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Proposal

Title: International student study experience and engagement in Finnish higher education institutions

Abstract:

Although internationalisation has been on the agenda in the Finnish higher education sector for years, there are a number of recent national efforts in the form of policies, initiatives and funding to boost the internationalisation of Finnish higher education institutions. The ambition of the past two governments has been to increasingly attract international talent to Finland and support their integration into the Finnish labour market and society (see Finnish Government 2021a, MEAE 2023,

MEC 2023.) A national target has been set to triple the number of international degree students by 2030 (Finnish Government 2021b, MEC 2021).

Finnish higher education institutions have also been steadily increasing their education provision in English. The goal is to further increase the provision of international programmes in internationally attractive fields and expand the provision in fields in which experts are in high demand in the Finnish labour market. (MEC 2021.)

In the context of rising numbers of international students and degree programmes, it is essential to look into the current issues in quality assurance and enhancement of international student study experiences in Finland. Based on a mid-term analysis of the third audit cycle (2018-2024), integration of international students in the higher education community and international students' opportunities to participate in the quality enhancement activities were identified as improvement areas in several Finnish HEIs. (Huusko & al. 2022.)

1. Introduction

Internationalisation has been on the agenda in the Finnish higher education for years. There have been many national efforts in the form of policies, initiatives and funding to boost internationalisation of the Finnish higher education institutions (HEIs). The ambition of the past two governments has been to increasingly attract international talent to Finland and support their integration into the Finnish labour market and society (see Finnish Government 2021a; MEAE 2023; MEC 2023). National targets have been set to triple the number of international degree students by 2030 and that up to 75% of international graduates would find employment in the Finnish labour market. (Finnish Government 2021b; MEC 2021).

Based on a mid-term analysis of the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre's (FINEEC) third audit cycle (2018-2024), integration of international students in the higher education community and international students' opportunities to participate in quality enhancement activities were identified as improvement areas in several Finnish HEIs. (Huusko et al. 2022, p. 41.). In this paper, we study the current issues in quality assurance and enhancement of international student study experiences in Finland. The data analysed in the paper has been collected and produced in FINEEC's quality audits of Finnish higher education institutions.

We focus our analysis in the Finnish HEI context on two main questions:

- 1) What are the key strengths and improvement areas of Finnish HEIs from the international student perspective?
- 2) What opportunities are there for international students to participate in quality assurance and enhancement activities?

2. The Finnish Higher Education Context and internationalisation objectives

The higher education system in Finland consists of two sectors, research universities and universities of applied sciences (UAS). There are 14 research universities and 24 universities of applied sciences in Finland. Universities conduct scientific research and offer bachelor's, master's and doctoral programmes. The universities of applied sciences conduct applied research, development and innovation activities and offer professionally oriented bachelor's and master's programmes. In practice, all Finnish higher education institutions are public.

Finnish higher education institutions have steadily been increasing their education provision in English. The goal is to further increase the provision of international programmes in internationally attractive fields and expand the provision in fields in which experts are in high demand in the Finnish labour market. (MEC 2021.) Government policies and initiatives, such as the Talent Boost, emphasise the role of higher education institutions in attracting international talent to Finland and integrating them into the Finnish society and labour market. (See e.g., Finnish Government 2021b). The international dimension is clearer in the mission of the universities as stipulated in the legislation. Universities' mission is, among others, to "serve humanity at large" and "to ensure a high international standard" in their activities (See Universities Act 558/2009), while the regional role of the UASs is more prominent in the legislation concerning UASs (See Universities of Applied Sciences Act 932/2014).

3. Audits in Finnish Higher Education Institutions

Since the first cycle of institutional audits (2005-), the Finnish approach to external quality assurance has been based on an institutional audit covering all HEI activities and enhancement-led evaluation (Moitus et al. 2020). In Finland, the enhancement-led evaluation approach in audits is related to respect for the autonomy of higher education institutions, strong trust, and responsibility of higher education institutions for the quality of their own operations, and close interaction with higher education institutions (Pyykkö et al. 2013; Huusko & Pyykkö 2022). The aim in the three audit cycles conducted in Finland has been to support HEIs' staff, students, and stakeholders in identifying strengths, good practices, and areas for development in HEIs operations. The aim has also been to support HEIs in achieving their own objectives and thus creating conditions for continuous improvement (see FINHEEC 2010; FINEEC 2015; FINEEC 2019; Nordblad and Kivistö 2023). Finland does not have programme-level accreditation system covering all study programmes. The audits include an accreditation-like outcome (pass or fail), but do not lead to any formal sanctions, e.g., reductions in state funding or rights to offer degrees. (Kallio et al. 2021; Pekkola and Kivistö 2019a). Although the strongest sanction for failing the audit is not the loss of accreditation or the closure of programmes, the consequence is nevertheless a requirement for re-audit. Audit "gently forces" the higher education institutions, mainly with the threat of reputational damage, to take quality work seriously. (Nordblad and Kivistö 2023.)

The third cycle of audits is ongoing and ends in 2024. At the end of October 2023, 27 audits of HEIs have been conducted with the framework. One of them is a cross-border audit. (See FINEEC 2023.) Audit is evidence-based and criteria-based evaluation. The current framework consists of four evaluation areas: I HEI creates competence, II HEI promotes impact and renewal, III HEI enhances quality and well-being, and IV HEI as a learning organisation. Criteria that relate to international students and programmes are mainly covered in the HEI creates competence -evaluation area covering widely the planning, implementation, evaluation and enhancement of education. Topics related to students' study path and wellbeing, support and guidance, etc. are also included in this evaluation area. International students are not mentioned as a specific group in the criteria, but the term "students" is understood widely as covering all students. In addition, the HEI enhances quality and well-being -evaluation area includes themes of open and inclusive quality culture and engagement of students in the enhancement of HEI's activities. International programmes and international students' experiences have been more thoroughly discussed in some audits in the IV HEI as a learning organisation. The topic for this evaluation area is chosen by the audited HEI. It is an area that the HEI wants to get external feedback on for improvement, but which is not considered in the outcome of the audit (See FINEEC 2019).

The main data in the audits consist of the audited HEI's self-assessment report, other materials requested by the audit team, and the data collected during the audit visit interviews and workshops with various actors (management, staff, students, board, and stakeholders). During the site visit, audit

team hears and involves different groups of staff and students. Workshops are used in parallel with interviews to diversify the data collection and to increase the interaction between the participants of the site visit. As a rule, a student workshop is integrated into the site visit. (FINEEC 2021, p. 31.)

4. Research questions and data

In this paper, we focus our analysis in the Finnish HEI context on two main questions:

- 1) What are the key strengths and improvement areas of Finnish HEIs from the international student perspective?
- 2) What opportunities are there for international students to participate in quality assurance and enhancement activities?

The data used in the paper consisted of 27 FINEEC third cycle audit reports and student workshop data collected during the audit visit. Out of the 27 audit reports, 16 were UAS reports and 11 university reports. 5 of the UAS audits and 7 of the university audits were conducted by an international audit team in English or Swedish. The third cycle audit reports consist of the HEI's self-assessment and the audit team's assessment. Only the audit team's assessment part of the report was analysed for this paper. Audit reports are based on all the data collected in connection with the audit.

In 22 of the 27 audits, student workshops included a separate group of international students. 10 of the workshops were organised at universities and 12 at UASs. In every international student group, there were 3-6 international students. The workshop tasks for included an individual task and three group tasks. The student workshops started with an individual task. After that students were divided into small groups. The groups produced written responses to the group tasks, all views and issues that came up in the discussion were supposed to be written down in the group document. Only the written responses for the group tasks were analysed.

The data was analysed using qualitative content analysis that can be labelled as conventional content analysis (see Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). In addition, the data was quantified to get an idea of how common each of the issues reported was among international students and higher education institutions. NVivo was used to analyse the data. The workshop data and reports were analysed separately. One of the authors focused on the analysis of the reports and the other author on the analysis of the workshop data.

5. Results

The results of the analysis of the audit reports and student workshops are presented in this chapter. The results of analysis are reported if an issue or topic was mentioned in at least three HEI reports or student workshops.

Student workshops

In the student workshops, we asked international students *what is good or works well in their programme or education*. Based on the group work documents, the international students highly appreciated teaching, learning and assessment methods used at Finnish higher education institutions. In particular, the use of group work and practicing general skills (so called soft skills) worked well according to international students.

International students also praised the flexibility of studies and teachers and the possibility to make their own personal choices in their studies according to their own interests. Everyone can build a

degree that suits their interest and personal growth. International students liked the freedom of their studies including elective studies.

International students were also satisfied with the sense of community and the lack of hierarchy between staff and students, and low threshold for contact. Some students felt that they received good support and guidance for their studies. International students praised the labour market contacts. Students considered the internationalisation of higher education institutions to be at a good level and perceived the diversity of students as an asset.

Students' feedback and voices are listened to by teachers. Students also rated high internship opportunities and the use of digitalisation. Students found teachers to be competent and, especially in universities, that education was research-based. Other things mentioned were excellent learning experiences, possibilities to scholarships and student loans, recognition of prior learning, high quality of studies, opportunities to ask questions by email, open access to materials, support on arrival Finland and networking opportunities.

In the student workshops, we also asked international students, *what should be improved in their study programmes*.

International students had many ideas on what could be improved in their studies. Students liked to improve lectures, the attitude of lecturers and lecture materials. According to international students, not all teachers spoke English well enough.

International students also wanted to improve the curriculum and communication in various forms. Students would have liked more cooperation with labour market, more practical skills training and more guidance and support in their studies, especially in master's thesis phase and career-guidance. Students needed support in finding an internship or traineeship. According to international students, studies involved too much self-study. There were too few courses and networking opportunities in English. Students needed more support and help from staff during the arrival phase. Students wanted also more opportunities to learn Finnish and more interaction with Finnish students.

According to students, feedback is not always asked for or utilised. Some students had problems with study information systems or scheduling problems with several overlapping courses. The workload varied from course to course. Students were also dissatisfied with the range or level of minor or optional subjects. According to the students, the information and advertisements before the application phase did not correspond to reality. Students had difficulties in many ways when they did not speak Finnish, such as getting a job during their studies.

In the student workshops, we also asked international students about their *opportunities to participate in and influence the development of their study programme and other study-related aspects at the HEI*.

Although the question was about opportunities to participate and influence during the studies, international students responded by suggesting improvement ideas or by listing things that do not work. The opportunities for students to influence and participate vary greatly between HEIs and between degree programmes.

According to international students, they can give feedback, but often they have doubts about how this feedback is used. Students can influence through student representatives. According to the responses, students are regularly heard on various issues. Some students know who to contact, such as coordinators and teachers, if they have problems or improvement suggestions, others do not.

According to international students, some activities are only for Finnish speakers, and they would like to have more in cooperation with Finnish students. Students wanted more support for their studies and more visitors from the labour market. Lectures should also be improved. More representatives of international students should be involved in the student organisation.

Audit reports

The audit reports highlighted mainly improvement areas concerning international students and international programmes. The main strength highlighted in the reports was the good interaction with teachers, caring faculty and low threshold for contact between the students and teachers. In a few institutions, students were also pleased with the support they received for their career and integration into Finland and the labour market. Some of the good examples for supporting the integration into labour market included extensive language studies (Finnish/Swedish), different career support trainings, support for finding internships and work placements and jobs, mentorships, and building student pathways from recruitment to employment.

Based on the audit reports, the main improvement areas in relation to international degree programmes and international student study experiences at the Finnish higher education institutions are: international student integration in the higher education community, integration into the Finnish society and labour market, and quality management of international programmes.

Supporting the international students' integration into the Finnish society and labour market was an improvement area for both universities and universities of applied science. As mentioned above, international students are facing challenges in finding internships and work placements as well as jobs in Finland. Employment of international students demands close and long-term collaboration between the higher education institutions and employers, and often also with other local and regional actors. One of the key measures to support international students' employment was internships and work placements. Internships were considered as important pathways to employment. Some collaboration projects and partnership programmes with employers were mentioned as ways to systematise and increase the offer for international students. Mentorships were also mentioned as good initiatives to introduce international students to the Finnish work life, build their networks and at the same time improve the mentor organisations' readiness to recruit non-native speakers. Some audit teams called for a more systematic, built in approaches in international programmes in addition to career services. The audit reports also emphasised the important role of the higher education institutions in promoting international talent and spurring change in the labour market concerning recruitment of non-native speakers.

Another important improvement area for both higher education sectors, was the international students' integration in the higher education community. As was noted above, international students felt less included and in some cases as outsiders in their own institutions. More systematic measures were needed to facilitate the integration and inclusion of the diverse group of international students into higher education communities. Based on some reports, more attention should also be given to community building. Integration of all students and support for cross-cultural learning should be built into the international programmes and facilitated from the start.

Sometimes international students found it challenging to interact and form a community with domestic students. The disconnection between the groups was at some institutions negatively impacted by the Covid pandemic. Various social events, onboarding buddies, joint assignments and student tutors were named as some ways how contacts between international and domestic students could be enhanced. Clear programme structures were also said to enhance the feeling of a programme community.

In the UAS audit reports, the issue of not being included as a full member in the higher education community was expressed more as unequal opportunities. This was in many cases related to language. The language challenges were mentioned both in university and UAS reports but were especially highlighted in UAS audit reports. Language and communication in English was the main improvement area for the UASs. There were multiple challenges in terms of languages, as described above in the analysis of student workshops. In some cases, differences were reported to exist within institutions between different campuses and programmes. The improvement areas identified in the reports included teaching and support in English, course materials, study related opportunities in English as well as communication in general. Audit teams' recommendations also included English language courses and training for staff, staff recruitment, and support for producing course materials in English.

One of the challenges related to integration in the higher education community and language was opportunities for student engagement. The audit reports indicated that international students' opportunities to participate in the institutional level decision-making and quality work is limited. International students are not always well-informed about the HEI operations and student engagement opportunities. Audit teams recommended that quality management information should also be available in English and more accessible to international students. In general, HEIs should ensure that international students get their voices heard both at programme and at institutional levels.

As discussed above, audits highlighted some issues with the quality of international programmes in a few HEIs. HEIs in question were recommended to develop more systematic approaches to planning, evaluation and improvement of the programmes. The needs and feedback of students should also be better considered.

In addition to the above topics, improvement of alumni activities was mentioned in some UAS reports. Based on the recommendations, international students' and graduates' needs should be better considered in alumni activities. Linking international students with the alumni could improve their networks in Finland. International alumni in Finland could also be better used as internship supervisors and in introducing students to the living and work life in Finland. Some UASs were encouraged to build international alumni networks.

6. Conclusions

The analysis showed that the audit reports are not fully balanced or comparable in terms of their content. In some reports, international student experiences were dealt in more detail while in others not discussed at all. There could be various explanations for this. International students are not explicitly mentioned as a student group in the FINEEC criteria, there was not enough evidence for bringing up the issues in the report or international student experiences did not receive attention in the audit. In enhancement-led evaluation, there also tends to be a focus in the reports on what should be improved instead of what works well.

The workshop data from international students provided a more comprehensive picture of international students' views on Finnish higher education than the audit reports. This concerns both the strengths and improvement areas.

Based on the workshop data, international students were satisfied with the teaching and learning methods and the flexibility and freedom of their studies. The sense of community and low hierarchy, low threshold for contact and good interaction between students and teachers were also praised.

The main improvement areas highlighted by international students in the workshop data were lectures, lecturers, and lecture and course materials. A similar result was obtained from Finnish students in an evaluation of the state and renewal of higher education pedagogy (Toom et al. 2023). International students also wanted to develop curriculum, communication, and connections to labour market. Perhaps the most worrying finding from the student workshop data was that international students who often pay tuition fees felt that the information they received about their studies prior application did not always reflect the reality at the institution.

International students' experiences of being able to influence the development of their study programmes or higher education institutions varied widely. Some students said that they were able to give feedback and were listened to, others did not even know whom to contact if they wanted to take their ideas for improvement forward at the institution. Some students also reported that they did not have their own representative in the student union. When HEIs are increasingly attracting international students, also the international students' opportunities to participate in their institution's decision-making, governance and quality work should be ensured.

Finland and most Finnish higher education institutions have ambitious objectives and targets for internationalisation and increasing the number of international students in Finnish higher education institutions. Our analysis shows that there are no quick fixes when it comes to internationalisation of higher education. Higher education institutions need systematic, long-term and sustainable approaches to internationalisation. The approaches need to cut across the organisation and ensure the quality of international student experiences and the quality of international programmes. Higher education institutions should also pay more attention to the needs of international students.

Language is one of the main challenges, which was connected to many of the improvement areas highlighted in our analysis. It is one of the key reasons for international students feeling as outsiders in the Finnish higher education institutions and reason for the unequal treatment of international students. The issue of language is not a simple one to solve but a crucial one. Finnish higher education institutions have an important role with respect to the national languages and some HEIs have special duties related to national languages. In one audit report, this was described as requiring a 'delicate balance' between the national languages and English.

The audit reports also confirmed that the higher education institutions have a crucial role in attracting talent to Finland and in supporting their integration into the country. The audit teams encouraged institutions to take a stronger role in this and systematically embed elements supporting integration in the international programmes and services. The higher education institutions are in a great position to spur change in labour market by promoting their international students and encouraging employers to open up their recruitment and organisations for international students and graduates.

Equality is a fundamental principle which is grounded quite deep in many Finnish higher education institutions. The idea of wanting to treat international students the same as the domestic students is a praiseworthy goal. However, to achieve the goal of equality requires recognising that international students have various and different needs and therefore require specific support. In other words, they cannot be treated the same.

Internationalisation requires a cultural change and a shift in thinking at higher education institutions. Instead of trying to integrate international students into the existing higher education community and consider them as "others" coming in, institutions should strive to build their communities into something new: Inclusive and multilingual communities built on cross-cultural sharing and learning.

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