

How a strategic focus on a customer oriented approach resulted in a considerable reduction of the student drop-out rate.

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The school

At the School for Dental Assistant, Hygienists and Clinical Technicians (SKT), Denmark we have been working systematically with quality improvements since 1994. In doing this we adapted the EFQM Business Excellence Model in 1999. Therefore we have a long tradition for developing incremental quality improvements using the principles of RADAR and performing self-assessments. In 2005 SKT was awarded the prize *Recognised for Excellence*. SKT is a small unit affiliated to Aarhus University. We have about 300 students present at any given point in time and we have a staff of about 58 full time equivalents. Our employees are mainly occupied with the delivering of learning opportunities or related support activities. Working with quality is a natural and integrated part of day-to-day business for both managers and staff. The staff at SKT is known for setting high professional standards.

The context for the project

At SKT we monitor a variety of output data. Over a short period of time the student drop-out rate at one of our educations had suddenly increased to 40%. The management found this figure totally unacceptable for a number of reasons. For the society the consequence was that we could not educate graduates enough to fulfil demands from the labor market. For the school the result was an unacceptable low student to teacher ratio, too many financial expenses and at the same time too little income. Therefore, the management set a target for the drop-out rate for the next cohort of students. In order to achieve the target the management formed a special task force assigned to work for this achievement.

Project organization

The task force comprised of three employees - the student advisor, the teacher of psychology and our Quality and Communication Coordinator (the second presenter). The members of the task force organized their work according to the model SKT uses for projects. In doing so the work was divided into six different phases. Firstly, a phase in which the project was established. Together with a number of other employees the task force did a brainstorm on issues which might influence student drop-out. Following this planning of the project took place.

In the second phase the task force collected all available information on student drop-out. Simultaneously they developed a guide for interviewing students leaving the course which was implemented by the student advisor whenever someone decided to leave the course. In addition, the members of the task force researched student expectations to the school and the course in several different ways e.g. student satisfaction surveys with the use of written questionnaires and focus group interviews.

Thirdly, all information was analyzed. It became evident that no single initiative would make a big difference on its own. However a multitude of efforts would be needed.

The task force involved a large number of colleagues and managers in designing and implementing changes in many different fields (our fourth and fifth phase of our projects). After six months many new initiatives and improvements had been set into place. The task group made a status report on the achievements after two years of intense work at SKT. After yet another year the task force made a final report and was disbanded. At this time all the new procedures and the forthcoming development had already been handed over to the staff to be carried out as part of the daily routines. Reducing the student drop-out rate was during the entire period a key performance indicator. The management supported the task force with attention, working time, money and right to draw on colleagues.

New initiatives

Based on the task force analysis many initiatives were carried out in response to the demands revealed. Over the time we have increasingly involved the present students in the identification and development of our changes. The changes have initially been carried out within the following themes

- providing better information on what to expect at recruitment,
- creating the basis for realistic expectations from students and teachers to each other,
- reaction on signs of frustration amongst students,
- creating time for reflection and recreation,
- creating an open and safe learning environment,
- developing teacher competences,
- offering individual student support, and
- teaching how to handle examination nerves and exam phobia

Positive results derived from a multitude of changes in our processes and our attitudes

During two years time we were able to reduce our student drop-out rate from 40% to 17% and this has subsequently been stable over a period of time now. This drop-out rate is extremely low compared with similar educations in Denmark. This result has been achieved at a time when we have had increased students' satisfaction measurements in our surveys and the students' results at the exams with external assessment have been unchanged, too.

Initiatives that our students appreciated

The recruitment of students was intensified – more efforts were done not only to attract students for the course but also to attract students who would be dedicated to the course and the profession. One of the innovations was to use our present students in this process. By doing this we achieved several advantages. It seems that the potential students got more realistic expectations to the course and the school than before when only the teachers took part of the recruitment process. We also believe that the students involved in the recruitment of new students got more engaged with the school.

In response to student demands we have introduced initial teaching in study technique. In the students' schedule we have made time available for a variety of new activities. We have set time aside to be spent with the student advisor in order for her to intercept the mood or the need of the group or some individuals. Time is available for the students' own reflection and time is set aside for the students to meet on their own, too. The introductory module for the new students was planned, managed and delivered by the older students. Part of the learning at SKT is regular individual feedback to students from the tutors. The tutors' feedback has to be regular and clear.

Teacher oriented initiatives do not work

Based on positive experiences from another college we tried to create social activities that would gather our students and staff. Our teacher initiated picnics and walking in the nature. This did not appeal to our students. Our students did not appreciate any of the social activities initiated by the teachers. It is not because the students do not want social activities – they just want their own according to their own values and norms. They really appreciate when the teachers participate in their December party taking part of their beer drinking competition.

From “drop-out” to “taking care of “

In the past students who could not perform well or who did behave outside the teachers’ norms were left to drop-out by themselves or with a little help from the teachers. Focus on the reasons for drop-out and focus on resources wastages due to drop-out in this project has challenged and changed the former way of thinking. Now the teachers see a student’s performance below the acceptable level or a behavior outside the norm as possible indicators of a student in need of support. Identification of students who might be in need of special support has been formalized and structured. The student advisor approach potential candidate, offer support and initiate a dialogue with the student regarding the needs. About 10% of the students receive some sort of support or special treatment e.g. counseling, more time for an assignment or elaborated lessons. Thus, although the present project has changed a large number of procedures the biggest difference from before is certainly the thinking, attitude and behavior of the staff. Along the present project – and certainly influenced by reflections within the project, we have developed a more understanding and accommodating philosophy and view on human nature. The school’s approach to students and learning has become much more individualized and tailor-made than before.

Leading to a stronger customer oriented approach

The analysis done during this project revealed that reasons for student drop-out can be very different and diverse. As a consequence the task force concluded that solutions to prevent and solve drop-out should, therefore, be equally different and diverse. In many cases individual considerations and solutions have to be made. Thus, although SKT already was working with a customer oriented approach it has certainly been strengthened by this project.

Organisational agility

We believe that SKT’s ability to perform so well on retention of students is due to a number of facts. Most staff has been involved in the developmental processes and the focus has been relevant and clear for all. A possible resistance for change could be staffs’ fear to act in a new environment or conservatism. Along this project SKT’s staff development has been concentrated on developing an understanding student approach with emphasis on enlightening and curious questions as driving force for student development. Building a caring attitude towards students not performing so well or behaving outside the teachers’ norms has been an eye-opener that has also resulted in a better understanding of our students. At the same time staff have understood how student retention has an influence on the economy of SKT and why therefore a strategic focus and development of quality are needed. The task force and the teachers have received bonus for their achievements.

The organisational learning at SKT

We have learned that we can improve our achievement by focusing much more on our customers’ needs than before. Our positive results have basically been achieved by asking the students about their needs and being responsive to this. In some instances we have also involved the students in the

development processes at the school with very positive results. We believe, however, that we can develop even more positive results if we go further with the student involvement. We can not describe one universal set of actions to follow in order to achieve reductions in student drop-out rates. What we can offer is to share out approach and experience with others for inspiration.

At SKT we have learned from experience how we can see results from our efforts. We have experienced how successful improvements and innovations can be dependent on knowledge and reflections on different levels – from the concrete to the philosophical level.