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How to Guide Students to make the Right Choices

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In Finland students meet increasing demands to graduate in the set time frame. This means three years for a Bachelor's degree and two years more for a Master's degree. In reality, it takes approximately seven years to complete a Master's Degree in Technology at Aalto University. The study time has remained the same for decades.

This study shows how guidance has helped the students in making the choices regarding their studies and what kind of guidance has appeared useful for the students. Students from the degree programme of Forest Products Technology were interviewed and their study progress was analyzed based on the official study records. Interviews were carried out in co-operation with Forest Products Guild (the student organization of Forest Products Technology at Aalto University).

1. GUIDANCE AND TUTORING PRACTICES IN FINLAND

1.1 Guidance practices in Finnish universities

A brief overview of the guidance and tutoring practices in Finnish universities is presented based on the literature.

1.2 Guidance in Aalto University

Tutoring is organized by the degree programme in co-operation with the student organizations. According to the Finnish law, university students have to be members of the student union. Membership in the discipline focused student organizations such as Forest Products Guild is optional, but very popular.

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2. STUDYING IN THE DEPARTMENT OF FOREST PRODUCTS TECHNOLOGY

2.1 About the degrees and studying

Bachelor's degree (Technology) consists of 180 credits and Master's degree (Technology) of 120 credits. Bachelor's degree is an official milestone, but most students in the Finnish universities complete the Master's degree. The 300 credits in the Master's degree are divided to the basic and methodological studies (around 120 credits), major studies (60 credits), minor studies (40 credits), special module (20 credits) and optional studies (20 credits). Bachelor's thesis is 10 credits and Master's thesis 30 credits. Next chapters describe the essential elements of the degree programmes of Forest Products Technology and Bioproduct Technology.

3. STUDY PROGRESS IN THE DEPARTMENT OF FOREST PRODUCTS TECHNOLOGY

Official study records of the students who were accepted to the department of Forest Products Technology in 2008-2010 were analyzed. Analysis shows how many students have actually stayed in the department.

4. STUDENT INTERVIEWS

14 students, mainly from the FPT classes 2008 and 2009, were interviewed to find out how they have experienced the offered guidance and tutoring and what they consider important from the perspective of motivation.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

Interviews and study record analysis indicate that development of the Bioproduct Technology programme has proceeded in the right direction in many ways. Mathematics, physics and chemistry have been challenging courses in FPT programme and even more so because they belong to the first year's studies and if they become an obstacle students may decide to leave the programme and the university. In the new degree programme the courses of mathematics, physics and chemistry have been organized in a different manner than earlier.

This study was not able to link the success in entrance examination and progress in studies, but it seems that there are various other important factors such as motivation and interest in the field of studies. Forest Products Technology has been unfamiliar to many students before they have begun their studies in the programme. The same situation still exists with Bioproduct Technology. Professors and teacher tutors could be more active in discussions with freshmen and older students and try to learn what students expect from their studies and what kind of careers they are interested in to pursue. Students consider many choices (for instance majors and minors) very restrictive for their future and it might be relieving to hear how many other things affect the career paths more than the exact course titles.

Increasing demands to graduate in the set time frame along with all the time changing degree structures and programmes are not small matters for students who are often stressed already because of the studying itself. Good atmosphere and feeling that someone cares should not be overlooked when degree programmes or degree structures are developed. Teachers need time (resources) to be available for the students when needed. Guidance of personal study planning should involve both the study administration and the teachers. Wider and more open perspective would enhance the development of various support practises for students. ■