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DEAN'S DIGEST

*“Education is not
the filling of a pot
but the lightening
of a fire.”*

W.B Yeats

Sometimes we must take another route to reach our destination. This seems to be the case when it comes to online teaching and learning during a pandemic. The responsible faculty members focus on managing teaching and research tasks. But with the present situation, looking after the mental health and wellbeing of students (and ourselves) seems to be the shortest path to learning. For the past couple of weeks, student wellbeing has been the #1 priority at the Dean of Education Support. With reference to Yeat’s quote, besides extinguishing the usual fires at ITU, we must also make an extra effort to lighten the fires of our students and keep those fires burning.

New strategy for a thriving learning environment

How important is it for your teaching motivation that students are passionate learners driven from within? Now envision the barriers that may impact learning when students are grounded in a small flat, sitting alone, unstable internet and lack of moral and practical support – for almost a year! Add to the list competing priorities like spare time jobs, boy/girlfriends, distracting house tasks, procrastination, or coping with other stresses that demand resourcefulness and self-regulation. Some students do this well while some really struggle to stay engaged and focused!

These at-home student environment characteristics are more important than ever to recall. How ITU staff and faculty frame online learning experiences can have a profound impact on how students feel about them. The first newsletter briefly touched upon how student wellbeing has been affected by outside influences of Covid-19, emphasizing the positive impact of social interaction to student wellbeing. While acknowledging ITU’s challenges and present efforts, the past weeks’ incoming survey results and student accounts clearly evidence the need for a more formalized and focused action.

In order to ensure a healthy and thriving learning environment, we must join forces to develop efficient practices for doing so as it is vital to the students' learning performance as well as in their future career.

Wellbeing refers to a state of overall mental and physical health, strength, and resilience to function well personally and while staying at ITU. It forms a valid part of the ITU curriculum because it directly affects students' learning and performance, relationships with fellow students and teachers. We want students to thrive so they can proactively manage stress, negative events, and challenges and keep focus on their studies while motivating themselves. Obviously, this calls for more personal and empathetic skills in the interaction with students. Taking a mental health mentoring role may come natural to some while hard to others as this is not "business as usual". Moreover, it is challenging to build the rapport and dialog needed in an 'online only' setting. This double whammy means that empowerment of students requires a holistic approach:

Student ecosystem level: Being "Student-centered" assumes that we know who the student is and implies that we must regard study journeys as the student experiences it with ITU as well as other stakeholders relevant to their study life. A systemic understanding of our students' realities is central for contributing to a thriving learning environment.

Campus level: The social interaction at Campus with students happens in study-related activities as well as non-study related social events (Analog, canteen, during breaks, Scroll bar, etc.). This is where we fulfill our social needs and build social capital: we create and strengthen relationships with others and become part of the ITU community. Social activities online and weekly services in the labs are poor replacements, but the best alternative for now. They can give students a sense of purpose and an inspired action to go the distance.

Course/group level: Social engagement in teaching and learning is reflected in lectures, group work, lab activities, etc. This kind of interaction shapes our identity and fulfills esteem needs of recognition, respect, self-efficacy and psychological strength, which is important to thrive in a working environment. This is also where self-actualization needs are discovered and nurtured, i.e., the desire to become the most one can be. Framing teaching in student-centric rather than teacher-centric ways can fuel the fire and boost engagement and persistence in learning.

Individual level: Learning is embedded in emotional states of pain and pleasure, which is why stress management is central for academic progress. Thus, wellbeing and mental health state of the student is measured by inner feelings of the pace and pressure and study motivation. It is therefore vital for the students to understand their emotions and stresses and know how to deal with them to confidently engage and reflect and be responsible and innovative learners.

Studying in itself is not enough to keep the fire burning. The forthcoming strategy is based on quantitative and qualitative accounts of students' experienced pains and challenges. I hope that the planned actions can help students build resilience and empower themselves over time.

Stay motivated, positive, and compassionate 😊 I am looking forward to discussing these initiatives with you and presenting ITUs strategy for a thriving learning environment soon.