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Changing education – QA and the shift from teaching to learning

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Short bio (150 words max): Elina Holm is Executive Director of Student Union of Lapland UAS ROTKO. In her position her main areas of responsibilities are governance and financial administration. She also works as an advisor for SU board and representatives in Finnish higher education and general political system, organizational development and quality control. Elina holds a Masterôs degree in Education (M.Ed.) specialized in adult and continuing education administration. In her studies she has specialized in Finnish higher education system from the perspective of critical theory and pedagogy.

Proposal

Title: Studentsô role in quality enhancement ï a reflection of functional stupidity or an implication of ñQuality as Practiceò?

Abstract (150 words max): This paper deals with studentsô role in quality enhancement in Higher Education Institutes (HEIs). The main focus is on student feedback, where the discourse fluctuates from ñabsolutely necessaryò to ñwaste of everyoneôs timeòextremity. The consensus discourse emphasizes the importance of measuring studentsô satisfaction and perceptions of the quality of study programs. The dissensus discourse points out that feedback is rarely helpful, because formal questionnaires are designed by administrators and are therefore perceived as inappropriate for evaluating quality. The paper

concludes that student feedback can provide important perspectives for assessing quality, but more importantly, the everyday commitment and involvement to the continuous improvement through the ñQuality as Practiceò ï approach ought to be promoted. This approach challenges the rational ï and quantitative - paradigms, which still dominate the strategies for the management of quality. It also celebrates the involvement of the key stakeholders of quality in higher education: students and teachers.

Introduction

Quality management in HEIs is dominated by rational paradigms, which emphasize the measurement and management of quality (Combe and Botschen, 2004). What makes it however quite controversial to even discuss about the measurement and management of quality in HEIs is that there is no commonly accepted definition for ñqualityò in this context. Instead of dealing with a ñuniversal truth claimò about quality, we are confronted with competing definitions of quality.

For example Harvey and Green (1993) discern quality as 1) excellence, 2) value for money, 3) fitness for purpose or 4) transforming. On the other hand Harvey et al. (1992) point out that in higher education the truth claims of quality are ñstakeholder relativeò, which make it especially difficult to assess quality, because stakeholders are usually very loyal to their own perception of what quality means to them. There are also scholars who define quality as the process of quality enhancement. For example Argyris and Schön introduced already in the early 1970s a double-loop process in which the first loop is driven by the question: ñAre we doing things right?ò and the second loop by the question: ñAre we doing the right things?ò(Argyris & Schön, 1974)

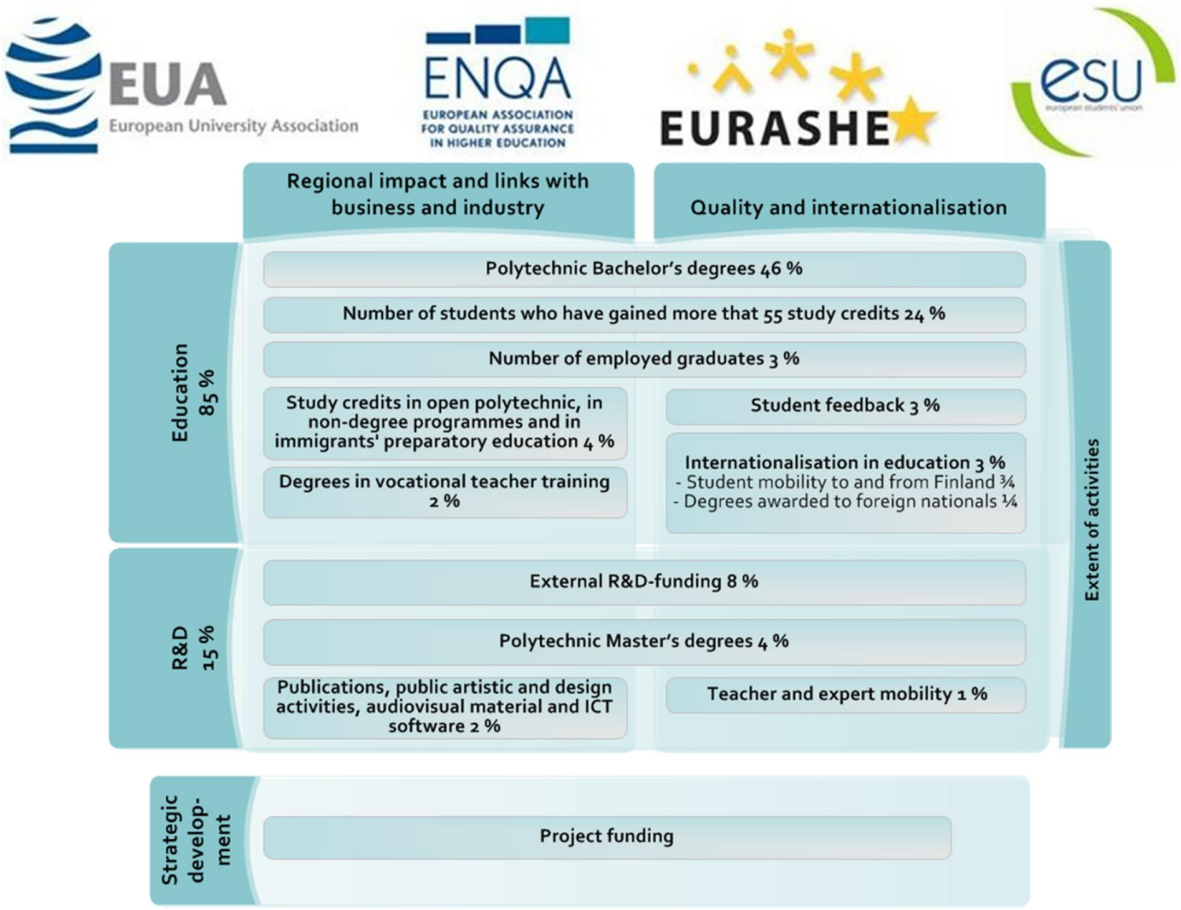
The double-loop process is closely connected with the idea of learning community, which in turn is connected with the concept of ñquality cultureò. However the rhetoric related to quality culture in higher education does not make it any easier to grasp the essence of quality enhancement in HEIs and especially the studentsô role in it. Harvey and Stensaker (2007) point out, that ñquality culture is not something than can be constructed irrespective of the context in which it is locatedò. Yet studies have revealed that quality assurance processes are often chosen without taking into consideration the present social structures in an institution. They can even ignore the existing grass-root practices of handing quality assurance and enhancement issues, if they are not documented, standardized or institutionalized (Henard & Leprince-Ringuet, 2008).

We claim the debate around studentsô role in quality enhancement is not only related to the challenge of defining quality and to the rational paradigms dominating quality enhancement in HEIs, but also to the complexity of the quality culture. This debate will not evolve further until a more practical approach for the enhancement of quality is promoted in higher education. What we are suggesting is a multi-dimensional approach, where quality is improved not only through institutionalized quality enhancement processes, but also as ôbricolageô through organic social movement and everyday re-framing. We call this approach ôQuality as Practiceô

We illustrate the studentsô role in quality enhancement and the challenging of measurement and management of quality through student feedback with two examples: the first one discusses the issue on a national level and the second one on an institutional level. We conclude with reflections related to the studentsôrole in quality enhancement and finally suggest a complimentary approach which celebrates the involvement of the key stakeholders of quality in higher education: students and teachers.

Student feedback as a part of the steering and financing model

In Finland the steering and financial model of the Universities of Applied Sciences (UAS) was renewed recently. The overall objective of the renewal was to shorten the study times and strengthen the role of research and development (R&D), but it also entails incentives which aim at promoting internationalization and the enhancement of quality in teaching and learning.



Picture 1. Steering and Financial Model of the UAS[1] sector

We will discuss briefly the role of the student feedback Opala[2] in this model. It is a nationwide system which gathers information on the employment of graduates and on the success of education. Replying to this survey is participatory for the graduates. The Ministry of Education takes advantage of the feedback in evaluating education, comparing UAS and different fields of education, and in planning education. UAS use the feedback in developing education and in comparing the results with other UAS. This indicator was debated when the preliminary version of the model was presented. Critique stated that the questions are vague, response rates vary and the analyses of the results do not steer UAS to develop bona fide their teaching and learning processes. Despite of the critique it remained in the model.

This ôqualitativeôindicator is based on a formula, which takes into account the evaluation given[3] and the amount of respondents per each question. Due to this the amount of respondents to each question is actually more important than the rating given. The results of the year 2013 (see appendices 1 and 2) reveal an interesting phenomenon: many UAS have made it compulsory for their graduates to reply to the survey. This explains thus the ôqualitativeôdifferences between UAS: they will automatically score higher points and in the comparison between the UAS sector they will gain more money based on their overall rating.

The noble idea to give voice to graduates and to include this indicator in the model serves as an illustration of an intensive ônumbers managementô which may develop and reproduce a quality culture, which celebrates performance indicators and rituals around the handling of these (Alvesson 2002). The

[1] Ministry of Education uses the term "Polytechnic" in their official translations
[2] https://opala.pkamk.fi/main.do
[3] 'I Strongly disagree' 1 point, 'I disagree' 2 points, 'I agree' 3 points, 'I strongly agree' 4 points

focus on numbers makes it also difficult to attain a higher level of cultural awareness to guide robust development actions. The debate over this indicator reveals the main weakness of it: in its worse, it can fade out the subjectivity of the development of the teaching and learning process and promote only instrumentally biased quick fixes on an institutional level, as the example mentioned above reveals. One challenge related to this issue is also the differences in the quality cultures of UAS: if an institute encourages itsôstudents to be critical and voice out their complaints, it might actually score worse than other UAS.

However the critique towards the nationwide feedback system has already fostered a reform: a new questionnaire. It was developed co-operatively with the representatives of UAS and in this development process it was taken into account that the quality of education is an intersubjective, debated and transforming, but also a sufficiently stable concept which is constructed on the basis of mutual understanding and compromises of the political insights of the goals of higher education. The new questionnaire measures the quality of UAS education from three perspectives: good practices (general), learning (subjective) and contentment to studies. Although choosing appropriate perspectives to assess quality in higher education is problematic, at least this questionnaire reveals what is appreciated in the national level. It also takes into account the outcomes-based learning and competences. (Aarnio, 2014)

Reflections of the students' role in the quality enhancement on an institutional level

Our case organization the Lapland UAS is a merger between two UAS ï Kemi-Tornio UAS and Rovaniemi UAS. It has operated since the beginning of 2014. It uses different kinds of participatory methods to promote studentsô involvement in quality improvement, such as group development discussions, feedback days and student representatives in the instituteôs working groups and internal audits. There are also two formal web-based questionnaires, an overall annual survey and a course evaluation survey. Besides these activities the UAS and the Student Union ROTKO do close co-operation in quality enhancement issues.

The web-based feedback systems were renewed in the beginning of 2014. While renewing there was a heavy debate over what should be asked and how the surveys should be conducted. After the renewed annual survey was conducted, the discussion revolved around the low response rate. A sensitive question seemed to be what kind of development actions should be taken based on the results. What was quite interesting from the standpoint of quality improvement was the tendency rather to explain the results of these surveys on a program level than to make genuine efforts to feed back to students the actions which are going to be taken. A lot of effort was also placed on generalizations and statistical measures of the results in order to make institutionalized truth claims on quality.

The institutional discussion on the technicalities of the formal questionnaires and the sensitivity towards development actions reveals rather selected interests and the functional stupidity related to improving the quality culture on the basis of student feedback. Functional stupidity is a term which Alvesson and Spicer (2012) define as ñinability and/or willingness to use cognitive and reflexive capacities in anything other than narrow and circumspect way.ò It appears as if the improvement actions cannot be taken before an institutional level consensus view is formed and a technocratic project to manage the quality of the degree programs is launched. It also reveals the dominance of instrumental values and the ñpanopticonó[4] approach related to the development of quality culture: the purpose of the feedback system is to collect measureable evidence of the institutionalized quality and after collecting the evidence ó Act, Plan, Do and Checkôif the actions taken have been effective.

[4] A term popularized by Michel Foucault. See for example Foucault, M. (1977).

This discourse characterizes also the commitment to information in higher education, which according to Alvesson and Spicer (2012) is also a good illustration of functional stupidity. There is a constant and excessive interest and focus on information: it is required, talked about and complained about. Complaints refer both to the shortage and oversupply of information, which actually reveals that organizations do not have the time and the interest to use the available information. As Alvesson and Spicer note there is actually both an over-interest in and under-use of information. This phenomenon applies to student feedback as well when issues about the ôrightô questions, response rates and tools for collecting feedback are emphasized.

ROTKO also made a case-based questionnaire about the quality of studies and feedback systems for the students of our case organization in the beginning of the year 2014. Students were given the opportunity to give their own suggestions on how they felt that teaching and learning could be developed. The response rate of this survey was also quite low, but nevertheless it provided an important channel especially for the unsatisfied students to voice their opinion of certain study program decisions done by the UAS. ROTKO adopted an agile approach in dealing with the results: they did not make generalizations based on the results, because they would have been misleading due to the low response rate. Instead of writing a report and publishing it, the problems that students brought up were discussed openly and taken straight to those who are responsible and have the resources to take actions on the matter. ROTKO had a fruitful dialogue with the students and HEI representatives and through this dialogue they were able to find quick solutions to the problems voiced out by students.

This approach acts as an example that when considering the quality of teaching and learning in higher education, one needs to resist the temptation to seek one-dimensional classifications and general explanations. Because the notion of quality is problematic, contested, multi-dimensional and inter-subjective, it requires not only examination, but also dialogicality at institutional, departmental and individual levels (Elassy 2013). Studentsô role in this approach is the role of ñpartnersò rather than the role of ñcustomersò (Hill et al, 2003). It also serves as an example that quality initiatives can spring from grass-root level and from students directly, if these initiatives are heard and dealt with care.

Do Higher Education Institutes have something to learn from students?

There is an ongoing debate on how student feedback can support the development of the quality culture in HEIs. There seems to be two extremes in this discourse. Some teachers claim that students are not competent in assessing teaching: it is teachers themselves who are the most competent ones to evaluate the quality of their own work. The other extreme is the consumerist approach: students are customers and their expectations and opinions should be taken into account as such. Both of these extremes place students into the position of object when it comes to teaching and learning. However, in higher education students are one of the key stakeholders of their own learning. Therefore their views of their experiences are essential to the quality enhancement in HEIs.

The practice of obtaining feedback from students is widespread, but not so longstanding tradition in HEIs. Richardson (2005) reviews in his paper the literature concerning the issue. The review is thorough, but it reveals the dominance of functional and instrumentally biased thinking related to quality enhancement. It introduces several researches where the main focus is on technical aspects of collecting feedback, such as formulating a single questionnaire for all students, asking the ôrightô questions, the timing of obtaining feedback and the importance of response rates. Although these technicalities play a major role in Richardsonôs review, it entails an interesting question related to the subject of the student feedback. Richardson (2005) points out that it is sensible to seek feedback at a level that is appropriate to oneôs basic goals. If the aim is to assess or improve the quality of teaching, then it should be the subject of feedback. If the aim is to assess or improve the overall quality of the study programs, then it should be the subject of feedback. Logically this means, that there is no reason to think that obtaining for example feedback on an institutional level, it would be effective in improving quality on an individual level.

The lost subject of the student feedback can very well explain the ever evolving debates around this issue. As Richardson (2005) points out, many stakeholders believe that student feedback is useful and informative, but at the same time there are representatives of these stakeholders who do not take student feedback seriously enough. The main excuses are the difficulty in interpreting the feedback, institutional reward structures, the publication of feedback and the lost sense of ownership of feedback both from the studentsô and teachersô part.

According to Giroux and McLaren (1989) pedagogy indicates how teachers and students produce meanings and how they represent their social reality and themselves. Students donôt just adopt knowledge, but take part in creating it through their studies. Hooks (1994) points out that students should always be seen as individuals and actions should be planned according to their needs. The crucial question therefore is how students place themselves in teaching-learning process: as subjects or objects? As objects they might feel powerless and unable to make a difference; as subjects they might adopt more responsible role in the learning process and voice out their opinion. What also plays a significant role is the teaching-learning process itself: if it is teacher-centred and doesnôt encourage studentsô subjectivity, it leaves no space for reflection of any kind and can lead to a situation where studentsô inability to learn is seen automatically as teachersô õfaultö.

All these aspects make it quite difficult to design such formal questionnaires, which would take into account all the complexities related to this issue. Although formal questionnaires are a functional way to collect data systematically on an institutional or program level, they are not based on a dialogue between subjects of the process. This leads to situation where one who gets to ask (and make) the questions and analyse data gets also to define what quality is. Studentsô versatile demands indicate that the profile of an average student has changed profoundly. Rather than placing students as objects reflecting their experiences through formal questionnaires, institutions should be able to listen to their students in different ways. But listening doesnôt work without dialogue and without dialogue students will never truly become a subject in the process of developing the quality of teaching and learning. Without subjectivity a student remains merely as an average object, which is in many cases just a sum divided by its components, not a reflection of grass-root reality.

Discussion

The importance of feedback is widely recognized in the organizational life; it plays a major role both in learning as well as in developing organizational practices. It also contributes to the understanding of organizational culture. Organizations have wide-spread repertoires for collecting feedback: the range of tools varies from electronic surveys to interactive self-assessment and extensive external reviews. When formal questionnaires are usually aimed at collecting evidence of the organizationôs performance from different stakeholders, management reviews and quality system audits emphasize the link between the performance of an organization and the õgoodnessö of itsô quality culture, which is characterized by norms and values supportive of excellence, profitability, a customer service orientation and commitment to the organizational goals.

The debate over how to conduct student surveys and what to ask from them seems to be never-ending and illustrates the selected interest in assessing the õgoodnessö of quality culture. If HEIs were able to adopt a wider perspective on how students can participate in the development of the quality culture and place them as subjects of this process, they would go beyond this debate. This calls for local adaptation and the case-by-case evaluation rather than a routine õblanket assessmentô of what is good and not so good in shaping local ideas and meanings on quality culture (applied from Alvesson 2002).

What makes it however difficult to understand the complexity of organizational culture, is the confusion of it with the organizationôs management ideology. From the management point of view, the attempt to

manage a culture and quality as a technocratic project appears appealing. However deeper, less conscious aspects of cultural patterns ï such as grass roots practices related to quality enhancement ï are more valuable, at least in the long run, to focus on. Alvesson (2002) points out that in the functionalist and normative thinking, culture is seen as instrumental in relation to the formal goals of an organization and to the management objectives associated with these goals, i.e. external and internal effectiveness and performance. The consequence of this thinking is that culture tends to be reduced to limited aspects which are directly related to organizational efficiency and competitive advantage.

What we are suggesting is a multi-dimensional approach, where quality culture is improved not only by *including* students in the HEI quality system and *allowing* them to undertake activities in the institutional quality enhancement by collecting feedback or attending official meetings, but as ôbricolageô through organic social movement and everyday re-framing by the key stakeholders, students and teachers. Weick (1995) discusses the concept of ôbricolageôin the book called ñOrganizational Change and Redesign ï Ideas and Insights for Improving Performanceò. When adopting a ôbricolageôapproach to organizational development the importance of fixed procedures is not relevant to convert the assortment of resources into a more meaningful organization: ñThe leaderôs function isé fixing things on the spot through a creative vision of what is available and what might be done with it.ò What is quite interesting is the notion that the act of drawing organization out of whatever is at hand is not a random exercise. According to Weick (1995) what makes for skilled ôbricolageôis intimate knowledge of resources, careful observation, trust in oneôs intuitions, listening, and confidence that any enacted structure can be self-correcting if oneôs ego is not invested too heavily on it.

In the context of higher education ôbricolageô means that that the more one goes down from the institutionalized system level to the interface level of actual teaching and learning, the more the focus goes from accountability as the main aim of quality assurance to the actual improvement of educational quality ón-siteô(Henard & Leprince-Ringuet, 2008). This approach recognises óquality as practiceô, which finds more routes to orderliness that the one through the rational quality enhancement paradigms. It also aligns with the outcomes-based learning, in which learning and meaning is constructed by the students in the course of their learning experience and in which teachersô role is to create, develop and manage learning environments by using a variety of resources, methods and technologies in order to deepen and enrich studentsôlearning. (Tam, 2014) The change from static ï and statistical ï to dynamic involvement and enhancement is however difficult, because the intellects in higher education and in quality enhancement are oriented towards the ends of actions taken (Applied from Shotter, 2008).

óQuality as Practiceôapproach simply means involving students in the course planning and development as co-constructors. This approach requires flexibility, because the means to achieve the learning outcomes are fairly open: for the similar outcomes, a variety of teaching and learning activities, methods and even modes of delivery can be deployed. As teachers work and interact with students in different kinds of learning situations, they develop a ôlocal knowledgeô, which is born by experience, rooted in practice and one that is highly contextual, recognizing the possibilities and limitations within everyday counters (Tam, 2014; Skelton, 2005) It also means adopting a reflexive dialogical practice in teaching and learning in which teachers and students as co-constructors of the learning process and develop new forms of reflexive talk both about and within practice. This means focusing on the micro-practices of teaching and learning. (Applied from Cuncliffe, 2014).

óQuality as Practiceôinvolves at least three issues: recognizing that teachers and students are ópractical authorsôin the learning process, constructing dialogical opportunities for learning, and incorporating a practical reflexivity in learning situations (Applied from Skelton 2005; Cuncliffe 2014). In this approach quality of the course is improved ón-siteô The role of the collected student feedback in this approach is merely to provide information on whether the above mentioned requirements of the óquality as practiceô approach have been applied successfully.

According to the results of the national university student feedback in Finland, good quality equals with a well-functioning communication and dialogue between the students and teachers. (Rasku-Puttonen,

2014) The current national feedback system in the UAS sector does not take into account dialogicality and reflexivity as indictors of quality, but on an institutional level the feedback system can be developed in to this direction, if such quantitative evidence of the involvement of the key stakeholders ï teachers and students ï is perceived as important for the quality enhancement purposes.

Questions for discussion:

1. Are the results of feedback surveys a lot more one dimensional than they would have potential for?
2. How to tackle the technically biased thinking on ñcollecting evidenceò of the institutionalized concept of quality?
3. How to integrate ñQuality as Practiceò ï approach to the orderliness dominated strategies of quality enhancement?

Appendix 1

Opala response rates 2013

AMK	The amount of respondents 2013	The amount of graduates 2013	Response rates 2013
Arcada UAS	406	409	99,3 %
Centria UAS	445	517	86,1 %
Diakonia UAS	414	680	60,9 %
Haaga-Helia	1 107	1 647	67,2 %
Humak	233	266	87,6 %
Häme UAS	930	1 120	83,0 %
Jyväskylä UAS	1 101	1 162	94,8 %
Kajaani UAS	347	350	99,1 %
Karelia UAS	621	695	89,4 %
Kemi-Tornio UAS	392	465	84,3 %
Kymeenlaakso UAS	650	741	87,7 %
Lahti UAS	746	980	76,1 %
Laurea UAS	1 132	1 515	74,7 %
Metropolia UAS	2 466	2 726	90,5 %
Mikkeli UAS	878	878	100,0 %
Oulu UAS	1 468	1 472	99,7 %
Rovaniemi UAS	454	610	74,4 %
Saimaa UAS	486	624	77,9 %
Satakunta UAS	1 022	1 053	97,1 %
Savonia UAS	1 252	1 273	98,4 %
Seinäjoki UAS	733	733	100,0 %
Tampere UAS	1 611	1 890	85,2 %
Turku UAS	1 542	1 822	84,6 %
Vaasa UAS	321	543	59,1 %
Novia UAS	540	576	93,8 %
Summary	**21 297**	**24 747**	**86,1 %**

Appendix 2

UAS Opala survey summary of the ratings 2013

AMK	Polytechnic has helped me developing my connections	In your place of work after graduation, you will make use of your polytechnic studies (Bachelor's degree)	The education provided by the polytechnic was competent and of a high quality	The guidance and advisory services at the polytechnic helped me to advance in my studies	The guidance you received during your practical training was sufficient	The work experience you gained during your practical training benefits you in your studies	In your place of work after graduation, you will make use of your polytechnic studies (Master's degree)	Summary of the ratings
Arcada UAS	1 190	841	1 191	1 110	1 128	1 206	82	6 748
Diakonia UAS	1 337	965	1 214	1 201	1 247	1 335	92	7 391
Haaga-Helia UAS	3 346	2 426	3 299	3 268	2 872	3 008	241	18 460
HUMAK UAS	759	461	716	713	602	675	45	3 971
Häme UAS	2 864	1 984	2 804	2 864	2 388	2 534	292	15 730
Jyväskylä UAS	3 383	2 261	3 368	3 414	3 205	3 413	279	19 323
Kajaani UAS	1 066	652	1 060	1 091	995	1 052	87	6 003
Kemi-Tornio UAS	1 150	670	1 190	1 194	1 125	1 173	74	6 576
CENTRIA UAS	1 333	886	1 317	1 357	1 219	1 296	72	7 480
Kymeenlaakso UAS	1 910	1 190	1 842	1 872	1 780	1 928	152	10 674
Lahti UAS	2 166	1 368	2 121	2 102	2 037	2 165	168	12 127
Laurea UAS	3 231	2 466	3 186	3 341	2 990	3 247	343	18 804
Metropolia UAS	7 381	5 389	7 209	6 994	6 510	6 928	618	41 029
Mikkeli UAS	2 705	1 733	2 696	2 755	2 576	2 724	253	15 442
Oulu UAS	4 483	2 748	4 493	4 498	4 361	4 642	308	25 533
Karelia UAS	1 815	1 079	1 800	1 784	1 818	1 943	86	10 325
Rovaniemi UAS	1 347	893	1 281	1 298	1 265	1 405	119	7 608
Saimaa UAS	1 484	883	1 447	1 434	1 384	1 454	124	8 210
Satakunta UAS	2 931	2 354	3 157	3 172	3 093	3 227	245	18 179
Savonia UAS	3 769	2 630	3 500	3 586	3 654	3 953	127	21 219
Seinäjoki UAS	2 216	1 478	2 296	2 304	1 940	2 059	147	12 440
Tampere UAS	4 826	3 399	4 783	4 734	4 373	4 611	427	27 153
Turku UAS	4 638	3 106	4 441	4 379	4 356	4 619	376	25 915
Vaasa UAS	929	642	916	896	888	959	27	5 257
Novia AUS	1 600	1 175	1 534	1 461	1 562	1 689	71	9 092
Summary	**63 859**	**43 679**	**62 861**	**62 822**	**59 368**	**63 245**	**4 855**	**360 689**

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