

SYMPOSIUM

An international perspective on stimulating excellence in higher education

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This symposium on evoking excellent achievement in higher education focuses on international comparison of research data. Research on high ability in higher education is a new field in Europe. Institutions in Finland, Germany and the Netherlands share the results of their collaboration in research. We wish to discuss empirical research findings and their implications on the institutional level, the level of teacher strategies and the level of students and programs. Presentation 1. The comparison of plans of Dutch and German universities on their aims and goals with gifted education is the central theme of the first presentation. Students are stimulated to achieve more and a higher level in different ways, leading to different learning outcomes. Presentation 2. Effective teachers' strategies to evoke excellence include three concepts; building a community, offering a certain amount of freedom and providing academic challenges. What do teachers themselves say on their strategies and which differences can be found in strategies in a regular curriculum compared to honours education? Presentation 3. Measurements on moral and cultural sensitivities of urban secondary school students favor the high ability students. Is that still the case with higher education students? We discuss the implications to further develop the instruments for cross-cultural comparisons and to further educate the high ability students' moral sensitivities to combine excellence with ethics and citizenship for the global world.

Evoking excellence with special undergraduate programmes: a German-Dutch comparison

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This presentation compares the two main gifted education programmes for undergraduate students in the Netherlands and Germany. The programmes were evaluated and will be compared in terms of the institutions involved, the educational objectives pursued, the nature of support provided to the students, and the anticipated effects (Netherlands), respectively the achieved effects (Germany). The Dutch study focuses on the Sirius Program established by the Dutch government which invited universities to submit their own plans for the promotion of student excellence. The successful applications are analysed with respect to the above mentioned criteria. The German study focuses on the ideational support means, which is a varied enrichment programme provided by several national foundations that is supported with money and guidelines by the German government. The scholarship recipients were interviewed in large online surveys (N1 = 2379 and N2 = 1614). Both programmes are endowed with public funding and thus are shaped by political objectives. Also, both programmes are conducted by non-governmental institutions: universities in the Netherlands, and basically political, religious and social foundations in Germany. Thus, the presentation provides insights in theory and practice of gifted undergraduate education in both countries. The discussion will address the impact of political objectives and organizational structures on the reality of gifted education. Strategies for educators to accumulate scientific knowledge about gifted education, about evidence-based goals and about real life limitations will be provided. The different evaluation methods will be discussed in order to find out the best practice for research.

Introduction

The aim of this presentation is the comparison of the main promotion programmes for excellent undergraduate students in the Netherlands and Germany. The programmes are compared in terms of assigned institutions, educational objectives, the nature of support provided to the students and the anticipated effects (Netherlands), respectively achieved effects (Germany). In the Netherlands, most universities now offer special programmes for talented students. The government has stimulated this process through the Sirius Program. Assessment of plans was based on the institution's own views on excellence and the anticipated achievements. This resulted in 37 applications, 19 of which were selected for funding (2008-2010). For this presentation we have analyzed these successful applications focussing on the following points: 1) the nature of the activities chosen by each university to stimulate excellence, 2) the "added value" expected for the participating students, the university and society, and 3) the anticipated effects of the excellence programmes as measured by the individual universities. In Germany, the main programmes for undergraduate gifted education are provided by

institutions which are closely related to the bigger political parties, the two main churches, the labour unions, the German economy and the state as such. These institutions receive money and some guidelines from the government in order to provide scholarships and enrichment programmes for excellent and socially committed students in the tertiary sector. The enrichment programmes, called "ideational support", vary widely and are influenced by theoretical assumptions of gifted education as well as political / ideological objectives. The effects of the ideational support were evaluated (2009-2010) in a survey including 2379 present scholarship recipients and 1614 former stipendiaries, as well as other people implicated in the programmes. The evaluation focused on effects of the ideational support, self-reported by the recipients. Psychological issues such as self-regulation, self-efficacy, good work (Gardner, Csikszentmyhalyi, Damon, 2002), social competence etc. were assessed as well as "objective" measures such as achievement (indicated by grades and duration of study) and social commitment.

Data and Methods

For the Dutch study, the 19 successful applications published by the institutions are publicly available (www.siriusprogramma.nl). The plans were analysed and categorised according to the nature of the activities, the number of credits awarded, the reasons for developing the activities, the anticipated added value, and the way in which the effects are to be measured. The German study applied a multi-method approach, consisting of large online questionnaires for present and former scholarship recipients, phone interviews with mentoring professors, group interviews with self-organized groups of scholarship recipients and questionnaires in which the implicated institutions reported their specific goals which should be realised in their education programme. Additionally, the main documents published by the institutions to present themselves were analysed and categorised. However, the focus lay on the online questionnaires, which were completed by 2379 present and 1614 former scholarship recipients. According to Kirkpatrick's (1998) evaluation model, reaction (satisfaction, quality of the programme learning (knowledge, attitude), behaviour (academic and occupational achievement, civic engagement) were assessed. The data of present and former scholarship recipients were compared with each other as well as with results from studies on gifted students (Heller & Vieck, 2000; Lubinski & Benbow, 2006) and representative samples (Fischer, 2006).

Results

Netherlands (Sirius): Historically, the Dutch research universities have more experience with special programmes for talented students (often called Honours programmes) compared to the universities of applied sciences. In the Sirius Program we detect a shift from departmental research programmes for a limited number of students, to more broadly-orientated multidisciplinary Honours programmes for a larger student population. The universities of applied sciences have developed Honours programmes specifically aimed at professional excellence and stimulating applied research within the institutions. Although the contents of the programmes and the European Credits (EC's) awarded vary greatly between the institutions, the anticipated added values and effects to be measured show similarities. The performance indicators mainly focus on short term effects such as academic performance, retention and graduation rates, student satisfaction, time required to obtain the first job and starting salary. Germany (ideational support): The questionnaires revealed showed that the scholarship recipients appreciate the received ideational support much. They report effects of the ideational support in terms of development of achievement, social commitment and personal growth. The more the students participated in the ideational support, the bigger were the reported effects. Also, the effects of the different education programmes were in accordance with the goals of the particular institution.

Theoretical and educational significance

The presentation provides insights into different theoretical assumptions about gifted education found in the implicated institutions and the different political and organizational strategies to accomplish promotion of gifted students. It is of theoretical significance to learn about the assumptions and aims of given institutions in the two countries and to prove if they meet scientific knowledge about best practice in gifted education. Also, the impact of political assumptions and institutional limitations on the reality of gifted education will be discussed. The methodological add on value of the presentations will be the discussion about a best practice in the evaluation of undergraduate gifted programmes, concluding the research of both studies. The educational significance concerns the development of strategies to get together scientific knowledge about best practice as well as theoretical assumptions and the reality of political and structural limitations and guidelines in the institutions concerned with gifted education.

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