

Enhancing vitality of young students by integrated experience-based outdoor education methods.

Ilze Grinfelde, Institute of Social, Economic and Humanities Research of Vidzeme University of Applied Sciences, Latvia, ilze.grinfelde@va.lv

Agita Livina, Institute of Social, Economic and Humanities Research of Vidzeme University of Applied Sciences, Latvia, agita.livina@va.lv

Introduction

In the past decades the overall vitality of the society is decreasing despite continuous campaigns on healthy and physically active lifestyle, recommendations to change recreation patterns, development of facilities and infrastructure. The attitude towards lifestyle that includes regular physical activities among youth is very alarming. The long term consequences for society include health problems, decreased economic productivity, social and cultural input. These are strong arguments to concern about a vital society that has physical and mental energy, experience sense of enthusiasm, liveness, which is essential for sustainability (Ryan et al., 2010).

The critical period representing the most decline associated with changes in physical activity is the transition from late adolescence to early adulthood (Kwan et al., 2012). The main identified barriers for physical activity in young adolescents are intrapersonal, interpersonal, institutional barriers, community, and physical environment. Intrapersonal and institutional barriers are predominating in this age group (Gyurscik et al, 2006). The natural environment has specific added value, physical activity in nature can significantly reduce aggression, stress and violence (Ryan et al. 2010).

In the present study the particular case of Vidzeme University of Applied Sciences Tourism and Leisure studies (founded in 1996, Valmiera, Latvia) will be used to present the experience of integration of outdoor physical activities in the study program with a focus on development of skills knowledge and reduction of institutional barriers for physical activities.

Despite the fact that a good physical condition is not only a personal issue, but also a professional precondition in case of tourism, the research of Grinberga (2016) reveals that 70% of students identify their lifestyle as sedentary and inactive (11% with 0 activity), 45% of respondents said that they do some outdoor activities because of the added value of natural surroundings. The most common problems related to physical inactivity that students mentioned is back pain, decrease of physical fitness, (difficulty to move, muscle weakness etc.), also weight gain, poor immunity and sickness, pain in the neck, apathy. In their comments about the reasons for inactivity students mention lack of time due to the intensive lecture schedule which could be interpreted as an organizational barrier.

Approach used in tourism studies in Vidzeme University of Applied Sciences

Since 2012 we have been implementing more experience-based education. Experience-based education (experiential learning) is understood as facilitated continuous holistic process with high level engagement (integrated functioning of the whole person – thinking, feeling, perceiving and behaving) of participants. Learning results acquired from synergetic new experience-based transactions between the person and the environment (Colb, Colb, 2009).

Besides changes in methods in particular courses, two specific courses were created as an essential part of the program. Both consist of planning, implementation and evaluation. Students are responsible for the choice of destination (usually territories with specific nature protection status) and co-creation of the program.

To evaluate the role of courses, the students' opinion was collected from: individual written reports of Outdoor Practice in 2015 (n=25) and individual diaries filled during Integrated Regional Practice 2013 – 2015 (n=57). The qualitative content analysis was used with a focus on comments about physical condition, health, skills and knowledge, role of natural environment and personality growth. The feedback in both courses is very similar (see the results in Table nr. 1)

Table 1. Description of Courses and Students' feedback

Title	Outdoor Practice	Integrated Regional Practice
ECTS	3	6
Study year	1st year	2nd year
Aim	To develop skills for outdoor life, active tourism, stimulate personal development, develop communication, decision making, critical thinking, leadership, foster understanding of the importance of the natural resources.	To develop skills in event management, leisure and tourism management. Focusing on useful, practical input in regional tourism development.
Implementation	Not less than 3 days	10 days
Feedback	Group and individual. Written report.	Group and individual. Individual diaries.
Venue	Wild environment, different types of trails. Completely outdoors.	The base is located in remote rural municipalities. Partly outdoors.
Physical activities	Hiking, trekking (~ 20 km/day)*	Cycling (~300 km), hiking (~30 km)*
Other comments	Socially meaningful job (e.g. cleaning river).	Students during the course stay in the base and hike or cycle to explore surroundings. Specific tasks include: creating and testing tourist trails, ethnographical expeditions, development of infrastructure management of Museum Night events.

Title	Outdoor Practice	Integrated Regional Practice
Feedback		
Physical condition/health	Being tired, exhausted, some felt muscle pain, headache, were afraid about their physical condition, and some found this as opportunity to improve their physical condition. Around half found themselves stronger than they thought before. Some indicated that courses showed their physical weakness.	
Skills/knowledge	Practical outdoor skills, knowledge about biodiversity, communication, team management, decision making etc.	
Natural environment	In the majority of cases natural environment is mentioned in the context of physical activities. Specific features – landscape, weather; appreciation, surprise, novelty, sense of discovery.	
Personal growth	Empathy, initiative, ability to reach personal goals, step out of comfort zone.	
Challenges	Contacts with local society, efforts to find motivation, enthusiasm when in physical discomfort.	

* Other types of activity possible.
Source: author

Concluding comments in the reports and diaries repeatedly voice desire to continue specific physical activities, engage friends, inspiration and energy to start some research. All students have stressed the notable experience despite physical and emotional pressure. The majority stresses the high importance of practical insight in future profession and recommends to include more of experiential-based education courses in the program.

Conclusions

Data analysis reveals that students felt more challenges (physically than emotionally or from the perspective study load), benefits of the individual and the society in a wider perspective. The research shows that the role of use of experience-based education methods in study programs of a university are significant. Integration of physical activities, valuable knowledge and practical experience outdoors reflects synergetic value. For the vital society concept, of which students are a significant part, the simplest step would be reducing the institutional barriers e.g. introducing changes in study programs, encouraging academics to “go out of the auditorium”. At the same time, continuity of certain type of activities that could affect intrapersonal, interpersonal, community and physical environment barriers is more than necessary.



- Grinberga, K. (2016), Student's physical activities and outdoor recreation habits. Vidzeme University of Applied Sciences Tourism and Recreation studies example. Annual research. Vidzeme University of Applied Sciences
- Gyurcsik, N.C., Spink, K.S., Bray, S.R., Chad, K. and Kwan, M. (2006) An ecological-based examination of barriers to physical activity in students from grade seven through first-year University. *Journal of Adolescent Health* 38, pp. 704-711, DOI: 10.1026/0943-8149/a000136

- Kwan, M. Y., Cairney, J., Faulkner, G.E., Pullenayegum E.,E. (2012). Physical Activity and Other Health-Risk Behaviors During the Transition Into Early Adulthood. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 42 (1): 14, pp.14-20, DOI:10.1016/j.amepre.2011.08.026
- Kolb, A.Y., Kolb, D.A. (2008). Experiential Learning Theory: A Dynamic, Holistic Approach to. Management Learning, Education and Development. In: S. J Armstrong, C. Fukami, eds., *Handbook of Management Learning, Education and Development*. 1st ed. London: Sage Publications, pp. 42 – 68
- Ryan, R.M, Bernstein J., Gagne, M., Mistretta,, L.,Warren, B.K.,Weinstein, N. (2010). Vitalizing effects of being outdoors and in nature. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 30, pp. 159–168, DOI:10.1016/j.jenvp.2009.10.009