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DEAN'S DIGEST

“Extensive research demonstrates that happiness is not only a pleasant emotional and cognitive experience but is also predictive of and causally related to positive outcomes in relationships, career, and physical health. Thus, happiness aids success in important life domains, which likely feeds back into one’s happiness in a virtuous recursive cycle.”

Kristin Layous

A HAPPIER STUDENT LIFE FOR BETTER LEARNING— faculty members are central actors

In November 2022, a delegation of higher education and student organisation representatives visited elite universities in Boston and San Francisco: MIT, Harvard University, Harvard College, OLIN College, University of Massachusetts, North-eastern University, Stanford, and Berkeley. The provost of Copenhagen University, Kristian Cedervall Lauta and I represented Danish universities. The various insights from knowledge experts on student wellbeing and how it underpins learning seem relevant for our joint effort for a thriving learning environment at ITU.

A growing body of research suggests that students not only get intellectually challenged throughout the study journey; they are also increasingly mentally and emotionally challenged. Despite strong resources and a range of clinical services at the universities we visited, they all experienced an increasing and unfulfillable demand. This may not be caused by higher education itself, but the daily stressors associated with university life are significant contributing factors. The Dean of Harvard College, Rakesh Khurana, identified the influence of digital technologies as well as big moral disappointment and distrust in the older generation and institutions as key triggers. So, they are searching for other preventive actions than treating recurrent symptoms. First step is to acknowledge the reality and challenges of youth and to help students gain academic success rather than treatment.

Faculty is vital to a thriving study environment

Faculty members are the biggest influencers of a thriving study environment as promoting academic performance and wellbeing are complementary. They spend much time with the students and partly set the stage for their learning, how ambitious and hard-working the students should be and how to engage with the teachers, the contents, and fellow students. According to the experts we talked to

relationships predict the outcome; not grades so reducing the fear of being exposed and looking stupid and the belief that professors are dangerous and inapproachable is part of the solution weaving performance and belonging more tightly together throughout the learning journey.

Launching faculty education and coaching that support complementary solutions is useful, but it is equally important to understand the conditions under which faculty operate and how universities cause psychological and emotional distress, and how contexts afford certain ways of thinking. University structures are often restraining, and faculty must meet increasing demands of research, education, funding, and admin stuff. Basically, the shortest cut to a thriving study environment is a thriving workplace. This is the most important precondition for succeeding with preventive measures. Much is therefore gained by improving the university working culture. At ITU we could address this agenda more by addressing the challenges of increased faculty workload and accelerating demands and create more task synergies to declutter and free up their time.

Education is life transforming for better and for worse

At the universities we visited, students come to change the world – not to get an ordinary education, so focus is on their human (mental, physical, social) conditions for making a difference on creating a sense of belonging in a community and purpose. Moreover, a study period is the most vulnerable period in a young person's life and if they experience mental or physical issues there is a large risk of dropout (86% for BSc students at University of Massachusetts). Empowering students for the labour market without hampering their wellbeing, education should be understood as transformational and focus on the identity creation (who you are) rather than be seen as transactional and measure what the students can.

At Harvard University, Howard Gardner and Wendy Fischman ran Project Zero where 20 researchers interviewed 2000 students and admins, did 5 yrs of observations and spent 2.5 yrs on analyzing data. They found 1) no direct relation between self-efficacy and academic persistence, 2) a “neo-liberalist mission” of education leading to self-centered students (9:1 ‘I’ vs ‘we’) pressured to be perfect (which legitimates cheating), 3) a transactional mindset (getting good grades and a job as the primary purpose) creates stress and leads to a diminishing sense of belonging from the first year to last year, and 4) Few had a transformational mindset (focus on learning process, intellectual capital, and growth).

How people make sense of themselves and uni is hard to change. Understanding how contexts afford ways of thinking is just as important as understanding psychological processes. Students' and faculty's stories shed light on structural problems, so it makes sense to ask for their perspectives so we can proactively and intentionally create an empowered, social, and resilient community that fosters an ethic of compassion, collaboration, and community action for all at ITU. We can help to create long-lasting wellbeing by helping students focus on *who they want to be* rather than *what they want to do*. This will also prepare them for jobs that don't yet exist. Experiential learning and facilitated self-learning build contextual agility which enables making an impact. A radical idea is making citizenship count as developing employability skills, so students who engage in creating a thriving community receive work credit hours like North-eastern university. Let's keep the dialog and good work on the attractive and inclusive working and study environment in 2023.

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Links:

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