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Report of CHAGAL – workshop April 2005

I came to the Chagal workshop with a great enthusiasm and high expectations how Iceland could build up preparatory courses for applicants with second language who want to enter higher education.

In past years University of Iceland has enrolled several students with Icelandic as their second language but with the growing number of immigrants moving to the country it is evident that there will be an increased demand for higher education among people with Icelandic as their second language. Therefore, I was very interested in how the participants of the workshop would present their work (i.e. preparation programs, curriculum ...). And in fact I could learn about issues, concepts, and ideas which I have brought back home and have tried to implement.

An International workshop like Chagal does more than introduce and provide a program. In spite of the diversity in culture and political situation, Chagal confirms that all countries are facing similar issues in multiculturalism. Some are ahead of others with a lot of experience ready for implementation to those who are just at the doorsteps. Although Chagal has addressed diverse issues and has done a good job, there is still more to discuss and to be done.

During the Chagal workshop, I realized that financial resources have to be provided for students with second language. Without financial support any institution would not be able to provide effective education for Chagal students to give them access to / enable them to enter higher education.. The representative from the UK gave a broad overview of the necessity of financial support and I would have liked to hear more about the PBL (problem based learning) program. None of the students of another origin than Icelandic would have a fair chance to enter higher education without a basic understanding of the crucial cultural and political elements (e.g. political parties at the Icelandic Parliament) of everyday life in Iceland.

Therefore, I believe it is necessary to introduce a good project such as Chagal-preparatory courses to the Ministry of Education. I would like to see a preparatory course for immigrants with higher education where they would gain teacher education and become teachers for children and adults of diverse origin themselves.

By now, I have already introduced the Chagal program to the leading institute in teaching multiculturalism to the students of the Icelandic University of Education. The discussion will continue and the focus is on how we can build a bridge of strategies between the higher education and people with Icelandic as a second language. A Chagal preparatory course in Iceland would partly implement the diverse issues addressed by the project, as well as meet our special needs as a small nation with students living scattered in the whole country: Preparatory courses where we could learn from the students and share with them the methodology of learning and teaching in diverse cultures. This has to be developed even if it might take some time!

At the workshop, I experienced the importance of acknowledging the student's culture and environment and how a holistic approach is a necessary procedure to define and provide an adequate, supportive environment and a suitable methodology. The student centred approach is geared towards the special needs of the students to maximize their potential and to achieve relevant competences.

Through the Chagal project, several excellent ideas have appeared but they have to be adjusted to the diverse groups of learners and their culture.

I think that the student centred approach in all its dimensions might have some barriers, nevertheless I am sure that such a methodology could be beneficial for the target group.

Teachers who are not used to teach adults with a second language might have to accept a support system or teamwork and for that reason having access to an international database could be an additional asset. I consider teachers of adult students to be often "self-centred" (= opposite to "student-centred") in their work and therefore it will need some time to change that.

The work of counselors could make a great difference in building up trust and support for the students. In my opinion, counselors do play an important role in the holistic approach as well as in the student centred approach. A good counselor could be a cornerstone of the program providing the students with a contact person who leads them through higher education - mostly by offering emotional support (in terms of confidence, trustfulness, and enthusiasm).

Several Chagal projects do address the importance of support and learning technique. Each institution needs strategies for preventing dropout and the "Watch program" I introduced could be a part of that. All the Chagal projects focus on students at campus. Nevertheless, how to produce distance education for the target group of students with second language? How can Chagal address students with second language through distance education? How can Chagal support and prevent dropout within the group of distance students?

I found the 12 guidelines could be useful to formulate and define ways for the university or institution to review their old ideas or reflect on new ones. I also assume that the guidelines offer ideas for a suitable, adequate curriculum for university to build up a supporting environment for foreign students. However, I would like to have seen at the workshop some examples of how we could formulate and adjust the guidelines for different issues. I hope that a good Chagal database will be the bridge into the future

I believe that the Chagal project has began to row the international boat for students with second language. The preparatory courses, projects, ideas will be on the deck and give the boat full speed into the future. However, it is easy to slow the boat after 2 years but I do hope you and the participants will be fortunate enough to sort out the profit of Chagal and use it in the international context educating students with second language.

I thank you for offering me to participate in the Chagal project.