

A Progress Report of Implementation “Successful Student Learning” Course for First Year Students at the Eurasian National University

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Abstract: Significant progress has been made in the reform of higher education in Kazakhstan since independence and the beginning of the transition to a democratic society and market economy. Changes have occurred in the system of higher education with a new structure of tertiary education based on the Bologna process, using credit system technologies, elements of academic support services for students. Credit system give opportunity for Kazakhstan students to build a route of personal and career development; to take an position active position with regarding to their future, which will further contribute to their learning throughout the life. Experience of work with the first year Kazakhstani students shows that, basically, new students have problems with new requirements and rules of study by credit system, living an unfamiliar environment. Academic support services as advising, tutoring, first year success courses for students are a new phenomena at the universities of Kazakhstan which comes with the reforming of higher education system. In order to bridge the gap, in 2012, the Faculty of Social Sciences at Eurasian National University implemented an extra-course for first year students “Successful student learning”. This was carried out by group curators as first steps to expanding their work, to enhance collaboration curators and students and to improve the first-year student experience. Results of pilot study indicated that first-year students consider the course helps to them to adjust to the university and that it increases their success at the university.

Key words: Higher education • Successful student learning • Bologna process

INTRODUCTION

Kazakhstan, a relatively young country in Central Asia, is currently enduring a rapid economic growth, a period of political stability and a time of establishing itself in the international arena. Besides the development is also focused on reforming the country’s existing academy to improve its policies and practices and to gain recognition of Kazakhstani higher education in the world.

Significant progress has been made in the reform of higher education in Kazakhstan since independence and the beginning of the transition to a democratic society and market economy. Changes have occurred in the system of education with a new structure of tertiary education based on the Bologna process; using credit system technologies. In Kazakhstan universities the credit system was established as an experiment since the beginning of 2001. At present, almost all of the leading universities of Kazakhstan work on credit systems [1]. According to State Education Law of Kazakhstan, credit

system is technology on the basis of choice and self-planning of the study courses using credit as a unified unit for measurement of student learning and teacher work [2].

Credit system is seen as an educational technology which helps to make educational process more innovative and student-centered. The mission of higher education institutions is no more understood as simple delivery of knowledge, but as educating of the all-round citizen capable of independent creative thinking and working toward self-development.

Credit system give opportunity for Kazakhstan students to build a route of personal and career development; to take an position active position with regarding to their future, which will further contribute to their learning throughout the life. But, many Kazakhstan researchers indicated, that credit system students are often not prepared to determine their educational needs, opportunities or plan a learning route to achieve their goals [3]. Kazakhstani students, especially freshman do

not fully understand the meaning of “credit system” and “how to study at the university by the credit system” since they studied at the secondary school which have different study rules. Unfortunately, according to the survey which was conducted 2011 with students the principle, characteristics of learning style in the “credit system” are “unfamiliar” until the end of study at the University for 35-42% Kazakhstani students [4]. In order to bridge the gap, from 2010 the Kazakhstan universities formally implemented from the experience of US universities the academic advisor, tutoring program and first year seminars.

As you know from the US universities experience, first year seminars are one of the strongest predictors of student persistence from first- year to the second year [5]. Students who participate in first year seminars have higher grade point averages, are more satisfied with their college experience and institution and have a stronger sense of community than those who do not.

Researchers have stressed the importance of providing effective transition methods in order to ensure student retention and progression [6]. According to the research literature, the foremost factor that impedes students’ adjustment to university life is lack of preparation for and understanding of the type of learning that is required [7]. The first year seminars have been developed to assist students in their transition from higher school to college with focus on academic and social development. Orientation sessions, learning communities, student mentors, peer counseling, bridge programs and first-year seminars represent the variety of initiatives designed to set students up for success. Keup and Barefoot found that participation in a first- year seminar has positive effects on both social and academic experiences while in college [8].

The situation regarding orientation course or first year success seminars in Kazakhstan is quite different from the US universities. In general, there is no a Kazakhstan tradition academic support center or variety of first year success courses as in the USA. Formal first year seminars are usually conducted by “curator” in short- time at the beginning of first year of study. Curator is faculty member which work as a volunteer with students. Curators are basically controlled academic performance and attendance of students, but not provide systematic help them to adjust to the university life.

Experience of work with the first year Kazakhstani students shows that, basically, new students have problems with new requirements and rules of study by credit system, living an unfamiliar environment.

Also, students have trouble to adapt to living in a dorm room, to cook for oneself, to save money and deal with a daily commute.

First year success courses/ seminars a low profile activity in Kazakhstani universities that is performed by many staff across the University. Meanwhile the administration of many universities do not approve of the introduction of first year success courses for many reasons as a waste of time of students, the financial aspect, or they think that organize enough activities for students to help them to adjust. But, a few of institutions across the Kazakhstan such as Eurasian National University (ENU), Kazakh National University Abay are trying to implement first year success courses in order to develop fundamental academic skills and familiarizing students with university policies and procedures. Observing and analyzing problem of first year students at the ENU by administrative staff confirmed the need to organize support courses for them. In the fall semester 2012, Eurasian National University’s Faculty of Social Sciences implemented the extra-course for first year students “Successful Student Learning” (SSL). This was carried out by group curators, on behalf of the University; one such effort that has often been widely overlooked in Kazakhstan higher education. The main purpose of this course is helping students to adjust to the university, preventing early academic difficulties of first year students.

The Eurasian National University’s (ENU) Faculty of Social Sciences (FSS) “Successful Student Learning” (Uspeshnaya ucheba studenta) (SSL) pilot project The course “Successful Student Learning” which was carried out by curators of faculty Social Sciences ENU was a first step to expanding their work, to enhance collaboration with curators and students. The SSL plan is designed to assist first year students with their transition to the university community. This course consist of four parts which introduces the entering student to the University’s academic programs, general education requirements, student handbook, relevant policies and procedures. This course will expose the first year student to the Eurasian National University Experience. Other topics covered in this extra- course will include college survival skills such as goal setting; time management; learning styles, personality and active learning; critical thinking; listening, note-taking and participating; reading to remember; test-taking skills, writing and speaking for success; and research and the college library. This curriculum is currently being constructed by using US universities experiences in this field. The schedule of study plans is listed in the Table 1.

Table 1: Typical plan of “Successful Student Learning”

Date	Part	Content
1week	1Part “Study at the University”	University policy: the goal, mission, activities. Web site of the university (www.enu.kz). The educational process at credit system. Structure of the university. University services and their functions.
2-3 week	2- Part “ Student self- organization at the university”	Time management and Academic Success. Stress management. Personal Finance.
4-5week	3Part “Preparation for class”	The type of homework. Writing and Speaking for success. Effective techniques: before the lecture, during the lecture, after the lecture. Study skills.
6-7 week	4Part Student involvement	Academic and social integration is a condition for student success. Communication skills. Loyalty. Friendship

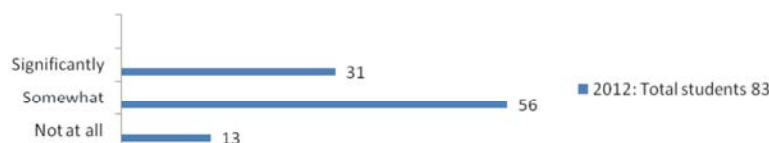


Fig. 1: Students’ responses to the question, “How much has the SSL course affected your success at ENU?”

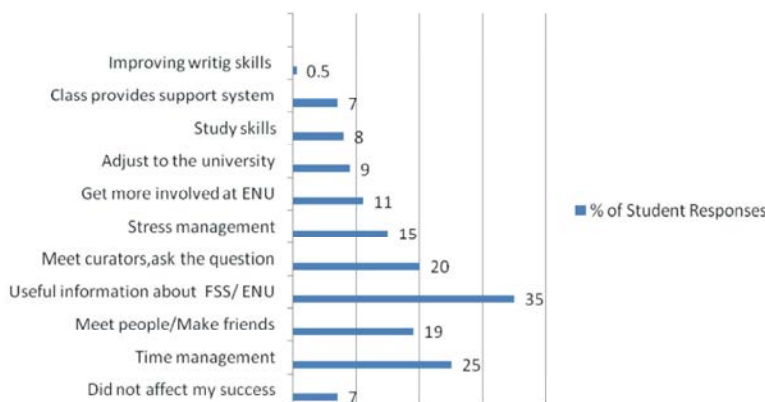


Fig. 2: Students’ open-ended comments about how the course positively impacted their success. The number noted is the percentage of students giving the response

In the SSL course at the FSS of ENU, the first- year student are distributed among the 2 different sections (learning communities) to create classes 20 to 25 students. The course meets once a week throughout the midsemester and each class lasts 75 minutes. Each section is led by faculty curators, who have demonstrated good academic experience at the FSS. One aim of the SSL pilot project is to begin the process of developing the students into “self - learners”. Curators assist students with how to assess their individual and group performances; help them to learn how to critically examine their academic performance for continual improvement.

Results of “Successful Student Learning” (SSL) Pilot

Project: At the end of program students are asked to answer the question, “How much has the SSL course affected your success at ENU?” Students can choose to answer “significantly,” “somewhat,” or “not at all.”

They are also asked to submit comments to support their answer. Results indicate that the implementation SES through academic advisors has been successful; 87percent of the students in 2012 responded that their academic success was “significantly” or “somewhat” influenced by the activities in the SES course. Mid-semester assessments are summarized in Figure 1.

Figure 2 lists the most common student comments about how the SSL course positively impacted their success. Freshman students value main aspects of the course. Useful information about ENU, its culture and where to find resources topped the list of most common comments, along with making friends and learning time management skills. Following close behind in percentage of comments were meeting faculty curators, helping with the adjustment (in rigor) from high school to college, improving study skills and managing stress. With regard to stress management, many of the students wrote that

they simply enjoyed coming to class because it was “so relaxing” to have discussions with friends and the advisors and they could “chill out” from the stress of their other classes. It was clear by the students’ comments that the faculty advising had succeeded in creating a quality learning environment where a high degree of trust and respect was achieved and there was student buy-in and commitment to accomplishing the learning objectives of the course

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The course “Successful Student Learning ” which was carried out by curators of faculty Social Sciences Eurasian National University as a first steps to improve curators work was implemented successfully. The results of the brief pilot study indicated that first-year students consider the SSL course helps them to adjust at the university and that it increases their success at ENU. Our next steps include the extension of the research to discuss which aspect of the SSL course has been most valuable to student and how student feedback has been changed in future years of implementation.

Proceeding from the aforesaid regarding first year seminars as elements of academic support services in Kazakhstan, we conclude that Kazakhstani colleges and universities should offer more advising and support services to their students, which are currently found in only a few major universities. The government should financially support the development of these services. Academic support centers can offer freshman an extended academic orientation to integrate entering students into the institutional environment. This initiative is vital importance to students, especially today when academics and all its participants are transiting to the unfamiliar three- level educational system, establishing new undergraduate curriculum, integrating the credit system and reforming other aspects of higher education.

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