

Why do some first-year students fail in their academic studies?

- can student support services do anything to help?

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Abstract

This study concerned first-year students failing in being successful in their academic studies and the reasons behind this. We were also presenting some suggestions, when it came to Student Support Services (SSS), to help the students succeed in their academic endeavours. We studied a group of 148 first-year students, who were unsuccessful in gaining 20 credits out of 40 requested, during their first year of academic studies at the University College of Borås (UCB). The rate of respondents from the six different schools of UCB was 72 students. The study gave an overview of both organisational and personal reasons for failure. The study was dealing with study hours, students who work extra alongside their studies and the effects this had on study results. We were also discussing whether the available student support services at UCB were known to the students, used by them or if they were in need of additional study-related support. The most striking results were the dominating numbers of young, male students under the age of 25, and the fact that most of the respondents had Swedish as their mother tongue. The most significant conclusion of our study was that Student Support Services plays an important part in helping students to succeed in their academic studies.

Introduction

In the Strategic Plan for the University College of Borås is stated that multi-culture, equality and equal opportunities according to sex, ethnicity, religion, age, social class, sexual disposition and possible functional disorder imbues the values of UCB. SSS shares these values. In order to give all our students as equal opportunities as possible our unit started in a small scale in 1998. Since then SSS has gradually grown and the number of people working there is today a total of twelve, covering the following fields:

- *Reading and Writing Disabilities*
- *Communication, Speech and Presentation Skills,*
- *Swedish as a Second Language*
- International Coordinator
- Career Counsellor
- Student Counsellor
- Social Counsellor
- Student Priest
- Student Nurse
- Mathematics Support
- IT Support

Six years ago we made a study (Holmeros Skoglund, K. & Högberg, I., 2003) concerning the need of pedagogical support among students at the University College of Borås. The results of that study indicated that many students were in need of different kinds of support. The outcomes of that study helped out in the enlargement of our unit. The three first mentioned fields in the list above are the original ones and to be able to compare the results of the first study this second one mainly focuses on these. However if there is an appropriate reason for it we are dealing with the other fields as well.

Purpose

In this, our second published study, we wanted to investigate if there were any relations between study results, need of, access to, and use of study support. We also wanted to find out about reasons to why some students failed in their academic endeavours. Comparisons between study results and age, gender, native language and distant learning were also made. We also asked whether they had studied at a university earlier, what they themselves found were the reasons for failure, if they worked extra alongside their studies and in that case how many hours a week. Interesting to know was if they

were acquainted with our support services and in that case if they had an opinion about our unit. They were also asked if they missed some kind of study related support. The final questions were about their present occupation and whereabouts.

Furthermore we wanted their opinions on future development in order to improve our present support services. As a widening measure we compared our results with nationwide studies carried out by the Board of Higher Education in Sweden, presented in the Student Mirror survey.

Results and Discussion

72 students answered the questionnaire; 41 were men, 31 women and 64% were between 18 - 25 years of age. 70% are native Swedes and 19 different languages are represented. The percentage of students in higher education with a foreign background in Sweden as a whole is 16% compared to UCB, 20%. Only 2 students with another native language than Swedish mention language as a reason for failing.

A substantial number of our respondents found the start of their academic studies very turbulent and pointed to shortcomings in the organisation, which created confusion. They also thought the differences in standards were much higher compared to the upper secondary school and students from working life found the academic studies very demanding. It is evident that many students 'cannot get the hang of it' from the very beginning of their studies and need extra support to get on. Only 9 of the 46 students, younger than 25, had studied at university level earlier and were, according to themselves, lacking in previous knowledge, and in need of study strategies.

36%, more men than women stated they were in need of support to pass but only 7% of them visited SSS for pedagogical support during the period. Perhaps it is not too brave to come to the conclusion that the great numbers of students, who actually have attended our different support units, have been more successful in their studies than our reference group. 33% have sought for support outside UCB. Even if marketing of our support services have constantly been on the agenda, we can state that we are lacking in this. The distance students were mainly under the age of 25. We had expected them to be of an older age group.

A surprisingly large percentage, 67%, of the Natural Science/Technology –preparatory-year students failed in their studies. Summer courses in mathematics as well as Mathematics Support linked to these courses are suggestions to help this group of students. Cross tabulations of gained credits and the question, *Did you work during your studies?* show that 53% answered yes to this question. 26% of those working only gained 10 out of expected 40 credits as shown in Table 1. Reluctance to raise a study loan and not being able to live on it was a reason for working. Moreover there is an ongoing debate in Sweden whether full time studies are demanding enough in some programmes. *'Can society and students afford not to use the study time better.'* says Chancellor of the Swedish universities, Sigbrit Franke (2007).

Table 1 *Number of working hours/week –a comparison with students at UCB and the Student Mirror survey (2007) in percent*

Student Mirror	UCB		Work	
% students	%	no	hour/week	
50	47	(34)*	0	answered "no"
14	4	(3)	1 – 5	
10	17	(12)	6 – 10	
7	10	(7)	11 – 15	
5	8	(6)	16 – 20	
3	0	(0)	21 – 25	
2	7	(5)	26 – 30	
9	7	(5)	more than 30	

* Numbers in brackets = number of respondents

Too large study groups, lacking in contact with teachers, unstructured courses and deficient information were reasons that contributed to their failure. They also experienced group work with too many participants as inefficient and as a waste of time. Some students were ashamed of needing support and others did not know that it existed. See Figure 1.

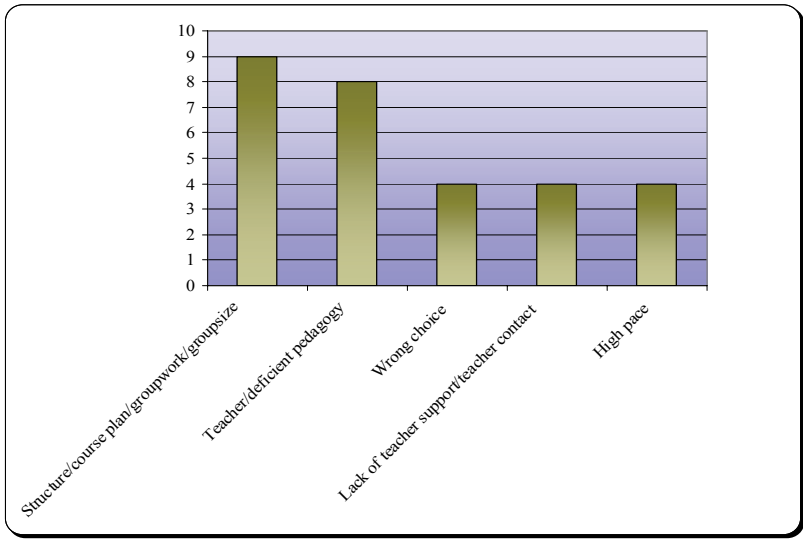


Figure 1 Reasons to why you did not take 40 credits during your first year -organisational reasons

We can state that help from the faculties in marketing our support services in a positive way is of importance. This is already in progress but perhaps not sufficiently enough everywhere. SSS is trying to create a network with representatives from all faculties with the good of all students in view. We emphasise the need of a co-ordination of the support given at the different faculties of UCB with the support given at SSS. This would give a clear view of the overall support resources as well as a great economical gain for UCB. Support in connection with the courses is more adequate to take place in each faculty.

Personal grief and difficulties in life made it hard to concentrate on studies for a great deal of our respondents. Only very few of them however consulted the Student Health Services. *No credits – no study loans*, which results in drop out. You could only wish there would be time and possibility for students to recover; as is possible in working life. See Figure 2.

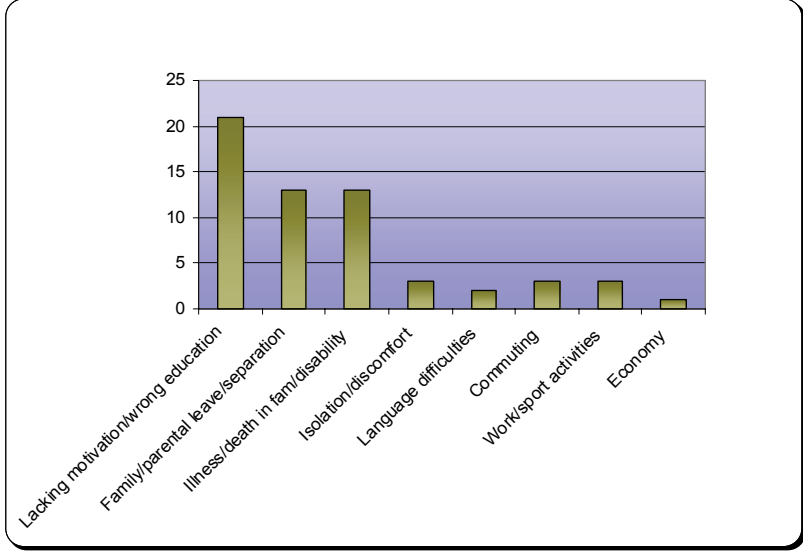


Figure 2 Reasons why you did not take 40 credits during your first year -personal reasons

Over half, 67%, of the students in our investigation studied from 27 up to 55 hours a week and still did not reach expected 40 credits. Does one study in the wrong way? Does one lack in study techniques? There is evidently a will of succeeding with the studies as seen in Table 2 below.

Table 2 Study hours/week -a comparison with students at UCB* and the Student Mirror Survey (2007) in percent

Student Mirror	UCB*	study hours/week
% students	% no students	
1	0 (0)	0
8	3 (1)	1 - 5
9	13 (8)	6 - 10
10	2 (1)	11 - 15
12	3 (2)	16 - 20
16	8 (5)	21 - 25
17	27 (17)	26 - 30
25	45 (29)	more than 30

* Calculation based on the 72 respondents in our survey. In brackets; number of students

In spite of the fact that the consultations with the SSS were very rare in our group, the different sections of the SSS can show the opposite, when it comes to all the UCB students. Our different courses, workshops, therapy groups and consultations with the Student Health Services and the Study Guidance Services are frequently visited, see Figure 3 and Table 3, and the students are, according to evaluations, mostly very satisfied.

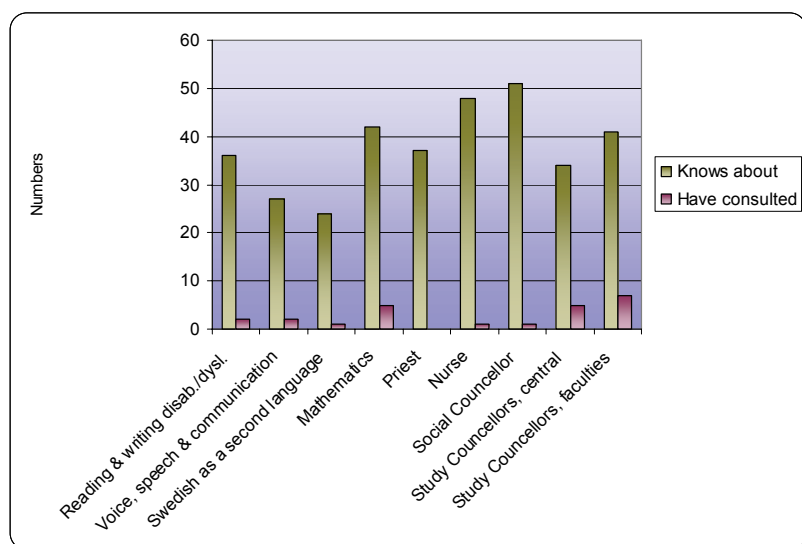


Figure 3 UCB has some supporting activities. Are you aware of them? Have you consulted them?

Table 3 Number of students and number of consultations academic year 2005- 2006; UCB overall

Support	No students	No consultations
Reading and writing disab./dyslexia	74	345
Voice, speech, communication	92	450
Swedish as a second language	ca 46	ca 190
Mathematics support	*	ca 700
Student priest	ca 75	ca 185
Student nurse	152	193
Social counsellor	139	350
Study counsellor - central	*	*
Study counsellor - faculties	*	*

* No statistics available from this period.

53% of our respondents are working or applying for work as seen in Figure 4. This is not surprising since the labour market in Sweden at the time of our study was very favourable.

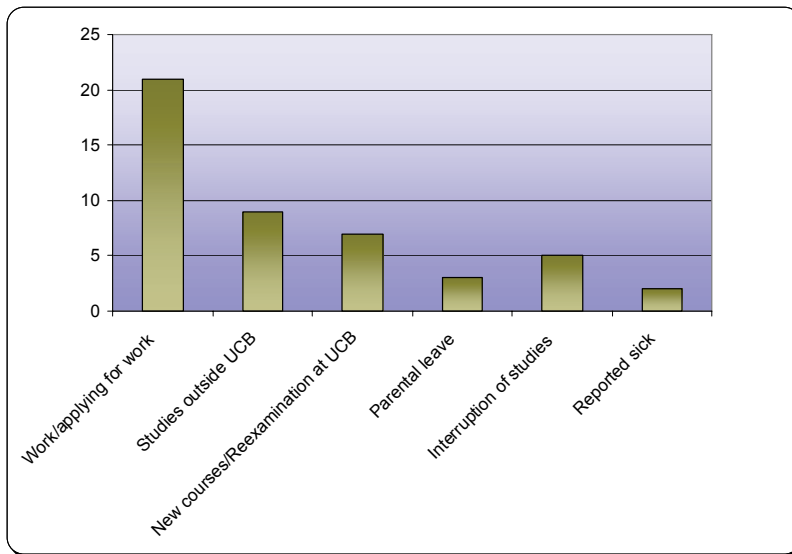


Figure 4 *Are you still studying at UCB? If not, what are you doing now?*

Many supporting activities are suggested; see Figure 5, also already existing ones, indicating difficulties in marketing from our side. Crucial to many students are smaller group sizes and better contact with teachers. They consider studying in too large groups ineffective and a waste of time. E-mail and telephone contacts cannot always replace the so important personal meetings. Most students, however, are fully aware of their own responsibility.

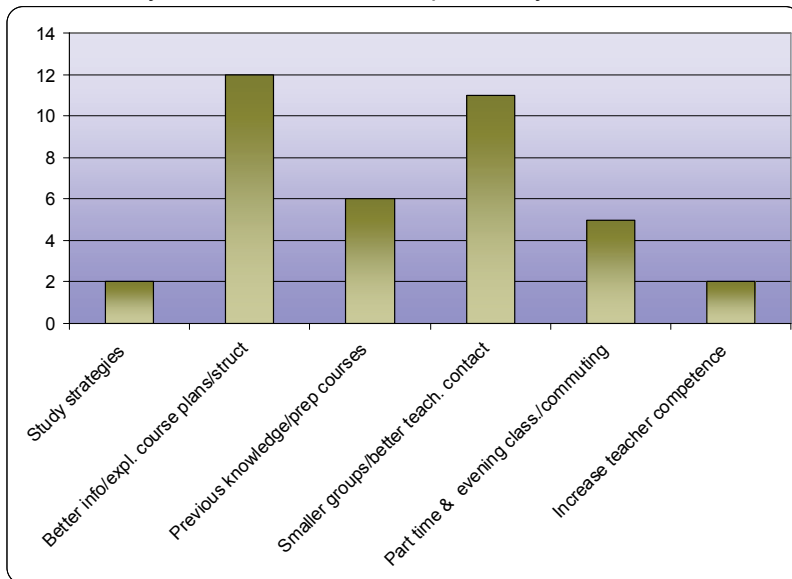


Figure 5 *What can UCB do to make your studies easier?*

Conclusion

As a conclusion we state that our title-question '*can we do anything to help?*' must be answered positively. With a well-planned First Year Experience-programme, Student Support Services and University College of Borås can support responsible students to reach their study goals. To go on networking in the spirit of First Year Experience is very inspiring for us and thus rewarding for our students.

'Successful studies are beneficial to the individual student as well as to the university.'

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Web resources

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- National Resource Center for the First year Experience and Students in Transition
<http://www.sc.edu/fye> (2007-12-12)
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