Student Success Support Program

The University of Dunaújváros has prioritized student success for several years now.

The University developed and launched a Student Success Support Program (*HASIT* in Hungarian) in order to improve retention and graduation rates. The main objective of the project was to adopt a new educational philosophy that established a student and learning centered environment, fostered student motivation, and enhanced student retention.

One of the main missions of the Institution is to train resilient, confident students who can cope with the challenges of the labor market.

The University of Dunaújváros does not only transmit knowledge, but also implements it in practice. Moreover, it offers something that students may not find elsewhere: support.

Before launching *HASIT*, University researchers carefully examined the factors that caused student dropout.

The study found that the Institution needed to apply a diverse set of tools to help students overcome obstacles, and earn a university degree.

The Student Success Support Program *HASIT* was developed as a result of this recognition.

Positive results were visible soon after launching the project. The number of students who completed their course work increased dramatically. All through these changes, the University remained true to its basic premise of high quality education.

One of the most important features of the program is its mentoring system. The role of faculty mentors is to guide students under their tutelage through personal consultation



and classroom work as part of the curriculum.

The mentoring system primarily focuses on academic counseling. Faculty mentors help students integrate in college life, and counsel them in academic and classroomrelated issues.

Another highlight of the HA-SIT program is its **AVATAR** system. **AVATAR** is an application and monitoring system that processes quantifiable, dropout-related variables as indicators. It measures student activity, performance and success, graphically presents student progress, and identifies at-risk students. As with other academic and learning support systems used at the University of Dunaújváros, students enter **AVATAR** with their own student ID (Neptun).



Students may choose the AVA-TAR symbol they like in the system, as well as the "image" of their portal. The AVATAR symbol displays seven states depending on how happy or unhappy they are with student progress on the basis of measurable indicators. AVATAR does not only provide information about assignments and deadlines in any given semester, but also tracks student progress over their entire program of study on the basis of a long term study plan. The system features students as well as faculty through their AVATAR symbols on the basis of their student support indicators.

Student and faculty feedback shows that the **AVATAR** system developed by **the University of Dunaújváros** is a modern and innovative application that provides upto-date and useful information for both students and faculty in order to help students thrive. We present here the results and conclusions provided by the HASIT project of the University of Dunaújváros and the MRK Dropout Task Force, for educational policy makers and other stakeholders in higher education.

General observations:

• Dropout has become such a serious problem in Hungarian higher education that it requires a concerted effort on part of institutions through centralized and organized solutions, protocols and recommendations

• Regardless of the educational profiles and dimensions of institutions, all stakeholders in higher education must tackle the problem of dropout.

• The Student Success Support Program (HASIT) developed by the University of Dunaújváros aims to reduce student dropout, and may serve as an example of good practice for other higher educational institutions.

• Stakeholders in higher education include faculty, whose attitudes and dispositions may help institutions reduce dropout rates throughtraining and focused involvement.

• Several institutions struggle with the re-activation of passive students, the premature pulling effect of the labor market, and dropout that is especially problematic in the fields of information technology.

◆ In conclusion, we may argue that piecemeal solutions at the level of institutions are insufficient to combat the general problem of student dropout. A cooperative effort among all stakeholders of higher education is necessary to properly facilitate student retention.



Sub-project 1.

EM

• One of the basic premises of student retention is the universal acknowledgement of the fact that it is everyone's responsibility.

Itoring

• Faculty plays a particularly great role in student retention, because they have the most frequent and most intensive relationship with students.

The basic objective of studying student retention is to establish the bases of a student support program

• Successful student retention includes the socialization, training and education of students, which is a complex and holistic institutional task.

We developed the AVATAR application in order to reduce student dropout rates in close cooperation with the mentoring system.

• The One the one hand, the basic goal of the project is to identify student dropout indicators and, on the

other hand, to develop an IT system that helps students accomplish their chores with regards to academic and social life.

◆ The Monitoring system was launched in order to help HASIT objectives materialize, that is, to decrease student dropout at the University of Dunaújváros. A basic condition of the success of the sub-project is that the faculty has up-to-date information about student assignments, performance and progress. For this reason, it was necessary to continuously update the data of academic systems, and to develop an interactive system that facilitates access to data and everyday use through userfriendly solutions.

• The monitoring system assesses student progress on the basis of indicators provided by the system. Among the data are the number of credits of each completed course, the incomplete status of courses with prerequisites, grade point average, missed classes, progress of thesis, foreign language requirements, further obligations status, and diverse online educational program use. • Users may view the indicatorbased measurements in AVATAR states, of which there are seven:

The main source of information for the program is the Neptun Standardized Academic System. Since the data provided by Neptun are insufficient for all objectives of the HASIT program, it was necessary to develop certain expansions. That is how we incorporated in the system the attendance register of courses, or the results of mid-term exams.

♦ Angry; ♦ worried, warning; ♦ sad; ♦ neutral; ♦ encouraging; ♦ smiley; ♦ content, happy



◆ The functions of the Monitoring system differ according to user status like student, faculty or mentor. They are the same in a sense that they all have further modules beyond the basic system, which in turn differ according to user status. Further modules available to students are the Calendar module, the Notifications module, the Bulletin board module, the Filter module, and the Data export module.



Modules available to faculty are the Calendar module, the Notifications module, the Bulletin Board module, the Filter module, and the Data export module.

Modules available to mentors are the Calendar module, the Notifications module, the Bulletin board module, the Filter module, and the Data export module.



◆ The expected short-term result of the system is that the performance of below-average students and majors may be quickly identifiable, and student-teacher communication may become more efficient. This positively impacts the processes of calling for and providing help, and calls atten-

tion to pending tasks as they remain within the scope of the student.

The greatest advantage of the use of the Monitoring system is that all data appears on the same surface in the desired structure, in a clearcut form. Therefore, the Monitoring system may even complement, or even replace, the occasionally run VIR system with a user- and editingfriendly portal.

Another great advantage of the system is that all the variables that affect the semester performance and progress of the student may be traceable: both the student and the mentor may easily track the career path of the student.

• For students, HASIT provides standardized presentation. All results and tasks are visible at one place regardless of who teaches that subject. Students may quickly review the courses that they still need to take for the completion of their degree program, as well as their past results.

The areas on which they still need to work are highlighted for students.

Automatic reminders and the notification function make sure students do not forget about pending tasks.

• The monitoring system also helps the work of the mentor, as it provides them with all the necessary information about their students, highlighting the ones who need urgent attention.

By using individual filters, mentors are able to use filters they prioritize.

• The monitoring system is able to decrease student dropout by call-

ing mentors' attention to at-risk students on the basis of student indicators way before they would actually drop out. The mentor can thus take action to prevent dropout.

In conclusion, administrative tasks gain new meaning at an institutional level, for we are more motivated to do paperwork when we know that the system will use data for an important cause.

At the level of the institution, therefore, the system fosters administrative discipline.



Sub-project 2.

Mentoring System

◆ The For the development of a mentoring system it is indispensable to create a task force that coordinates work, and whose leader is the director of the mentoring system. It is the Director who provides guidance for the development of the mentoring system.

• What becomes a crucial factor and needs careful consideration is the compatibility of the mentor and his or her student, as the success of mentoring greatly depends on their relationship. We may use various empirical methods to measure compatibility. It is important to be aware of the professional recognition of the mentor, and the quality and quantity of his or her professional networks. We need to asses the mentor's attitudes, open-mindedness and potential bias. The mentor should be success-oriented so that they are able to tackle problems emerging along the way. The success of mentoring greatly depends on the information we have about these questions.

• Whether there is official mentor training at place, or mentors are prepared through a conversation for their work, they need to abide by a confidentiality statement with regards to facts and personal information that emerge during mentoring.

• The preparation of mentors may take place at an introductory training, whose objective is to develop the personal and communicative skills of mentors for a successful mentoring relationship. While it is true that a single training will not necessarily make someone a great mentor, it does give the future mentor a chance to learn about expectations, and to decide whether they are really suitable for the task.

These trainings normally cover three areas:

(1) learning about conditions and circumstances, formalities, practical questions, and the assessment of mentoring, (2) understanding the student as young individuals; for the sake of efficient communication, it is important to learn about the social and developmental characteristics of their generation, (3) managing the student-mentor relationship, what the first meeting should be like, how close their relationship should be, how the mentor should model professional behavior, and what they should do if the student fails to show up for meetings.

One of the main objectives of the training is to acquire the skills and competences that are necessary for successful interpersonal relationships. It should highlight the following themes:

How can the mentor help the student articulate their objectives independently, without the mentor prompting them? (2) How can the mentor lead the student to identify the most efficient path to their objectives, to setting deadlines, and to self-reflection? (3) Efficient study practices, habits, and learning methods.
 (4) Understanding attention, trust building, encouragement, risk

management, unbiased attitudes. (5) Accurate and unbiased feedback including how the mentor can kindly tell the student that he or she "was mistaken" in a non-judgmental way. When analyzing good practices, we found that feedback plays a crucial role in building a positive mentoring relationship.

• The training should include several areas. Besides pedagogical and psychological training, mentors need to become familiar with the rules and protocols of the institution. We need to provide them with accurate information about how and where they can act in order to help the student.

• The training should also include the discussion of case studies, as case studies may help mentors tackle problems that emerge during the studies of their students.

• The right preparation of mentors contributes to high quality mentoring work, and we may be able to prevent mentor burnout.



Sub-project 3.

The **"Training of trainers"** subproject helps participants gain insight into the latest pedagogical theories, and learn about the idiosyncrasies of the current generation in higher education.

We undertake the task of re-defining and adopting the role of the educator and proven, efficient methodologies on the basis of the latest pedagogical findings. These are the objectives of the "Training of trainers" program. We take the characteristics of Generation Z as a point of departure: freedom, dynamism, pro-activeness, and a practical approach to tasks are the dominant features of this generation. Educators' roles have to adopt a more immediate approach to student-teacher interactions, and should prioritize mentoring and facilitating during the mentoring process.

The needs that emerge from generational characteristics (e.g. experience-based, direct interactive learning) resonate with the experience-based methodologies of trainings that stress group dynamics. The approach and methodological repertoire offered here respond to the needs of **Generation Y and Z**, and ensure the efficiency of educational processes. At the same time, for the faculty to properly exploit these opportunities, they themselves need to become competent and authentic representatives of institutional approaches and values. In order to facilitate this, we developed a program called **"Burnout prevention: Strengthening Faculty Resilience."**

The training is based on the basic premise that only well-rounded, open-minded and creative faculty can educate well-rounded, openminded and creative students. "An educational system is only as good as its teachers." In other words, strong faculty is the backbone of the educational system. In the light of international research, it is safe to say that what teachers teach matters less than the way they teach it.

The development of new pedagogical roles that respond to new student needs and **new teaching** **methodologies require empathy**, flexibility, and openness in higher education. These assets, however, are not a matter of decision-making, intention or some methodological "prescription;" rather, they depend on educators` mental dispositions.

What are the mental dispositions of educators today?

International research claims that 60-70% of European educators suffer from permanent stress, while 30% of them have **burnout syndrome**. It is especially younger (24-40 years) pedagogues who are at risk of burnout, and career change among them is especially high (30-40%).

Burnout syndrome comes about as a result of **permanent stress**, and is characterized by negative attitudes towards self, others, and work, as well as the loss of empathy. The burnout professor is therefore unable to create a tolerant and inspiring classroom atmosphere where erring is human, errors lead to learning, and growth is pleasurable. An overburdened and burnout educator is unable to achieve this goal.

Therefore, one of the most important conditions of methodological innovation is the **development of faculty resilience** (**mental fitness**), and the support of faculty in the construction of new pedagogical roles in higher education.



Student motivation

Sub-project 4.

The integration of students in talent development programs plays a prominent role in the reduction of dropout rates. Joining talent development programs and remedial education takes place on a voluntary basis.

• Members Members of the Student Government, as well as the leaders and professors of Honors Programs play a great role in the dissemination of information.

◆ Their activity is based on high quality training specified in the study program, and individual research assisted by thesis advisors. The relationship between the student and his or her mentor is determining for academic work. The objective is that Honors Program experiences lead a greater number of students to conduct research and join projects.

◆ As a result of the study, the following recommendations were drafted for the establishment of a talent development program: ◆ It is necessary to issue a standardized certificate that confirms student participation in the Talent Development Program.

• Like it happens with the validation of work experience, Honors Program and Talent Development program work should be also acknowledged on the basis of mentor or advisor recommendation.

• Industrial partners should be involved in Talent Development Programs, and they should help establish scholarships for students.

• Students` integration in research and publication activities has to be intensified.

Institutions should facilitate the invitation of external experts to give talks and lectures in order to motivate students in academics.

 Distance education student integration in the program must be enhanced. More opportunities should be provided for Talent Development Program participants' presentation of their career paths.

Those students who perform exceptionally at the National Scientific Student Association Conference (OTDK) should be exempted from having to defend their senior thesis.

• The best students should be encouraged to participate in conferences.

• Students who perform exceptionally well at the Talent Development Program should be granted the option of an individualized study plan.

Students achieve great results in various forums and have proven themselves worthy should have access to certain amounts of money under the guidance of their mentors, which they may spend on publications, conference participation, or the purchase of study tools.

• The role of mentors is fundamental, which is why they need to be trained, encouraged and willing to integrate the latest research results in their daily work.

 Mentors should work individualized schedules.

• Greater emphasis should be placed on alumni talks, lectures, and the presentation of their research and career.

◆ For the successful completion of programs, it is necessary to specify the opportunities offered by higher educational institutions, to establish bilateral cooperative agreements, and to assign specific contact persons.

◆ In the long run, the expansion of networks may result in a more conscious selection of institutions and majors, which addresses one of the problems that lead to dropout in many institutions of higher education. The number of students who change their major or transfer to another institution may be reduced, and their motivation increased, during the program.



Research

and measurements Sub-project 5.

Generally speaking, competences are divided into two main groups: *general* competences such as basic and key competences, and *professional* or special subject competences.

What is worth finding out from our teaching staff?

We recommend that faculty be surveyed about what basic and key competences they consider essential for academic success in their institution, faculty, and department. This information should reveal the importance educators give to specific areas of competence.

The results of the survey may contribute to the study of student competences in two ways. On the one hand, it provides guidance about what types of competences should be measured among students from the perspective of faculty expectations. On the other hand, we may find out about what professors think in general about the basic and key competence levels of their students. Expectations with regards to certain competences, and the estimation of student quality may inevitably impact professors' bias, if they have any, but it may also help them tailor the structure of class material and the methodological tool kit to expected student competences.

We recommend that the internal examination of the institution (faculty, department) also include the question whether faculty has detected any changes in the characteristic competences that are necessary for academic success. If participants highlight too many negative changes, we should organize a training that helps them handle transformed student characteristics.

For the measurement of competences required to qualify for the student's subject area or major, we recommend high school requirements as a point of departure. If admission requires an advanced level high school exam, faculty should make recommendations as to what they hold to be the most important basic requirements in their subjects. This information may serve for the development of remedial educational programs, and may also serve as a basis for the assessment of the first year student's previous knowledge.

Student characteristics – Signs of success and failure

In order to reduce student dropout and facilitate graduation in due time, we find it important to gather student-related information that helps us develop a successful support system.

As every student will participate in the national competence survey, we base our recommendations on this study, and we offer complementary studies.

The survey among students should ideally complement the prospective national competence survey data with results like students' selfreflections on the basis of their goals and achievements (e.g. advanced level high school leaving exam, foreign language certificate).

Question areas regarding learning ability may be inserted in student surveys, such as understanding specialized lectures, and individual course material acquisition in Hungarian and in a foreign language etc. It is also advisable to examine to what extent students prepare to finish their studies in due time (senior thesis, foreign language certificate, comprehensive exams etc.).

Other external problems that are hard to identify, such as financial support for one's studies or the lack thereof, are also important information for avoiding dropout and facilitating retention.

Furthermore, *we recommend* that surveys that complement national studies are conducted in the competence areas deemed most important by faculty. The measurement of competences related to incoming students' major or specialization might be very useful for the organization of remedial educational programs.



Counseling in higher education

Sub-project 6

The HÖOK-FETA sub-project was collecting data from areas related to counseling in higher education. As a result, they did not only present the overall situation, but also elaborated some recommendations on its basis. The comprehensive developmental directives concern higher educational counseling in its entirety, while special recommendations concern specific, highly important counseling-related areas.

Comprehensive proposals

a. The settlement of the organizational, financial and quality control dimensions of lifestyle counseling in higher education. The greatest problem is the uneven relationship between the supply and demand of services among institutions of higher education. As a result, we found the lack of information regarding student community services, or the lack of the services themselves b. The development of the professional support of employees in higher educational counseling: client registry and monitoring system, further training, supervision.

We support the administration of progress related to clients. Its recommended form is a standardized monitoring system that has sufficient levels of authority, and is able to safely lead the path of clients and provide feedback about the success of counselors.

Besides the decrease of administrative burdens, the other salient area concerns the provision of professional development.

The obstacles and difficulties students indicate are constantly changing. At the same time, we witness the emergence of Hungarian and international good practices, which provide efficient models for problems. One of the building blocks of increased efficiency is that we provide counselors the most suitable tools through trainings so they may best tackle student problems.

The third area is the maintenance of counselors' mental health through case study discussions and supervision.

The tripartite support system aims to increase the efficiency of student support. Our recommendations include the establishment of a central agency that provides the support tools discussed above by keeping average costs to the minimum.

c. Data-based planning for supporting student success

Independent of the area of counseling, we may argue that higher education suffers from a serious lack of information with regards to soft data. Administrative databases are not able to provide information about students' socio-economic background.



At the same time, the main causes of dropout lie in these background variables. For this reason, in order to launch intervention projects it is necessary to have information about these areas through studies and surveys.

Specific recommendations

a. Involve peer groups in the guidance of at-risk students.

Data confirms that in the 29 institutions examined, there exists a diverse range of peer groups with diverse objectives and functions. Their common denominator is that their operation is fully integrated in the student community. Other institutional units cannot achieve this model of integration, and their reproducibility is also questionable as these are mostly bottom-up, self-organized groups.

b. Employ higher educational counselors for the maintenance of employees` mental health.

Many employees ranging from staff to faculty may find the stress of interpersonal interactions overwhelming, which leads to burnout and the drop of morale in the long run. This may create dissatisfaction and misunderstandings that also affect students. On the basis of student needs identified through surveys, therefore, it is important to support employees who are at the forefront of student interaction.

he next phase of HASIT^{DUE}

A prominent phase of our HASIT ^{DUE} project terminates here. At the same time, however, our work is not over. We intend to continue developing our program in the next phase for our institution, as well as for potential implementation in other higher educational institutions.

◆ In the next phase of the project, we launch the HASIT ^{DUE} system developed in the previous phase at the University of Dunaujvaros, which means the following:

◆ Launching the monitoring system (HASIT^{DUE}/AVATAR program), and run a real test. Subsequently, we fine-tune the system in terms of graphic design, the expansion of functions, compatibility with outer systems, data filters, data conversion and Moodle-developments. • Developing the mentoring system by restructuring it, the organization of trainings for mentors, and the establishment of awards for mentors.

Training our faculty through trainings and methodological workshops, and providing coaching for "HASIT-faculty."

• Boosting student motivation by introducing elements that foster motivation, and supporting corresponding tools.

◆ The completion of surveys, and the administration of tests for incoming students, as well as their assessment and further development. The use of tests and surveys outlined in HASIT KIT, and their assessment; the preparation of questionnaires and methodological tools; further development, including the planning and testing of pilot studies and institution-wide surveys. ◆ The study of problem areas with regards to student dropout such as the study of international and disadvantaged student dropout, the premature pulling effect of the labor market, and its impact on student graduation rates.

The development of HASIT KIT.

◆ Our goal is to disseminate the results of our project, and further develop the particular modules of the HASIT^{DUE} model for other institutions of higher education. In these developments we will test the new institutional versions of the model, and prepare them for introduction.

• The reduction of student dropout must be a top priority in higher education.

◆ For this purpose, the further development of the HASIT project launched by the University of Dunaújváros may serve as a solid point of departure for other institutions.

◆ The main priority of prospective developments is that their objectives affect qualitative rather than quantitative changes in Hungarian higher education.



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