

CLI FELLOWSHIP

Supporting students to become resilient and confident learners

A blended course as a scaffolding tool to help students reach their full potential

FINAL REPORT

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PROBLEM ANALYSIS

Attention to student well-being has increased as more and more students report dealing with the pressure to fulfil high academic/social expectations. This burden can eventually lead to physical and mental health issues. To prevent this, universities are trying to find solutions to help students cope with stress, deal with failure and have a happy and successful student life. This project supports Erasmus University College (EUC) students throughout their bachelor's programme.

At EUC, students face several challenging situations during their bachelor's. In the first year, they have to adjust to the University structure and educational system and must be proficient in a student-centred-small scale programme. Additionally, in a few weeks, they need to integrate into a new social community, that in some cases also involves being in a new country. The students experience this transition to university as a stressful event that usually leads to decreased academic performance and eventual dropout.

A Liberal Arts and Sciences (LAS) Bachelor is sometimes taken as a synonym for an undecided bachelor that will delay "making choices". Nevertheless, LAS students will have to withstand more decision-making moments. For example, one of the situations that will require a lot of motivation and tenacity is when the students need to declare their major at the end of their first bachelor year. LAS student needs to have a real passion for learning and be open to all kinds of knowledge and research methods. They should be willing to spend their time at EUC exploring different disciplines instead of only preparing for a specific career. They need to design an independent study program to blend their many interests. Furthermore, they need to show a self-directed plan to achieve their goals.

During their last bachelor year, if they manage to survive all the difficulties previously mentioned, they will show that they gained the ability to reason critically, communicate effectively, and understand the relationships across different disciplines. We consider that students must be confronted throughout their bachelor's with the challenges of their future professional (and personal) life to be

able to solve them assertively. Our aim is to prepare confident and resilient critical world citizens.

Student counsellors are of great assistance to students in times of stress. They also help them to design their study plan.

However, they have limited resources to manage the increased demand for their services. Therefore, developing an efficient, self-directed, and long-lasting method was essential to help the students. This method should offer the students the tools to build the resilience that will help them cope with a challenging Liberal Arts and Sciences programme, which will also benefit them once they enrol in a master's programme or start their professional careers.

PROJECT DESIGN AND OBJECTIVES

The project aimed to design and implement a parallel blended course throughout the academic year. It comprised different modules that provided them with various activities, valuable resources, and studying strategies.

The Personal Development Track consisted of a combination of mandatory small-scale mentoring sessions and several (non-mandatory) workshops. The first-year students were divided into two groups. One group had their mentor meeting in week 2, and the other had its meeting in week 3. In week four and week five, workshops were organized according to availability. All these activities took place on Wednesday afternoons between 15:00 and 18:00. This gave the programme some stability.

The workshops were not mandatory. The students were given two reflection assignments (one per semester) in which they had to reflect on the PDT and how a workshop or multiple workshops contributed to their progress. These pass/fail assignments were graded by their mentor.

RESULTS

STUDENT LEVEL

Well-being survey

Due to the quarantine measures, we decided to cancel the workshops planned for quad 4. Instead, we created a survey to assess how students are doing regarding the corona crisis. This survey measured social, cognitive, emotional, psychological and physical well-being. We also provided various online resources for the students who scored low in any domain.

Mentor meeting

The final quad's mentor meetings focused on helping the students with their study plans. We had to reschedule the sessions due to the delay in delivering the course catalogue. The purpose of the meeting was for mentors to help students with any questions they might have regarding majors, minors, exchanges and/or off-campus courses. Students were asked to upload their study plans in advance so mentors had sufficient time to review them before giving advice. The meetings were done one week after the major presentations and live Q&A sessions.

Mentor level

There was a preparatory meeting with the mentors before the mentor meeting. Mentors were told that they could choose how they wanted to conduct the session (e.g. individually or in smaller groups). Mentors had a list of things to check for when looking at study plans and a list of the most critical articles from the ARR regarding majors and minors.

EVALUATION

We evaluated each activity of the PDT and student and mentor perspectives of the PDT.

METHODS

Survey (student satisfaction, exposure, reach, acceptability)

An evaluation survey was distributed to students on Canvas. This survey was used to assess the mentor meetings, well-being survey, study plan resources, and overall impressions of the PDT.

Interviews (satisfaction, exposure, feasibility, acceptability, context)

Mentors again evaluated the mentor meetings and preparatory meetings via individual interviews.

FINDINGS OF THE EVALUATION SURVEY

General view of the PDT

Most students scored their overall satisfaction and engagement with the PDT above average. We asked about the usefulness of the mentor meetings, and students responded positively. The mentor meetings helped them learn more about practical issues (e.g. majors, grades, study plans and EUC departments) and make friends in the group settings. It was nice for them to see that other students were struggling with similar issues (i.e. picking a major). The usefulness of the workshops received low scores.

Mentors

Scores on the approachability and helpfulness of the mentors were high. Students reported that their mentors were understanding, encouraging, motivated, creative and inspiring. Students felt comfortable asking their mentor questions and talking to them about any given topic. Some topics students would have liked to discuss with their mentor (but did not) were housing and career choices. One student reported a desire to talk to their mentor about the living situation at Lucia and how difficult it was for them not to receive any support on the matter. Some students also mentioned that they were confused about the role of the mentor. This kept them from approaching their mentor about things that might have bothered them. Overall, having a mentor and interacting with them throughout the year positively helped students engage with the PDT program.

Mentor Meeting 1

The first mentor session was about introducing the group to the mentor and making goals for quad 1. Students were clear on the purpose of the meeting, but its usefulness was perhaps lost on some. This might have been because students were already stressed about their courses and settling into university life. One student said that goal setting made them nervous, which is why they did not like the session.

Mentor Meeting 2

The second mentor meeting was about understanding the goal-setting process (self-reflection) and making goals for quad 2. The usefulness and clarity were again rated average for similar reasons stated above. Some students seemed to appreciate having the opportunity to talk about their goals; however, the meeting timing was bad (as they were stressed about coursework), and it took too long.

Mentor Meeting 3

The third mentor meeting was the EUC game, which was created to teach students about the rules of EUC. Most students thought it was fun, but that the information they learned from the game they had forgotten afterwards.

Mentor Meeting 4

The fourth mentor meeting was about study plans. This session received the highest average for clarity and usefulness. Students also said they felt comfortable asking their mentor questions during the meeting and enjoyed the session. In some cases, students mentioned that they thought their mentor could not answer all of their questions. However, they were still able to re-direct them to the appropriate channels. One student also mentioned that it would have been better to do this individually. All-in-all, discussing their study plans with their mentors was very helpful for the students.

Study plans

Since this is the first year that mentors guide students with their study plans, a section of the survey was dedicated to evaluating the information provided beforehand.

In the survey, students were asked how valuable the materials were and which they found most helpful. The course catalogue and curriculum overview received the most responses for usefulness. Students were also asked about other resources they might have used to make their study plans. These included asking second and third years or approaching their mentor (outside of the meeting) and/or their student counsellor.

A few students mentioned that it was disappointing that they could not take the major and minor combination they originally planned. One student said they were told before enrolling at EUC that they could take any major and minor they wanted. However, when planning their majors, it became evident that this was not the case. It was also noted that there was so much information regarding study plans coming from the PDT, OSEA and the student counsellors that students got lost and confused about exactly what they had to do.

Other suggestions included making example study plans for each Major and presenting information related to making study plans earlier in the year.

Well-being survey

The well-being survey and the usefulness of the resources were rated average. While it was nice to see the effort, students said it was ineffective to help people who might be struggling. Overall, the scores and responses to the items about the well-being survey were ambivalent.

SUGGESTIONS FOR THE PDT

The last item of the survey asked for further suggestions and/or feedback to improve the PDT. Suggestions included:

1. Opportunity for individual meetings
2. Shorter mentor meetings
3. More casual activities
4. More information about EUC rules and regulations, less about goal setting
5. Separate group for double-degree students

CONCLUSION

Despite all setbacks, the PDT team implemented all intended activities and incorporated almost all of its intended learning outcomes. Introducing mentors to EUC was very successful and received positively by most students. The quality of the mentor meetings and workshops had a good foundation but had room for improvement to cater to the student's needs and the capabilities of the mentors. One of the recommendations was that the planning would enhance mentor bonding and the overall impact of the PDT by officially starting the program during the introduction week. Implementing a peer mentor (buddy) system provide students with a different type of support that help their transition to EUC and university life go smoother.

The issues highlighted in this report were surmountable with the correct planning and proper resources. The PDT team was motivated to improve the programme. Considering that after the first year of implementation, the PDT was still expanding its scope and responsibility, EUC was suggested to prioritize time and compensation for team members and improve communication with all parties to run the program effectively. During the first year of execution, we achieved the foundations for a good program, and this evaluation gave us insight into what we could do in the future.

The new team incorporated all the suggestions into the currently running programme. And the evaluation and refinement of the PDT are structural parts of our curriculum.