral network.

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, as István Polónyi [6], the most significant Hungarian researcher in PT and SC studies, sees it, it is a must that up-to-date education be learner-centred. In Polónyi's opinion, students in short-cycle and part time study programs can be roughly divided into two major groups. The first one comprises students, who might come from disadvantaged groups. Examples include those who are unemployed, early leavers, students with learning difficulties, former dropouts, senior students etc. They are the ones who either do not have any previous experience in higher education, or, if they do, it was a very negative, discouraging experience. A well-organized and

personalized counselling system may help these students to overcome their initial difficulties. These students may be helped specifically with personal and online consultations, remedial classes, supplementary and graded teaching materials and psychological counselling services. Their progress has to be closely and individually monitored..

In the second group in Polónyi's opinion there are students who are already degree holders and who already work for their second or third qualification. These students are in search for better employability, higher social status and higher income. In the development and the running of programs for these students, the most important features include state-of-the-art teaching methods, high-quality teaching materials, foreign language classes, (possibly, bilingual teaching), excellent infrastructure and internationalization play the most significant role. But, professional guidance and counselling services are important for this group, too. These students primarily need information on additional opportunities, study abroad programs, good training sites, international conferences and publications, etc. To sum it up. in accordance with Key Message Number One of the Memorandum on Lifelong Learning issued by the European Commission in 2010, this group of students need information and guidance primarily to guarantee for them the "universal and continuing access to learning for gaining and renewing the skills needed for sustained participation in knowledge society." [7]

From the above the conclusion can be drawn that a personalized student counselling system, both online and F2F, can be an example of good practice for all institutions, already running, or planning to introduce SC and PT study programs.

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