OPPORTUNITIES FOR SUPPORT AND DEVELOPMENT OF STUDENTS' LEARNING SKILLS

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Abstract: The article draws attention to academic learning and the role of universities (academia) to develop students' learning skills. A prototype of a model for supporting and developing students' learning skills is presented. At the methodological level, it integrates three theoretically-applied approaches: an andragogical approach, a synergistic approach, and an evidence-based approach.

The andragogical approach is applicable to the target group – the student community. The latter performs two interrelated roles: as an active participant in the development of peer-learning materials and as a user of learning resources.

The synergistic approach is applicable to the conceptualization of the model and its components, which are in such a relationship that in their realization the resulting effect is greater than the sum of the individual effects.

The evidence-based approach to planning is also applicable to building a conceptual model for supporting and developing students' learning.

The proposed model is based on the results of a research conducted in 2016 ("Skills for self-directed learning for students") as well as the results of a study of existing models for the development of learning skills in the academic environment of other universities.

At this stage the model is theoretical and integrates activities in the following areas:
-   Informing, counseling and training students to improve their academic learning.
-   Including students in various academic activities as partners.
-   Developing educational resources to help student learning.

Examples of good practices by some universities are presented.

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Keywords: learning in higher education, student learning skills.

INTRODUCTION

Student support in learning and developingself-learning skills can be achievedthrough different, parallel pathways:

- by training students in a separate course "Forming Skills for Learning at the University";

- through activities set out in the curricula of each teacher;

- through a student's own activities (students are adult learners and are responsible for their own learning, so they are expected to find by themselves "their paths"to the formation of such skills);

- through mutual learning activities in an interactive environment – students transfer experience to other students;

- by developing learning resources – by lecturers, by other experts, by students – or by using ready-made resources provided in different ways:

√ in anindependent resource center;

√ as part of an existing library fund;

√ online through self-learning platforms.

In order for this process to be organized and purposeful(pedagogically relevant), it is necessary to create and justify *a model for support and development of students' learning skills* and to undertake real actions for the implementation of its componentswhile continuously monitoring their effectiveness (results).

In this article we will present such a generalized model. At the methodological level, it integrates three theoretically-applied approaches: *an andragogical approach, a synergistic approach, and an evidence-based approach.*

The andragogical approach is applicable to the target group – the student community. The latterperforms two interrelated roles – as an active participant in the development of peer-learning materials and as a user of learning resources.

The synergistic approach is applicable to the conceptualization of the model and its components, which are in such a relationship that in their realization the resulting effect is greater than the sum of the individual effects.

The evidence-based approach is also applicable to building a conceptual model for support and development of students' learning.

The proposed model is based on the results from a research conducted in 2016 ("Self-learning Skills of Students") as well as the results from a study of existing models for development of learning skills in the academic environment of other universities.

The model includes three main areas and related activities:

A. Informing, counseling and training students to improve their academic learning.

B. Involving students in various academic activities as partners.

C. Developing learning resources to support learning.

1. INFORMING, COUNSELING AND TRAINING STUDENTS TO SUPPORT AND DEVELOP ACADEMIC LEARNING

Obtaining targeted information, advice and guidelines for successfully completing educationaltasks, as well as planning trainings for the formation ofstudents' learning skills, have a key role in students' development as learners and influence their motivation from the start of their training until graduation. Therefore, it is important to plan and offer opportunities in the academia for:

- adapting students to the university environment and understanding their role as learners in an academic context;

- motivating and supporting students in the learning process when they encounter real difficulties in completing specific educationaltasks;

- motivating and supporting students in their personal and professional development, in the choices they make and are expected to make after completing their university studies and in their career planning;

- interaction and partnership with lecturers and administrative staff outside their particular work in specific academicdisciplines;

- supporting their self-learning by developing and providing access to learning resources.

In many universities, activities for supporting students' learning are offered by *units (centers) for support and development of teaching and learning in an academic context*, i.e.,students' learning is not seen as a detached, autonomous area in which different activities have to be developed and offered, but as a significant element of the processualrelationship ofteaching and learning.

First of all, the teacher is the professional who forms and develops through training students' learning skills. However,the teacher can be supported in this important activity by experts in the field of teaching in an academic environment. Therefore, these units offer activities and resources for the teachers to support their work with students as well as activities and resources for the students themselves. For example:

- short-term training on specific topics – forming skills for critical analysis, writing skills, improving presentation skills, etc.;

- short-term learning modules for students who have suspended their studies or wish to complete their studies sooner;

- peer-assisted learning activities – from students to students;

- materials in support of teaching and learning(work plans, exercises, leaflets, etc.),which teachers can adapt for the purposes of their academic discipline, etc.

The areas in whichtraining for students is offered can include:

- learning at the university;

- learning in a library;

- technologies that improve learning;

- development of research skills;

- leadership and management;

- career, personal and professional development

- informationtechnologies;

- equality and diversity;

- language courses, etc.

In particular, in the area of learning skills, the following educationalthemes can be included:

- Avoiding plagiarism, citation skills and skills for preparing bibliographical references;

- Working with bibliographic software;

- Academic writing;

- Skills for reviewingand exam-taking;
- Essay planning and structuring;
- Presentation skills;
- Skills for working with different software programs;
- Writinga dissertation;
- Critical analysis and case solving, etc.

Instruction should be short-term. Itcan be carried out in the form of seminars[31], workshops[32],studios[33],or trainings[34]with a focuson the formation of real practical skills, or through public lectures by specialists / experts in the corresponding field,providing students,accordingly, with current and important information. In some universities such activities are offered in cooperation with other units in the university – libraries, career centers or personal development planning centers[35], competence assessment centers, mathematics help centers (statistical assistance)[36], etc. By including students in a particulartraining, they are given additional access to manuals and online resources in the corresponding field.

A factor of significance for successful academic learning is students'adaptation to the university environment and understanding their role as learners. This could be achieved through the development and implementation of *a propaedeutic program[37],* which may include:

√ purposeful short-term instruction (course, seminar, training) to form learning skills;

√ activities for acquainting students with the university as an institution (inter-university centers, medical units, libraries, sports and rehabilitation halls and/or open areas, museum expositions, university radio and/or television, etc.);

√ ice-breaking activities for students beginning their studies but also for those who already have learning experience (from the higher courses);

√ activities for introducing the teaching and the administrative staff in the respective faculty;

√ socio-psychological training to form a model for personal development and behavioral change, to formsocial skills and motivation for learning;

√ activities for getting acquainted with and/or elaboratingrules and ethical norms for behavior in theacademia, etc.

Besides training, *student counseling* can also be offered in a university environment. Depending on the specific question/problem a student encounters, there are opportunities provided for consulting with various specialists – a learning adviser, an IT specialist, a librarian, an expert-statistician, an expert-linguist, etc.

Here is an example of the functions of a learning advisor – an expert who provides consultationson learning skills:

"This individual consultation provides advice for learning according to the individual learner's specific goals and their preferred ways of learning. The consultation is focused not on the content of a specific discipline, but on generalized learning techniques and strategies. Students are given guidelines how to develop skills to be successful and independent"(after: Study Skills Consultation). In order to be consulted, the student should make an appointmentwith the relevant expert-consultant.

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[31]Seminar–a form of instructionwhichincludes practicalactivitiesfor group work under the guidance of a teacher.

[32]Workshop– an educational seminar or a series of meetings for interaction and sharing information among a small number of participants (after: Dictionary of English Language, 2000).

[33]Studio– a form of instructionthrough which skills for self-expression are developed in different ways, through "the use of different languages" (after: Gandini, L. et all, 2005).

[34]Training(from *train* – instruct, practice, coach, exercise) – a form, a method or a technologicalsystem for active / interactive instructionfor acquiring knowledge and developing skills, habits, social attitudes, competences for interpersonal and professional behavior whilecommunicating(after: Bozhilova, V., 2017).

[35]Personal Development Planning Centers –offer activities to help rationalizingpersonal progress and achievements, and identifyingthe areas students want to develop or improve.

[36] Mathematics Help Centre – provides mathematical and statistical support and advice to students of all specialties in case of a specific problem, questions and request for help byastudent (for an example, see: Mathematics Help Centre).

[37]*Propaedeutics* – from Greek: to teachin advance, to prepare.*Propaedeutic program* – preliminary, introductory program.

An important role in the activities related to informing and counseling students is played by their colleagues with morelearning experience. The interaction between them can be realized through their joint participation in courses, seminars, workshops as well as in activities organized by students for students. Effective practices in this regard are some ongoing university mentoring programs[38]or peer assisted learning programs[39]in which students from more advanced courses (students-leaders) support, guide and consult their colleagues (fellow-students) how to develop specific knowledge and skills for personal, academic and professional growth and development. This is achieved by organizing and holding meetings – discussions regardingvarious issues such as: successful passing from one course to another, opportunities to improve learning, etc. The existence of such programs, on the one hand, facilitatesthe building of connections between students fromdifferent courses as well as between the students and the administrative staff, and on the other hand –it enables the students to express themselves, to improve their own learning skills in a particular subject and also develops important skills for their future professional development such as: communication and leadership, support, project management, etc.

A similar practice is the Student learningdevelopment associate[40] – a program which integrates students' learning experience and provides opportunities for a partnership with other students and the teaching or the administrative staff in order to improve the learning environment. Such a program may include the following activities:

- co-delivering content;
- appraising different learning tools;
- participating in providing assessment and feedback;
- consulting other students;
- planning activities;
- preparing resources;
- evaluating innovations, etc (after: Student Learning Development Associate at the University of Leicester).

2. INCLUDING STUDENTS AS PARTNERS IN VARIOUS ACADEMIC ACTIVITIES

Learning is enriching and brings more satisfaction to students when they and the faculty (teaching and administration staff) interact and cooperate. The UK Higher EducationAcademy (HEA)[41]defines this partnership as an interaction in which everyone is involved and actively contributes to the process of learning and working together. And it can be accomplished in different ways. Here are some examples:

- consulting with other students for determining the educational needs;
- planning of joint activities;
- developingeducationalresources;
- reviewing and re-planning of assessment and feedback;
- discussions on topics of common interest;
- participation in projects – students are active partners of teachers in research projects as part of the scientific team of the project;
- organizing various scientific events – conferences, seminars, public lectures, etc.
- joint participation in informal education activities – theater productions, concerts, sports events, exhibitions, etc.

Students' participation in such activities develops key competences and skills for teamwork, communication (in many cases in different languages –i.e., intercultural communication), organizational skills, etc. The impact on motivation and learning skills is also strong.

An example of a good practice for cooperation between students and administration can be found at the Faculty of Chemistry and Pharmacy (FCP) of the Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski", where a student in a higher

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[38]For an example, see: Mentoring at the Centre for Professional and Carrier Development and a Scientific-Research Laboratory on Experimental and Professional Pedagogy "Prof. PetarNoikov" at the Faculty of Educationof SU"St. Kliment Ohridski"

[39]Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) – for an example, see: http://www2.le.ac.uk/offices/ld/get-involved/pal-1.

[40]For more detailed information, see: Student Learning Development Associate at the University of Leicester.

[41] The Higher EducationAcademy is an organization working for improvement of the quality of teaching in higher education institutions. It develops professional standards for the lecturers in these institutions as well as research-based teaching methods – for more details, see: www.heacademy.ac.uk.

course schedules the courses in theacademic disciplines for the semesters – i.e., the academic timetable[42]. Traditionally, in most faculties, this is done by an administrative person.

Another example is presented by the Faculty of Education, where the teams for the development of research projects and projects for organizing scientific forumshave to include teachers and undergraduate or PhD students[43].

3. DEVELOPING EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES TO SUPPORT LEARNING.

Providing material resources is of great importance both for learning in the educational process and for building skills which help self-learning. For students as adult learners, different academic resources can be developed:

√ *printed materials,* including:
- information materials – books, textbooks, manuals, worksheets, etc.
- guidelines, instructions for the implementation of educational activities – handbooks, etc.;

√ *electronic materials* – electronic textbooks, multimedia presentations, information materials or materials for individualwork on optical discs (CD, DVD), audio and video recordings, etc.

√ *web-based resources* – websites with educational content, web-based programs for developing educational assignments, interactive exercises and methodical materials, links to external resources, and other web-based tools which facilitate learning.

There is a good practice in some universities to create an online platform with educational resources for students' self-learning, which also serves as an environment for communication between teachers / consultants and students and among students themselves. The most frequently used educational resources are in the following areas:
- academic writing;
- data processing;
- presentations;
- working with information technologies;
- searching for information;
- citing and avoiding plagiarism;
- developing a dissertation, etc[44].

Many of the resources on these platforms are developed by faculty members from different faculties for the purposes of training in a particular discipline.

4. BRIEF CONCLUSION

Modelling a dynamic process such as the formation, development and support of students' learning, is a challenging and complex task. It implies the commitment of both the students (as direct users of the educational services and activities offered), the academic staff at the university and the entire university community. Moreover, this is a process which combines training, social and educational, and consulting activities. It has propaedeutic, but also corrective functions. Therefore, the systematic approach to analyzing and modelling such processes is not only important but necessary as well. With the Model for support and development of students'learningskills proposed in this article, we have tried to "open the door" to understanding and developing such models in the academic circles in Bulgaria.

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[42]The information has beenobtained from an inspector of the Bachelor's Programs at the FCP during an internal audit of the University Centre for Quality Management in which the author of this article has participated
[43]at least one undergraduate or PhD student
[44]For an example, see: Student Learning Development at University of Leicester. Find a Resource Page

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