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How to Measure and Manage Perceived Quality of Higher Education by International Degree Students at Two Case Universities in Finland

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The study deals with the quality of higher education and the policy of measuring it from the point of view of the students' and educational institutions' external reputation. The results of the study will help to better manage and develop universities in the future. The study is limited to the two universities used as a case study, and to past and present students of their international master's degree programs. The sample size of the research was limited. In the student experience survey, the work did not consider factors such as the effect of number of semesters, the education success, level of students or the students' study programs in the perceived educational quality of the services. Therefore, the findings cannot be used to generalize about the educational quality of all Finnish universities.

The research's findings and suggestions should help university administrators and relevant government agencies to develop strategies to improve student experience now as Finland has taken into use tuition fees for non-EU/EEA students. Furthermore, the student experience survey introduced in this research is a valuable tool, which can be used in benchmarking universities in Finland so that the public can have information to make judgements about the perceived level of quality of the educational services of each university. Researchers suggest that all universities and universities of applied sciences should make regular use of the survey. This will ensure that Finnish universities and universities of applied sciences will have a favorable education environment, which would lead to improved global brand image.

INTRODUCTION

The study investigated the level of satisfaction of the existing international master's degree students with both academic and non-academic aspects of their education as a means of monitoring quality in the universities. Four top universities' administrators and twelve international students from two universities were interviewed. In addition, forty-three questionnaire surveys were conducted, to determine these stakeholders' viewpoints on the educational quality services provided, using items listed in the Times Higher Education Student Experience Survey, which are typical of Finnish higher education.

The student surveys and the interviews discovered that the universities were doing well in items related to student academic experience, university facilities and student welfare, but lagging behind in the items linked to social environment, student union and university connections to the industry. In addition,

genuine integration of international students and the availability of part-time jobs were regarded as factors that would attract and retain international students, but were still being missed by the existing non-Western students.

Historically, universities have always been of importance in the domain of knowledge. Today, higher education (HE) is seen as a revenue-generating sector (Pouris &Inglesi-Lotz, 2014) and the introduction of tuition fees in Finland has once again brought forth the argument about the quality of education. Some scholars believed that paying tuition might reduce the proportion of international students significantly, but it would enable universities to deliver services worth paying for and the universities would not be hostage to the government budget cycle and overall economy (Usher, 2016).

Universities' administrators believed that the introduction of fees is a means of quality assurance and might not precipitate a disastrous drop in applications, if the right strategy is used by the university to attract international students (Myklebust, 2017). More so, international tuition fee-paying students will become more serious about their responsibilities and what they want to get out of their degree. Arguably, today's universities collecting tuition fees are less concerned about how to ensure that international students receive the right learning outcomes that would make them ready for the internationally and culturally connected world (Brandenburg & de Wit, 2011).

Universities should not forget to balance the need to provide high-quality education, research and services with a view to foster local/national development on one hand and, at the same time, attract the best of foreign students and researchers/teachers in their quest to compete with the other universities in terms of efficiency, ranking and image. Every stakeholder in the HE sector agreed that there is the need to develop quality processes for the services provided by the universities against the ever-changing world. However, the main challenge in many countries, according to the World Bank (2007), is ensuring that the quality of educational programs meets local and international standards at the same time. Therefore, synergy is needed between various stakeholders and different regions of the world with a view to provide a common framework that will consistently assess the learning content and process and the method and practice of teaching.

In fact, there is no consensus on what constitutes quality, and how it can be recognized and measured (Kekäle, 2002). This is manifested when one looks at the policy documents on quality assurance of the two universities used as a case study. The documents only discussed how quality can be assured and managed but did not mention how to define, describe or identify quality criteria.

Quality is not a single concept but a profile of qualities can offer a much more informative description of institutions and courses (Green, 1994; Frazer, 1991). Schindler et al. (2015), while reviewing some literature on quality in HE, identified three main challenges in defining quality. Firstly, quality means different things to different stakeholders in higher education and their perspective should be considered when defining quality. Secondly, quality is a multidimensional concept and it is very difficult to reduce the concept to a single-sentence definition without losing its purpose. Lastly, quality is dynamic and should focus on exceeding the highest possible standard in its pursuit of excellence all the time.

In Finland, the quality of education/training is seen as a key factor related to their efficiency and excellence, as well as to the equality of individuals. There are three main components of quality assurance (QA) in Finnish higher education: national HE policy, quality assurance in each individual higher education institutions (HEIs) and national auditing (UTU, 2009). Also, quality assurance is influenced by developments in the international scene, particularly the European quality assurance principles and recommendations. By law, each university bears the main responsibility for the quality of its operation and must take part in national evaluations conducted by the national quality assurance body, the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC).

In addition, universities are required to publish the findings of the evaluations. Each university can construct a QA system that best meets its needs. Furthermore, the QA system also includes the performance agreements with the Ministry of Education and Culture (MoEC) and the performance indicators set by the Ministry. Student feedback systems are a vital part of the universities' internal QA systems. Universities also collaborate in developing the quality of their operations. In addition, there are European recommendations in terms of contents for some subjects. In fact, the universities are obliged to

ensure that the education they offer and the degrees they award are in line with international requirements, (UTU, 2009).

The two case-universities are renamed as University A and University B. University A and University B had about 12% and 13% international student populations respectively in 2016. The existing students from outside EU have come to Finland primarily because of free tuition. Other reasons are the lack of domestic capacity to meet the increasing demand for HE in their countries, political instability, proximity, affordability, quest to increase their international job prospects, access to high-quality education and potential for migration. However, the proportion of international students coming to Finland for study has started reducing from 2016 due to the announcement of tuition fee introduction, starting autumn 2017.

To achieve sustainability in the competitive international HE environment, the universities have to strive hard to satisfy their customers by providing high-quality academic and non-academic educational services. By so doing, they would be able to attract and retain international students. The success of any university can be directly linked to the impact it has on the different categories of its students and the question of quality in higher education can be addressed by looking at the demand from the students (student experience). Nadiri et al. (2009) mentioned that it is important for HEIs to understand students' expectations and perceptions of what constitutes a high-quality service with a view to attract students and serve their needs.

The methods of monitoring quality assurance in teaching/learning in Finland include interaction in teaching, students' self-evaluation and individual study plan, teachers' self and peer evaluation, student feedback and feedback discussions (UTU, 2009). Student feedback systems can be divided into three categories based on their focus: students' evaluation of teaching; students' satisfaction surveys; and students' perception of the academic quality (Richardson, 2005). In this study, the three categories overlapped and were considered using the students' interviews and student experience survey.

Garam (2003) carried out three surveys about the experience of international exchange students and trainees in Finland in 2000–2001. To the best of the authors' knowledge, there is a dearth of literature in Finland, where the opinions of the international master's degree students have been sought on the quality of service received by them outside the universities' course feedback mechanism. Thus, it was difficult to draw upon previous work to guide this study. Therefore, the research design was based on the Times Higher Education Student Experience Survey (Times Higher Education, 2016). However, there were minor modifications to suit the Finnish HE system.

In view of the introduction of tuition fees in Finland during autumn 2017, the cut in government allocation of funding to universities and the fear of decline in the number of students from their major markets (i.e. non-EU/EEA countries), it is imperative to look critically at the existing international student needs and expectations so that university administrators/policy makers can learn one thing or two on how to re-strategize policy and approach with a view to attract more students to their international degree programs in English. Against this background, the main research questions are:

1. How do students rate the different aspects of service quality at the universities in terms of importance and performance?
2. Are there correlations in terms of students' perceptions of service quality across geographical region, level of studies or gender?

The proposition of the research is that universities should continuously search for appropriate strategies to meet the expectations and needs of the students and thus gain a competitive advantage. This study did not take into consideration the comparison of the two universities used for the case study. As mentioned earlier, the study is limited to international master's degree programs and students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Almost every scholar that tried to define quality in higher education is of the view that it cannot be defined precisely (Krause, 2012; Martin & Stella, 2007; Mishra, 2007; Stensaker, 2007; Vlãsceanu, 2004) but a profile of qualities can offer a much more informative description of institutions and courses

(Frazer, 1991). Quality assurance in Finnish higher education is being developed as part of the Bologna process (BP). Finland was among the first countries in Europe that signed the Bologna declaration in 1999 (UTU, 2009). The aim of the BP is to establish a European higher education area (EHEA).

However, the standards and guidelines of quality assurance in the EHEA were adopted in May 2005. It is noteworthy that the BP, which started as a political development, now involved representatives of HEIs and students in their activities. The main responsibility of quality lies with each HEI. Quality assurance cooperation among the European countries occurs mainly through the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA). Both internal and external evaluation gives credibility to quality assurance. The University Act (2009, Section 87) states that all Finnish universities must evaluate their activities but also undergo audits every six years (UTU, 2009).

FINEEC carried out the international audit of the universities based on evaluation criteria stated in the Audit Manual, which corresponds to the European quality assurance principles and recommendations. The audit is an independent and systematic external evaluation, which assesses whether the quality system of HEIs is fit for purpose and functioning and whether they comply with the agreed criteria. The last audit was carried out in 2015 and the two universities fulfilled most of the criteria and were awarded a quality label, which is valid for 6 years.

There are several literatures on Finnish university quality assurance system (Kettunen, 2012; Parpala & Lindblom-Ylänne, 2012; Haapakorpi, 2011), apart from individual universities' publications on the quality management system. Some studies compared quality assurance between Finland and other countries (Ursin et al., 2008; Bernhard, 2011). Haarala-Muhonen et al. (2011) compared students' perceptions of their teaching–learning environments in three professional academic disciplines at the University of Helsinki. Bejan et al. (2015) discussed the core characteristics of quality assurance procedures applied in three institutions and their expected and observed effects, and how intended and non-intended undesirable effects are measured.

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted using two of the fourteen Finnish universities with a view to look at things from different perspectives and enhance the validity of the findings. The study used mainly semi-structured interviews and a student questionnaire and literary sources and limited its stakeholders to students and universities' administrators (i.e. institutional level). When mixed data are included in a case study, it assists in explaining the process and outcome of a phenomenon through complete observation, reconstruction and analysis of the cases under investigation (Tellis, 1997). Case study can be considered a robust research method particularly when a holistic, in-depth investigation is required (Zainal, 2007) and it has become relevant when issues related to education are being considered (Yazan, 2015). This study is exploratory in nature.

The data collection was done in a stepwise manner so that information discovered from one step is used as a path to the next step. Four (4) top administrators (designated as UA1 – UA4) and 12 international students, which included 4 PhD students (named US1 – US12) who had just completed their master's programs, took part in the interviews in English, while 43 international students from 12 different international master's degree programs took part in the student experience survey. The PhD students were included to have an informed opinion on some of the issues and ascertain the level of progress made by the universities on all aspects related to student experience. The interviewed students were selected based on the recommendation of some respondents and the fact that the researcher believed that they would help answer the research questions or achieve the research objectives.

In general, all the students selected for the interviews were from outside Europe. Each interview was audio-recorded and meant to last for 20–30 minutes. The interview questions of the administrators centered on educational quality and other aspects that will make learning worthwhile for the international students. The administrator's interview has a single stage and is meant to last between 30–45 minutes. The students were asked questions on both academic and non-academic aspects of their education. The result of the survey was used as a guide in drafting the student interview questions. The first set of

responses was received 9 February 2017, while the last response was received 1 March 2017. The main researcher began to analyze the results on 10April 2017.

The electronic questionnaire was sent to the students through a school authority. It is pertinent to state at this point that it will be difficult to get the total number of students that should have taken part in this survey because the researcher was not privy to the mailing list of students. However, a total of 43 responses were obtained prior to the analysis. The primary researcher believed that the response rate was low, but that did not invalidate the result in any way due to the diversity of the respondents. While reviewing surveys on a range of subjects, Porter & Whitcomb (2005, p. 138), concluded that, in most populations, a significant proportion of people never participate in a survey.

Three main research strategies were adopted in the analyses of the interviews. They are content analysis, critical discourse analysis, and deriving categories from these two analyses. Content analysis was used to identify individual and group focus and study the voluminous amount of data in a systematic way with a view to denote the meaning of the transcribed interviews. Critical discourse analysis was used to support content analysis to examine latent connotative meaning (Fairclough et al. 2004) such as the interviewees' underlying subjective views, especially when there was no transcript because the interviewees' tactically dodge or refuse to answer certain questions.

Michael Scriven's consumer-oriented approach was used to evaluate the student' questionnaires in this research. The approach stated that regardless of goals, the evaluator must identify outcomes and assess value from the perspective of consumers' needs (Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 2007). The consumers (i.e. students) are in the best position to determine the value of the university products (programs). Scriven (Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 2007) proposed a rich array of concepts and methods that are designed to move evaluation from its objectives' orientation to one that assesses needs and societal ideals. The methods of scoring, ranking, grading and apportioning were used to assess the data.

The different questionnaire items were analyzed to identify constructs in relation to the research themes. Then, the constructs were ranked to understand their significance in the research by using a scale range of 0–5 (0 = does not exist, 1 = poor, 2 = fair, 3 = good, 4 = very good, 5 = excellent). A mean score equal to or more than 3.50 was interpreted as a high or positive value, while a mean score of less than 3.50 was interpreted as a low or negative value. This was done to serve as a specific indicator of either low (negative) or high (positive) values for each question. Standard deviation was also reported in the result to show how much the members of the group differ from the mean value of the group. In fact, a high standard deviation (i.e. greater than 1) allowed the primary researcher to dig more into the data and identify any trend. These procedures were used continuously for the interpretation of the questionnaire.

Finally, as a former international student and an alumnus of one of the two universities used as case study, the primary researcher endeavored to remain objective and prevent his status or university links from affecting the interpretation of the results. In fact, as a former international student, the primary researcher was familiar with some of the challenges faced by international students and this contributed to the understanding of the context in which the interviewee is speaking. Furthermore, as an alumnus, the primary researcher was familiar with the university environment and had easy access to the students.

RESULTS AN D DISCUSSIONS

Quality in universities is now being monitored by students' opinions on all aspects of their education experiences. Hence, students from every continent except Australia and Oceania took part in the student experience survey (see Figure 1) and there was almost equal representation of both sexes in the survey (i.e. 23 females and 19 males). One student respondent did not disclose his/her gender and the same person did not fill in his/her program of study. The respondents were from 12 master's degree programs and 25 countries: 16 from Asia, 7 from Africa, 14 from Europe, including Russia, 1 is from South America and 3 are from English-speaking countries of Britain, Canada and USA. The study program of the student respondents is illustrated in Figure 2.

FIGURE 1
NATIONALITIES OF THE STUDENT RESPONDENTS
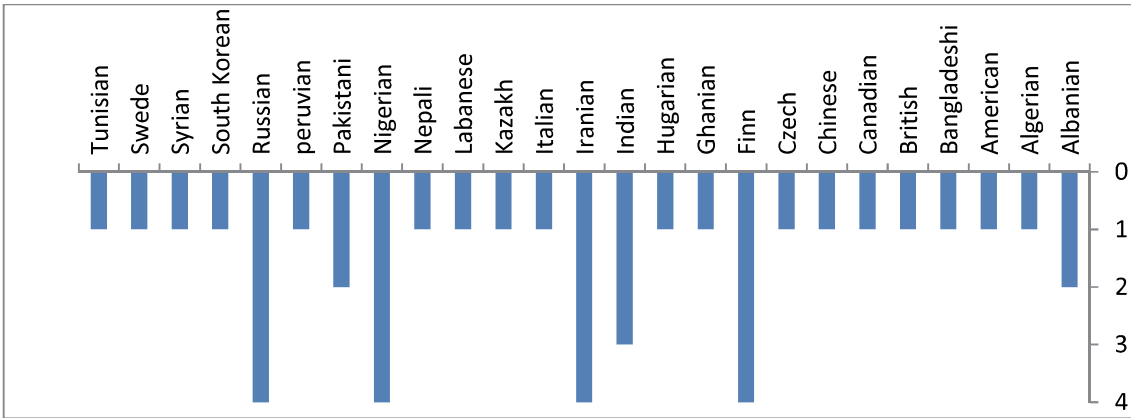
FIGURE 2
MASTER´S DEGREE PROGRAMMES OF STUDENTS THAT TOOK PART IN THE SURVEY
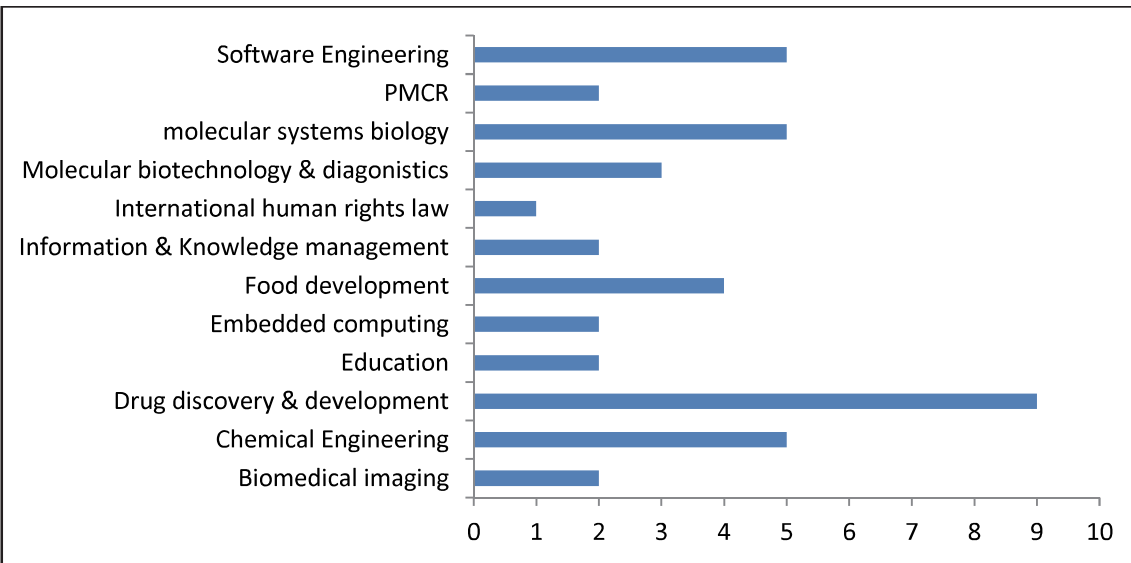
According to Figure 2, drug discovery & development has the highest number of respondents probably because it is a joint research profiling area of the two universities. Embedded computing is organized by both universities. The number of students in the first year was almost double the number of second year students. All the students, including those that had graduated during the survey, indicating that everyone was able to provide meaning and substance to the findings of the study.

Overall Responses by the Students

According to Michael Scriven's consumer-oriented evaluation approach, students as customers can be considered experienced specialists in evaluating the quality of their educational services. The information about the students' perceived academic experience, facilities which support learning and co-curriculum activities are ranked in descending order according to the mean score of the overall study population and is depicted in Table 1. The first five items in Table 1 that had a positive rating are quality of facilities, learning environment, helpful/interested staff, email service and value of university's education to

professional goals. This is consistent with earlier survey carried out by Garam (2003), where exchange students were more contented with universities facilities and support services for students.

TABLE 1
OVERALL STUDENT EXPERIENCE RANKINGS

Rank Variables	N	Mean	Stdev	min	max
1. Quality of facilities	43	4.16	0.84	1	5
2. Learning environment	43	4.09	0.87	2	5
3. Helpful/interested staff	43	3.98	0.89	2	5
4. Email service	43	3.81	1.05	1	5
4. Value of the university education to my career	43	3.81	1.01	1	5
6. Campus environment (within & around)	43	3.79	0.86	2	5
7. Library & library opening hours	43	3.77	0.95	2	5
7. Centralized/convenient facilities	43	3.77	1.04	0	5
9. Quality of lectures/staff	43	3.74	1.00	1	5
9. Laboratory	43	3.74	0.98	0	5
11. Personal relationship with teaching staff	43	3.67	1.11	1	5
11. I have opportunity to develop my professional skills	43	3.67	1.02	1	5
13. Student support services	43	3.63	0.85	1	5
14. Structure of courses	43	3.56	0.91	1	5
15.My personal requirements catered for	39	3.51	1.05	1	5
16. Sporting facilities	42	3.38	1.25	0	5
17. Community atmosphere	43	3.37	0.98	1	5
18. Student union	43	3.37	1.02	1	5
19. Course workload	43	3.35	0.97	1	5
20. Social life	42	3.12	1.13	1	5
21. Extra-curriculum activities	43	2.95	1.07	1	5
22. Your university connections with industry	43	2.93	1.08	0	5
I will recommend my university to a friend	**43**	**4.05**	**0.98**	**2**	**5**

N = number of respondents, Stdev = standard deviation, min = minimum score, max = maximum score.

On the contrary, the last five items are community atmosphere, course workload, social life, extra-curriculum activities and university connections with industry. It is important to note here that good social life, good community atmosphere and good extra-curricular activities are considered among the most important items in the student experience survey by The Times Higher Education Student Experience Survey. All the academic aspects of the student experience, except course workload, had positive ratings. The students were satisfied with the quality of the universities' facilities except sporting facilities, which had a negative ranking. In addition, the student union, considered moderately important, was ranked below the mean score. Interestingly, many of the students would recommend their universities to a friend.

There were some items in the student survey with higher standard deviations, which indicated that there was a strong divergence of views among the overall students in those aspects. The first three items which had the highest mean values, had also smallest standard deviations of values, indicating that there was consensus among the students. The last five items (except course workload) with the least mean scores had standard deviation greater than one, indicating that the perceptions of the students might depend on gender, cultural differences or level of master's degree programs.

Responses Based on Gender

The first 15 items, which had positive ratings in the overall students' lists, were also visible in the male students' lists, as well as items such as 'course workload' and 'sporting facilities' (17 items in total). For the female students, 13 items with positive rankings in the overall students' lists had positive ratings. These excluded 'structure of course' and 'my personal requirements catered for', which received negative

ratings. All the seven items that had negative ratings in the overall students' lists were also present in the female students' lists. However, only five of these items received negative ratings in the male students' lists. The best and last five items in the questionnaire perceived by both male and female students are shown in Table 2.

TABLE 2
STUDENT EXPERIENCE RANKING ACCORDING TO GENDER

Rank Variables (First 5 items)	N	Mean	Stdev	min	max
MALE					
1. Quality of facilities	19	4.42	0.84	2	5
2. Learning environment	19	4.16	0.90	2	5
3. Email service	19	4.05	1.03	2	5
4. Helpful/interested staff	19	4.00	1.05	2	5
4. Structure of courses	19	4.00	0.82	2	5
FEMALE					
1. Learning environment	23	4.09	0.85	2	5
2. Helpful/interested staff	23	4.04	0.64	3	5
3. Quality of facilities	23	4.00	0.80	3	5
4. Laboratory	23	3.87	0.82	3	5
5. Quality of lectures/staff	23	3.83	0.83	3	5
Rank Variables (Last 5 items)	N	Mean	Stdev	min	max
MALE					
1. Your university connection with industry	19	2.90	1.20	0	5
2. Social life	19	3.11	1.24	1	5
3. Extra-curriculum activities	19	3.21	1.23	1	5
4. Community atmosphere	19	3.32	1.06	1	5
5. Student union	19	3.47	1.12	1	5
FEMALE					
1. Extra-curriculum activities	23	2.83	0.83	1	5
2. Your university connection with industry	23	3.00	1.00	1	4
3. Social life	22	3.18	1.05	1	5
4. Course workload	23	3.22	0.90	1	5
5. Sporting facilities	22	3.23	1.34	0	5

N = number of respondents, Stdev = standard deviation, min = minimum score, max = maximum score.

From Table 2, it can be deduced that most differences in student experience ratings based on gender are marginal. The male students are relatively more satisfied with their student experience compared to the female students. This is supported by the findings of Grebennikov and Skaines (2009), who asserted that male students tended to rate the level of importance of university services lower and the level of performance higher than females did. However, the QILT Survey Program (2016) indicated that female students are slightly more likely to be positive about their educational experience than male students are. The female respondents viewed the teaching staff as more helpful compared to the male respondents. The quality of lectures/staff and laboratories were not among the best five items considered by the male respondents.

Neves & Hillman (2016) asserted that males tend to be more critical, particularly when rating their teaching experience for being structured and organized. Students perceived teacher expertise in the content/subject matter, strong communication skills and preparedness for class as factors most critical to good teaching (Korte et al., 2013). However, these findings might be influenced by program of study of both sexes, cultural differences and the level of program. Generally, there was a better convergence of

opinions among females regarding the first five (5) listed items because the standard deviation of all the items is less than 1.

Responses Based on Program Level

The first-year students rated more items positive (i.e. 17 compared to 13) than the second-year students. Both first-year and second-year students perceived the quality of the facilities, the learning environment and the helpful/interested staff to be the best three items in the questionnaire. The second-year students rated the laboratories and library and library opening hours better than the first-year students did. The value of the university education to their professional career and the campus environment were not considered among their top five items by the second-year students in contrast to the first-year students.

There was a better consensus among the first-year students in contrast to the second-year students because all the first five items rated positive by the first-year students had standard deviations less than unity. The first-year and second-year students rated extra-curriculum activities and their universities connection with industry the least item respectively. The first-year students considered the course workload among the last but four rated items, while this was not the case for the second-year students. The difference in opinion might be due to the period the survey was taken. The first-year students had only spent almost six months in their respective programs and might not know much about some of the items in the questionnaire, especially their university's ties with industry.

Responses According to Geographical and Cultural Difference

For this study, the geographical location was classified as Africa, Asia, Western Europe, Eastern Europe/Russia, and Anglosphere (i.e. English-speaking countries of Britain, Canada and USA). There was relatively wide divergence of opinions based on cultural differences. Students from Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe/Russia and even Anglosphere ranked the quality of facilities, learning environment, helpful staff and/or quality of lectures/teaching staff among the first five best items. None of these items was rated among the first five by students from Western Europe.

This is so because the students from those parts of the world probably compared these items with what are obtained in their countries and felt more satisfied with them, while students from Europe are exposed to and more familiar with these items. For example, students from outside Europe are new to the teaching style in Finland, where the students are allowed to take charge of their learning process and they enjoyed it. Furthermore, they are not used to having unhindered access to the teaching staff in their home countries. According to Wursten & Jacobs (2013), Finland has a supportive culture of education, where teachers interpret intellectual disagreement as stimulating and not as a personal disloyalty.

However, the students from Africa, Asia, and Anglosphere were less satisfied with the social life and community atmosphere in their universities but these two items received positive ratings from students from Western Europe. It can be deduced that the students from Western Europe have almost similar culture with Finland and can easily adapt to the culture, compared to those from countries outside Europe. This is better captured in the statement of one of the students from Asia in the space left for additional information in the questionnaire:

> *"I feel immensely that the school can do much better at promoting social environment if they decide to put their mind to it. Also, not all events need to be held in pubs/clubs/bars with alcohol being the key drawing point. I don't drink and I feel like I miss out on a lot of possible events and interactions just because of this reason. I am fine going to such a location to socialise, but the alcohol tends to bring out other person in people, which may not necessarily be their true definition. (I have) never heard of an event being organised in the Library or Cafeteria, but then again, I'm not the most socially active person"*

The students from the four other locations have only one common item with their counterparts from Western Europe. In fact, the students, no matter their cultural background, picked the learning

environment among the highest five rated items. Sporting facilities with negative rating had the highest deviation because not all students knew that the two universities shared the same sport facilities.

In general, a lot of effort should be geared towards improving the areas of strength (items with positive ratings in the questionnaire) and sincerely working on the weaknesses (items with negative ratings). This will go a long way in meeting student expectations and in effect enhancing service delivery.

Interviews

The purpose of the interviews was to get expert opinions on the how and why some of the issues were raised in the questionnaires. Therefore, the questionnaire and interview complement each other.

Quality of the Teaching and Student Learning (Proposition)

The quality of the programs is measured by student's feedback and accreditation of the programs. The university proposition for quality of the programs is stated in their overall strategy. One of the stated objectives concerning international students is to give them purposeful education that corresponds to their expectations and revises their acceptance procedures and timetables:

> *"We are aiming at having our education programmes well-structured and in line with the demand of both local and international job market. The programmes should follow the rule and be of high quality. In this regard, the student's feedback is very important and built into our system. We make sure that the students give us the feedback and the recommendations of the feedback are followed. It should be a self-correcting process as we go, especially if there are new forms of master's programmes. Another quality aspect is the way we take care of our students during the whole study process." UA2*

In addition, the universities promised to carry out quality assessment of their programmes in their strategies by following the Finnish quality assurance system for higher education in terms of accreditation. In fact, they have always been meeting those standards quite well:

> *"Each programme is assured through online course evaluation system by the students. A professor oversees each programme. He/she collects the information and directly gives the feedback to the corresponding teachers. Then, in accreditation, they go through everything like the statistics on how students perform in examination, the content of individual course and the curriculum in general. Also, EFCE, which we are a member, has made recommendation on the subjects that should be included in the core of chemical engineering. That is, how much mathematics, physics, chemistry, mass transfer, etc., should be study as compulsory courses in chemical engineering." UA3*

In University B, one of the Vice-rectors is in charge of quality management and there is a Quality Manager who coordinates and develops operations related to the university's quality management. The Quality Manager is supported by a Development Specialist. The Deans and Head of departments take responsible for quality at the faculty and departmental levels respectively. Each Faculty or department is allowed to take charge of its own quality system. One of the Faculties in University B is applying for an international accreditation system, where there will be a well-documented quality assurance for learning:

> *"We are now applying for an international accreditation system, where we will have a well-documented quality assurance system of learning. We have always had learning goals but we have not been good at systematically measuring the meeting of the learning objectives across programmes. Each programme has its own measuring system. We will introduce a standard whereby certain kind of learning objectives will be the same for all programmes and will be measured in the same way for all programmes. In that way, we*

> *can compare the programmes, measure the progress of our students in each programme and find out if something is not working".* UA4

Today, each program has its own measuring system and the Faculty has not succeeded at systematically measuring the meeting of the learning objectives across programs. The Ministry gives permission to offer programs to the universities but does not interfere in the running of the programs. Therefore, there is no national control system on how the quality of programs is assured. However, the Ministry has quantitative parameters in which they follow the quality of the master's programs, like how long it takes to finish the programs. However, some of the administrators believed it is not enough. One of the administrators from University A advocated for a qualitative approach like benchmarking the quality of the master's theses with others:

> *"Qualitatively, the best way is to benchmark the quality of the master's theses with others. Our general level of master's thesis is very good. ..... We have agreed that we will have two external reviewers every year for different areas. The next one will be for teacher's education in one of our campuses and information technology. They will evaluate the quality of the programmes, the teaching and the use of resources."* UA1

One of the administrators advocated for the inclusion of the industry in the formulation of the curriculum. Nevertheless, one of the administrators and some students believed that the quality of higher education is almost at the same level in Finland:

> *"Chemical engineering in City X might be different from other cities in terms of quality control system. In practice, they are the same because everyone follows the international recommendation."* UA3

To ensure the relevance of the curriculum to the society and the industry, the universities communicate continuously with outside experts. Due to the variation among different disciplines and departments, the universities looked at requirements and trends of the job market and streamlined the education/curriculum towards them. However, the challenge is how to guarantee the relevance of the programs to the constantly changing environment, especially in the information technology sector. One of the suggestions raised is the inclusion of people from the industry in the formulation of the curricula (e.g. having an industrial board for engineering education). Students are also involved in the determination of the relevance of their curricula through a centralized course feedback system, but none of the students interviewed had given any feedback on evaluating their programs. Most of the students believed that their course feedback is not implemented in any way.

Student Academic Experience

The students agreed that the quality of education/staff in Finland is well above average (60–70%), the environment is conducive for learning and the structure of the courses is good, flexible and less stressful because of the feedback mechanism. Those in science and engineering rated their programs higher because of cooperation between their universities and the industry in terms of project work done during their master's theses and their practical experience in the lab. The teaching staff was rated among the best in the world in terms of help rendered and the genuine interest shown towards the success of the students. For example, the students emphasized the open-door policy of the teachers and their relatively prompt response to questions via email.

However, some of the students want the lecturers to update their lecture materials regularly, include more lab work (especially those in the science field) or real-life experience in their lectures and should be up-to-date in terms of technology and research in their fields. Some of the students asserted that higher education in Finland in terms of quality is almost at the same level in all cities:

"Incoming international students believe that some universities, especially in cities with large population or in State Capital are well known and therefore of higher quality. They will choose those universities based on those criteria. But, students already in the system know that the quality of education in Finland is at the same level in all the universities because we visit those universities to attend courses and do online courses. Students also have the freedom to choose courses from these universities." US06

Ironically, course workload had a negative rating in the questionnaire but was rated well in the student interviews. This is understandable because this is a contentious issue, which depends partly on the teacher handling the course and how the students viewed the course credit hours and the number of assignments given to them. The students agreed that the teachers are given too much freedom to determine how they want to structure their courses. However, the students were happy with the possibility to do courses outside their university.

University Facilities

The students stated that the university facilities are top-class, which makes the university environment conducive for learning. Universities can earn student satisfaction through delivery of excellent service values. This is an integral part in obtaining a sustainable competitive advantage in today's global education market (Huang et al., 2010). Students in business related programs complained of not having access to the latest tools in their fields and if the tools are available, they are in Finnish. Universities should make available the international student resources relevant to their field of studies, make them more employable and teach them how to cope with the ever-changing world.

However, the majority of the students interviewed did not take the issue of sport facilities too seriously but were well pleased with the sporting facilities in City X. The researcher believed that one of the reasons that sporting facilities had a negative rating in the questionnaire but was rated better in the interview was because some of the sports the students are interested in are not popular in Finland and probably there are no facilities or meeting points for such sports.

Social Environment

All the interviewed students are from countries outside the EU and they complained about lack of vibrant community atmosphere in the classroom, within the university environment and around them:

"I have studied in many places and understanding one another is easy for the Europeans. However, for non-European like me, I feel like I am not part of the community because we rarely do things together…. There is no avenue for the foreign students to meet and interact. I don't see events where companies come regularly to interact with students. In my department, we don't know one another well. It is difficult to feel the international atmosphere here. I think the Finnish culture is competing with global culture." US11

"In my department, we did not have good atmosphere to gather or study together at the same time or same place. But, the local students gathered and studied together. The Finnish students don't usually mix and interact with the foreign students in the class." US08

These students are not pleased with social life in City X and they rated extra-curricular activities/societies very low. Fourteen years ago, Garam (2003) asserted that students integrated well into the community of international students, but relatively poorly into the Finnish student community. Therefore, Finnish universities should double their efforts to create a better societal environment in their domains because being a student is not only about studying; there should be activities to help the students make the most of their time.

Furthermore, the international students felt there was not much social interaction between them and the local students (including the Europeans) in terms of learning to work, live and play together. However, some of the respondents might have interpreted the shyness, quietness and reserved nature of Finns as a lack of warmth and friendship towards them. (Garam, 2003). The feelings of not too good social environment were compounded by the belief by the students that the student union did not take the view of the international students outside Europe into consideration in the design of their programs. Students outside Europe felt isolated from the student union and thus rated it 18th out of 22 items in the questionnaire.

University Ties with the Industry

For the student, their universities' connection with the industry in terms of job placement and internship is lacking. Hence, this item came last in the ranking. The universities' administrators also attested to this fact. This item is of utmost important to the student because all the students interviewed mentioned it more than once in the interview:

> *"I don't think my university has connection with industry in terms of job placement and internship. If they do, such opportunity is for their citizens who speak Finnish language and not available for international students. I stand to be corrected. We have tried severally and all the time, we are told to sort it out ourselves. Even, the people in the industry specified that they want someone who speaks Finnish and automatically non-Finnish speakers are excluded. It is more of psychological problem than language problem."* US04

Interestingly, more than 90% of the interviewed students would like to get a job in Finland. One of the students wants internship to be part of the two years master's program, especially for the non-science programs. This will allow students to acquire the needed working life experience.

Other Factors

More than 90% of the students, including three PhD students, asserted that the value of their universities' education met their professional goals and they had the opportunity to develop their professional skills. This is exemplified in the positive rating given to the former item (i.e. 4th best out of 22) in the student experience ranking. The dark side of this item are that the students complained of not getting the opportunity to get a professional job in Finland after graduation and sometimes lack of exposure to important resources (e.g. journals, business tools, etc.) that will improve their career path in their field of study:

> *"The value of the education met my professional goals. I had a lot of practical knowledge in my field; I attended a lot of seminars. All these are like an accumulation of knowledge for me and this helped me in my present PhD programme."* US08

The only PhD student that was not pleased with the value of education received complained of not having the required resources and supervision to make the education worthwhile.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

The findings and suggestions of this research would assist both university administrators and the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture to develop better education quality strategies. For example, the student experience survey introduced in this research is a valuable tool, which can be used in benchmarking universities in Finland so that the public can have information to make judgements about the level of performance of each university. It was suggested that all universities and universities of applied sciences should conduct this survey regularly or take part in it if administered by an external

body. This would have a favorable impact on the education environment, which would lead to improved ratings of the universities and global brand image.

On the other hand, universities should take into account the fact that foreign students are not one homogeneous group with totally similar needs. In particular, students from countries outside Europe and America may have social adaptation difficulties in Finland or in the West. Attempts can be made to reduce these difficulties with the more culturally sensitive social support of university administration and student organizations.

CRITICAL END-REMARKS AND FUTURE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Some readers of this article might not be sure about the writers' faith in students' ability to accurately assess the quality of their learning experience during their studies – at least on some of the measured dimensions. In fact, some scholars and teachers are seriously critical of systems that effectively act to delay feedback that should be freely shared between students, teaching staff and administrators – until the time when student surveys are administered. Such process can be seen as somewhat illogical because it denies students and teaching staff opportunities to address issues and deficiencies in a timely manner. It is also rather odd if educational administrators strive to include student opinion only at the back-end of education processes but show little or no concern for involving students at the front-end. The authors of this article do not deny the fact that it makes sense to gather student feedback during and after each course and throughout the course of study. Actually, this done regularly at most universities in Finland all the time.

But a good question for further research is: where are the places for students around the table when educators are designing curricula, courses and programs?

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