THE ROLE OF INTEGRATED WEB-BASED STUDENT SUPPORT SYSTEMS IN REFINING STUDENT EXPERIENCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS OF AZERBAIJAN

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Summary: As in the case of a communication channel wherein an encoder and a decoder exchange information, in the educational institutions the quality of education provided depends not only on the message (training) itself, but also on the supporting environment. Web-based student support systems of the higher education institutions of Azerbaijan requires to be adjusted according to the needs of students and should be responsive to the requirements dictated by digital technologies. With this in mind, several proposals have been presented in this research paper and consequent prospective benefits of implementing the integrated web-based student support system have been indicated.

Students` perception of quality in higher education is evolving far before they start taking classes and experiencing fully-fledged studentship within the precincts of universities. The premises opting of their significant decision of selecting a HEI to apply for may vary from diversity of studying programmes and financial opportunities to physical space the prospective students intend to study at. In pursuit of recruiting more students, universities subtly compete in advertising their tailor-made benefits. In the meantime, the more conscious applicants seek for extensive information and contact the universities` call centers, email to official representatives, and attend open houses at universities, thus, they take the first steps in discovering student support services in its initial stage, the stage of transition from high school to university. Over time the role of a student support system manifests itself in promoting students` satisfaction.

The student support system is composed of services, which intends to "help students to overcome barriers to learning which result from the loneliness of the student working on his own" (Prasanth J. K., 2000, 15). The variety of support services, students can benefit from, includes and not limited with academic support, career and internship counselling, skills development, IT support, etc. All these elements, to a greater or lesser extent, exist in HEIs of Azerbaijan and put their bricks in personalizing students` experience and building a supportive learning culture. However, their functions may remain unclear for new students and even the availability is shaded as they are dispersed among many departments and staff representatives throughout the campus. The goal of supporting an effective learning environment can be achieved by facilitating the access to these facilities through the comprehensive web-based student support system.

The desktop research of four foreign universities and eleven Azerbaijani beneficiaries cooperating in the scope of the Erasmus + CBHE project "Establishment and Development of Quality Assurance Centers in Azerbaijani Universities" has been conducted to compare the student support systems of European and local HEIs. The comparative study based on the online student support systems of Middlesex University (the UK), University of Alicante (Spain), KTH Royal Institute of Technology (Sweden), SMK University of Applied Social Sciences (Lithuania) shows that 3 out of 4 universities have advanced web-based systems serving to help and advice students.

Table 1. Student support services

Phase	Context	Work division
▪ Pre-admission ▪ Follow-up ▪ Post-university integration	▪ Academic related support ▪ Career support ▪ Extra-curricular support ▪ Health and wellbeing support ▪ Orientation support ▪ Psychological support	▪ Administrative office ▪ Career center ▪ Faculty (tutors) ▪ Medical division ▪ Student unions

Source: Own compilation

The research demonstrates that support on academic performance, wellbeing counseling (psychological and psychopedagogical counselling), accommodation, and financial issues are available in all online platforms of the mentioned European HEIs. In addition, some student support platforms provide support for the development of English language skills, on social mediation, care leavers, as well as information on equal treatment, gender and diversity. It ensures the inclusion of a diverse student population (such as mature, part-time, employed and international students as well as students with disabilities), which is reflected as one of the major points in Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG). According to the phase, context and work division the author suggests the following categorization of student support services into three groups:

On different phases almost all the listed support activities, depending on their context, are provided by HEIs of Azerbaijan. However, the particular importance to take the student affairs on a new level arises as a response to the shift of student support from traditional to online model. For instance, the Middlesex University and the University of Alicante have an Advisor Chat button on their webpages. In addition, the official ChatBot of the University of Alicante "AITANA: Virtual assistant" serves to resolve doubts related to the registration process.

For the implementation of a convenient student support system in HEIs of Azerbaijan the guidelines are proposed based on the four-stage PDAC (Plan-Do-Act-Check) model (Table 2). "One stop-shop" web-designed system will be definitely complemented by numerous advantages, however, in many cases, the faculty remains an important gatekeeper navigating students access to the desired support services (Oermann M. H., 2007, p.14), which requires training for staff. Crafting an integrated system will enable quicker access to support resources from anywhere, which is mainly essential for tech-savvy Gen Z. The web-based student support platform will serve as a tool to meet the essential needs of underrepresented groups as indicated in Bucharest Communiqué (2012) it will continue to develop "the social dimension of higher education, reduce inequalities and provide adequate student support services, counselling and guidance, flexible learning paths and alternative access routes, including recognition of prior learning".

Table 2. PDAC model

Plan:	Do:
- Observe the current condition of student support services provided at your institution; - Make a proper analysis of the students needs based on the survey aimed at answering the core question "What support services do they want to access online?": - Examine national legislation and practices relating to provision of support to underrepresented groups; - Identify the resources (both online and onsite); - Set clear objectives and identify processes to deliver the desired results.	- Ensure the involvement of all institutional units (departments, divisions, units) in the formulation of the model for the web-designed student support system; - Keep it user-friendly; - Provide an online handbook with clear and concise information on how the student support is provided; - Consider on site activities to be provided by the system (language courses, workshops, medical support, etc.); - Consider support for international students. "International Student Support in European Higher Education" (2010) may serve as a guideline to achieve this goal.
Check: - Designate a focal point responsible for coordinating the work of the system. - Ensure access to the web-system to all students, including prospective ones and alumni; - Evaluate the data collected. If necessary, conduct surveys to get students` feedback.	**Act:** - Identify opportunities and take measures for continual improvement of the platform.

Source: Own compilation

Conclusion. Implementation of integrated web-based student support system in HEIs of Azerbaijan is a long-term undertaking, which requires proper analyses. The experiences of the EU universities can serve as a role model for the development of the system. However, it will also require to take into account the local perception of the support services. The policy for the integration of the system can be a product of joint effort of several HEIs based on the guidelines indicated in this paper.

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