

## **Integrating international degree students into the academic culture – workshop to benchmark best practices**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Universities around the globe are getting more multicultural because of an increasing proportion of international staff and students. Different kinds of backgrounds also affect working in an academic environment. However, in many universities the increased internationalisation is only seen in numbers and percentages, not in

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practices developed for a multicultural audience. In this paper a project to develop teaching of multicultural groups will be presented and an outline of a workshop to improve the integration of international students into the academic culture will be introduced. The project Aalto is Multicultural was organized by Aalto University Student Union in cooperation with Aalto University in 2015 and the work to improve the integration of international students continues in 2016 by both parties.

The project Aalto is Multicultural is aimed at the faculty of the university to better take into account the different backgrounds of students in the classroom in their pedagogical role. The project provides the faculty with experiences and thoughts of the international students related to integrating into a new country and a new academic culture, plagiarism, problems in group working situations and finding work in Finland. All the materials of the project can be found in [www.ayy.fi/multicultural-aalto](http://www.ayy.fi/multicultural-aalto).

The workshop will start by going through the results of the project especially related to the problems in the integration to academic culture. These themes are then discussed in different group exercises. After the workshop the participants will have a deeper understanding of the problems international students face when integrating into a new academic culture and a jointly developed set of best practices to ease this integration.

## **1. MAIN FINDINGS OF AALTO IS MULTICULTURAL-PROJECT**

Often in the context of describing an individual's study experience in a foreign country the term culture shock is mentioned. In our project we found another, more detailed phenomenon that described the feelings of foreign master students in integrating into a new academic culture – learning shock. Different and new learning practices can cause a learning shock with symptoms such as stress, lack of direction and feelings of alienation (Griffiths, 2004). The students interviewed for Aalto is Multicultural-project were struggling with a learning shock especially because of the emphasized critical and applied thinking in Finnish academic culture. In their previous studies they were used to learning by heart and faced problems in the new situation because the expectations for the students were not clearly communicated by the faculty.

Lacking pedagogical advice and not explaining the expectations for students' work was reported as problematic by the interviewees. In Finnish academic culture students are expected to be independent and active. Integration into academic culture and explaining what it means to study in a Finnish university is done during the first year of bachelor's degree and the faculty expects that the master students are aware of all the expectations towards students. The teachers interviewed for the project told that they have to pay special attention into communicating their pedagogical goals and not expect that the international students are aware of the hidden knowledge and assumptions of Finnish academic culture.

Plagiarism and academic writing was one of the most problematic areas experienced by the interviewees. Plagiarism is understood differently in different cultures, and the students felt the guidance they got from in the beginning of their master degrees in Finland was lacking.

## 2. OUTLINE AND WANTED OUTCOMES OF THE WORKSHOP

**Title:** Integration of international students into academic culture

**Before workshop:** Participants of the workshop should familiarize themselves, if possible, with the materials of the project in advance. The video and info material can be found at [ayy.fi/multicultural-aalto](http://ayy.fi/multicultural-aalto).

**Outcomes:** Sharing good practices, finding and developing new solutions. Recognizing problems in integration into the academic culture and discussing how to change the studying mindset students are used to. After the workshop participants will have a deeper understanding of the problems in integration and they will have a set of jointly developed solutions and best practices for improving academic integration at their disposal. Notes of the workshop's findings and plans to continue the work in Aalto University will be delivered to all participants after the workshop.

### Outline of the workshop

Warm-up icebreaker: Card game exercise. The participants will be introduced to the theme by an interactive exercise where they will play a few rounds of cards in silence. What the participants don't know, is that everyone has been given a different set of rules. This exercise pictures the difficulties of functioning in a setting where one is not aware of the rules of behavior.

Introduction: Aalto is Multicultural-project and its main findings will be presented together with the work that is done at the moment in Aalto University to facilitate the integration of foreign degree students into the academic culture. Results of a questionnaire to the faculty about the main concerns and ideas regarding international students' integration will be presented.

The interactive workshop will consist of three parts

1. Problems. Ideas and problems will be collected from the crowd, and listed to 5 before-defined problem categories (learning shock, different perceptions of plagiarism, communicating pedagogical goals across different cultures, challenges in multicultural groupwork, other issues)
2. Solutions to the mentioned problems. Open space working method is applied. The five problem-categories are listed on papers and spread around the room. The participants go to work with the theme that interests them the most. In open space method there's a possibility to work on several themes. Participants will continue listing problems and developing solutions to the mentioned problems. Each group has a chairperson who goes through the main findings after the session.
3. Break
4. How to make the change happen, solutions into practice. Participants pick one problem-solution category they want to focus on and continue with the same problem for the whole time. Following supporting questions will be given to the groups:

How would you make this happen in your university? Who are the stakeholders you need to involve? What kind of services/information do the international students need? What kind of tutoring/guidance and when (right after arrival/after first week/before exams?)

After the discussion the main findings of the groups will be presented to the whole group. Notes of the findings and plans to continue the work in Aalto University will be delivered to all participants of the workshop.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Griffiths, D.S. et al (2004): Learning Shock – The Trauma of Return to Formal Learning. Tanaka Business School Discussion Papers: TBS/DP04/31. London, Tanaka Business School