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Editorial: Mentoring at European universities – New Wine into Old Wineskins?

In a tradition established by its predecessor, the ZSfHD, the ZFHE publishes a sequence of issues devoted to special topics for which guest-editors have the editorial responsibility. It is the job of the editorial board of the ZFHE to decide which topics are most appropriate and to appoint the guest-editors.

It was my suggestion about 5 years ago to devote an issue of the ZFHE to the topic of mentoring. The suggestion met with some scepticism from my colleagues on the editorial board since none of us knew with any certainty if the topic would generate sufficient interest. And even roughly 2 years ago, when the decision was made to actually publish a mentoring issue, we did not think we would receive many submissions in response to our call.

But the response was overwhelming. We received 42 manuscripts for a volume that could not contain more than 12 papers, thus forcing a painful decision-making process. At this point I want to express my gratitude to the many authors for their submissions and the many reviewers who helped the editors in the selection process. And of course, the editorial work was shared beyond writing the call and selecting appropriate reviewers: Dieter Euler, from the University of St. Gallen, was essential in streamlining the editorial decision-making process and David Taylor, from the University of Liverpool, contributed not just his expertise but helped the ZFHE to get started in the transition process to an English-language publication. And Michael Raunig, “the editorial office” of ZFHE, was always at hand to help us navigate the many procedural hurdles.

Looking at the issue at hand, I can report with a degree of personal satisfaction, that the topic of mentoring has finally arrived in continental Europe. This was certainly not the case in the years when I myself was a student—or even a young faculty member—in Vienna. I was very aware of this situation, since I myself was fortunate enough to spend most of my student days in the USA, where mentoring was at the center of the institutional mission of universities.

One of the pillars of university education in the USA is the concept of “Wanderjahre”.—Students not only have to learn new things in new ways, they also have to cope with a new environment. This approach works very well, at least at good USA universities. In a span of 4 years, “freshmen,” who start well behind their European counterparts (who usually have the benefit of an academically much more rigorous high-school education) are turned into graduates with a BA, who have now catapulted ahead of their European rivals.

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But for this to work universities have to provide more than a mere academic environment; they have to act “*in loco parentis*”. Mentoring plays a big part in such an educational concept. While the student revolt of 1968 (which happened on both sides of the Atlantic) changed many things, the overall system remained the same. The mentoring environment also carries through into graduate education and greatly benefits students pursuing their MA and PhD degrees. Needless to say, sometimes this caring environment can be too much. I fondly remember an off-campus coffee house with the telling name: “*Ex Loco Parentis*.”

Continental Europe is catching up (in GB, higher education always resembled the USA more closely; CSANYI, 1988). As stated in the call for the ZFHE mentoring issue, following implementation of the Bologna reform, students began to demand support on issues beyond their daily studies. Universities are reacting to these demands on different levels: they’re introducing mentoring and coaching programs and providing different kinds of counselling. This covers the whole range of academic disciplines and faculties.

Some universities are developing university-wide approaches across all subjects and departments. In other cases, the new programs are confined to certain fields of study—such as medicine. For example, the World Federation for Medical Education (2003) and other regional regulatory bodies (such as the GENERAL MEDICAL COUNCIL, 2009) put great emphasis on the provision of a system of mentoring medical students. Medical studies are perceived as stressful (DAHLIN, JONEBORG & RUNESON, 2005) at least in part because it means crossing a threshold (LAND, MEYER & SMITH, 2008) and entering a new community of practice (WENGER, 1998) with its own outlook and priorities. Disciplines other than medicine have also embraced similar approaches along the lines of mentoring, coaching and counselling such as the CBM project of the University of Vienna, 2008. From a bird’s eye view, one can see a whole range of different models and approaches, which in most cases require considerable investment in time and expertise, to serve the needs and achieve the expected outcomes. Correspondingly, there is a large body of research, or at least reflected experience, which needs to be considered.

In this volume of the journal we publish research-based findings and experiences from all areas of higher education. In particular, each paper addresses at least one of the following questions:

- What concepts and approaches of mentoring, coaching and counselling can be identified? How do they relate to the studies the students have to accomplish?
- From the perspective of the university, to what extent are these programs part of the culture and brand of the faculty or university?
- What are the objectives of the programs, and how are their impact and outcome evaluated?
- To what extent are the programs based on needs analyses that reflect the articulated demands of students?

- Who is providing mentoring, coaching or counselling programs? What role do student tutors play in the delivery of the programs?
- What are the major challenges in providing such programs?

This issue indeed documents interesting and worthwhile developments in many different areas. With this issue, I also bid farewell to the ZSfHD/ZFHE community, at least as regards my official role, and turn my thoughts to retirement-related issues. I do this with the knowledge that the education part of higher education is finally receiving the attention it deserves.

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