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## **Students of evaluation**

**- Experiences of student experts in the evaluations of Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council.**

### **Abstract**

**What is the role of student experts in evaluation panels? Are they token representatives of the masses of customers or are they professionalized partners in quality management? This study sheds light on how students see their role in the Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council's (FINHEEC) evaluation teams and how other members of the evaluation teams and the evaluated institutions appear to view the students' knowledge and competences. In addition, graduated student experts describe how the evaluation experience benefited their studies and subsequent working life after graduation.**

The Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council (FINHEEC) has included student members in all its evaluations<sup>1</sup> since the founding of the organization in 1996.<sup>2</sup> The students are full members of the panel, with the same rights and responsibilities as those of the peers employed in higher education institutions (HEIs).<sup>3</sup> The students read all the materials provided by the institution in question, prepare questions for the interviews, participate in site-visits and compose chapters of analysis for the evaluation reports. Though they typically have much shorter experience than other members of the evaluation teams, they are considered experts in higher education from the student perspective. Students are widely seen not as customers in the Finnish higher education system but as partners who actively co-operate to enhance the quality of education for the benefit of everyone. Therefore, their role in the Finnish context is not limited to a simple source of criticism and feedback, but includes participation in various working groups inside the HEIs and on the national level.

Due to the relatively advanced status of student participation in the evaluation of higher education in Finland, it is easy to remain satisfied with the current state of affairs and consider student participation as a solved issue. This could become an obstacle to development, since there is plenty of variance in the ability and possibilities for the students to fulfil their role as an expert panel member. It is necessary to recognize the special role of students in order to maximize their potential as evaluation group members. FINHEEC sent an anonymous questionnaire in spring 2013 to 50 former student members in evaluation teams in the

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<sup>1</sup> FINHEEC mostly conducts quality audits, but some of the respondents participated in other types of evaluations. Thus, although most subjects had actually participated in quality audits, this study will discuss students as members of evaluation teams.

<sup>2</sup> For information on FINHEEC's quality audits see: [www.finheec.fi/Audit](http://www.finheec.fi/Audit)

<sup>3</sup> This is by no means self-evident even in the European context. For more information see Galán Palomares 2012.

past). Just over half (28) of the students responded to the online questionnaire. Although the sample is too small to be statistically significant, the answers shed light on the student experience within an evaluation.

### **Background information**

The average age of the students was 25.5 years at the time of the evaluation, with the youngest student being 22 and the oldest 33 years of age. Since students in Finland generally start higher education at the age of 21.6<sup>4</sup>, we can estimate that most respondents had studied about four years by the time of the evaluation. At the time of the questionnaire, their ages ranged from 25 to 38 years of age, the average age being 33. Altogether 71% of the respondents had graduated from 0 to 12 years ago, the average being 4.4 years. This means that most respondents had some working life experience when this study was carried out. We received more responses from university of applied sciences (UAS) students (15) than from university students (10). Three respondents had studied in both sectors.

### **Student unions and quality management**

Roughly two-thirds (68%) of the respondents had been involved in the national student unions either in the university or UAS sector, while all had been involved in the local student union branch of their respective HEIs. Suggestions for student experts are sent to FINHEEC by the national student unions, which, in turn, use their grass-roots organization to canvass potential candidates. It is therefore natural to expect most student experts to have a student union background. Unfortunately no information exists on whether any of the non-respondents were student experts in FINHEEC without a student union background. However, we can fairly safely assume that most do, since most students interested in developing higher education are (generally) active in student unions.

With students penetrating most HEI working groups and bodies<sup>5</sup>, participating in national evaluations and becoming ever more professional in the nuts and bolts of the higher education system, the question is sometimes raised whether the interest of the rank-and-file student is still adequately represented. At the same time, as evaluations and quality management become more and more sophisticated, the benefit of past experience on how the system works in one's own HEI certainly helps. Most respondents (19) reported having been involved in the quality work of their own HEIs prior to participating in the evaluation of another organization. Another four subjects took part in quality work after their evaluation experience. Only five respondents reported not having been involved in the quality work of their HEI at all, before or after the evaluation, but all five said they would have liked to participate. The students' participation in quality management activities ranged from individual projects where the working group devised a quality manual for students to membership in the university board of directors. A number of respondents had been involved in an internal audit either as an auditor or an interviewee.

### **Students' role in evaluation teams**

On paper, the students' role is exactly the same as that of the other members. For the five-person evaluation teams, FINHEEC generally selects experts from both the university and UAS sectors, with perhaps a quality manager from one HEI. In addition to the student expert, there is also one person from a

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<sup>4</sup> Ministry of Education Press Release  
[http://www.minedu.fi/OPM/Tiedotteet/2008/09/education\\_at\\_a\\_glance2008.html](http://www.minedu.fi/OPM/Tiedotteet/2008/09/education_at_a_glance2008.html)

<sup>5</sup> See for example: Talvinen, Krister (2012) Enhancing Quality, Audits in Finnish Higher Education Institutions 2005-2012. [http://www.kka.fi/files/1598/KKA\\_1112.pdf](http://www.kka.fi/files/1598/KKA_1112.pdf) p. 45

company or a public organization who represents working life outside academia.<sup>6</sup> While having the same rights and responsibilities as the other members of the team, the 22-year-old student typically has at least 20 years less experience in higher education than the rest of the members. When asked to assess one's own role in the evaluation team, 89% of the respondents felt it was equal to that of the other members of the team. One deemed his/her role to be stronger than that of the others (presumably due to previous evaluation experience) while two persons regretted of having weaker role compared to others in the team. These two respondents in particular are important because their case might reveal what kind of students are more likely to suffer from a weaker role in the team and subsequently contribute less to the overall evaluation. Both of the 'weaker-role students' were UAS-educated business students of fairly young age (22 and 23) and reported having put in significantly less full working days (5 and 10) in the process than the other students (the average was 15.8 days). Both respondents were unable to describe their role in writing in the questionnaire, but one respondent attributed his weaker role partly to the role of the chair of the team and the way he/she guided the discussion.



Figure 1.

A larger group of eight respondents said their expertise was not taken as seriously in the evaluation team as that of other members (see figure 1 above). The written answers point the finger to the chair of the team again but also to the student expert him/herself. Many of the respondents had taken part in several evaluations and had found that as their experience accumulated their expertise was questioned less. There is also some indication of discrimination towards UAS students from the university staff members. Interestingly, again half of the respondents (4) were UAS students in business studies and none were university students. In this category, the students appeared to have put in as many working days as the rest of the respondents. The HEI in question seemed to take the student experts' competence more seriously than did the evaluation team. Four subjects reported that the HEI took their expertise less seriously than that of the other members while one felt that the HEI took his/her expertise much less seriously. In this is

<sup>6</sup> For the exact criteria see: Audit manual for the quality systems of higher education institutions 2011–2017 (2nd edition, Publications of Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council 15:2012. [http://www.finheec.fi/files/1780/KKA\\_1512.pdf](http://www.finheec.fi/files/1780/KKA_1512.pdf)

group half of the target group had graduated a good while ago (12 years ago) and most (3) had graduated from university. Notably, these were not the same people who reported having a weaker role in the evaluation team or their experience taken less seriously inside the team than that of the other members of the team. The written answers reflect variance in the attitude of HEI staff towards students interviewing them about the quality of their work. Reportedly, those staff members who understood the point of the quality audit well did not have a problem with a student interviewer, whereas misunderstandings tended to feed resentment. Also, one respondent found that where the status of the student union of the HEI was weak, the staff tended to be less willing to co-operate in an interview with a student. This also applied to the case of the one respondent whose expertise was taken much less seriously by the HEI than that of the other members. These few examples of less-than-perfect attitudes aside, it must be noted that the overwhelming majority of students were taken seriously and had a very strong role in the evaluation team, despite being very much junior to the other members in terms of age and work experience.

### **A learning experience**

Students estimated having put in anywhere from five full days of work to thirty days of effort. Two respondents added together all the evaluation processes they had attended and reached a total of 100 to 150 days. These cases aside, the average burden seems to have amounted to 15.8 days or roughly three full weeks of work. Most (16) respondents took part in only one evaluation while some (12) reported having been involved in two or more evaluation processes. Given that student competence improves significantly during the process, it would seem sensible for FINHEEC to select the same students a number of times, where possible. Although it is well-known that Finnish students put in quite a lot of salaried work (30% reported working full-time and another 30% work part-time<sup>7</sup>) to get by, it is perhaps surprising that 60% of the respondents reported having worked full-time in a salaried position at the time of the evaluation. FINHEEC does not conduct evaluations during the summer months so the work referred to is unlikely to mean summer jobs. If there is an unspoken assumption that students have more time at hand than staff for working on evaluations, this is obviously often not the case. However, when asked whether participation in the evaluation process delayed their studies, only one student regretted FINHEEC of delaying his/her graduation by one month.

The student experts were asked which of the three parts of the evaluation were the ones where they felt they were most successful in and where they would have needed more support and training. Most of the respondents (67%) considered the site-visit as their finest hour while four excelled in the advance preparations (reading the HEIs materials, preparing questions for the interviews and drafting report texts in advance) and three felt they did well in the reporting phase after the visit. None of the respondents found the site-visits difficult, but the group is split between advance preparations (15) and reporting (12) for more support and training. In terms of advance preparation, the students seemed to simply need someone to discuss the issues with, especially where some time had lapsed since the evaluation training given by FINHEEC. Most of the written answers highlight a number of issues related to the writing of the chapters of the final evaluation report. Apparently this is not the kind of text or language that students are required to produce in their studies. Also, unlike the site-visit, where evaluation team members get support from each other and the FINHEEC secretary of the team, in the reporting phase individual students are much more alone with their assigned report chapters. However, this difficulty might be a blessing in disguise, as

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<sup>7</sup> Saarenmaa, Kaisa, Saari Katja and Virtanen, Vesa (2010) Opiskelijatutkimus 2010. Korkeakouluopiskelijoiden toimeentulo ja opiskelu, Opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriön julkaisu ja 2010:18 [http://www.minedu.fi/OPM/Julkaisut/2010/Opiskelijatutkimus\\_2010.html](http://www.minedu.fi/OPM/Julkaisut/2010/Opiskelijatutkimus_2010.html)

FINHEEC's evaluation reports are often criticized for being too technical and full of quality jargon. Simplifying the language and the expressions would both ease the burden of writing for the students (and staff members of the evaluation team) and produce more readable evaluation reports for the benefit of the general public.

### **Evaluation for life**

Finally, the student experts were asked whether they were able to make use of the skills gained from FINHEEC's evaluations in their studies. Most respondents (16) found that their studies did not benefit from the evaluation experience. The few explanations given in the responses indicate that either the student graduated soon after the evaluation or did not study a discipline where knowledge of quality management systems is essential. Of those who did use their evaluation skills in their studies, nearly all (70%) studied business studies either in a university or a UAS. The knowledge of quality systems and competences developed in the evaluation process seem to be far more applicable to working life. Out of the 28 respondents, 23 subjects described the various skills and competences learnt in the evaluations. The most immediate benefits were seen by those employed by HEIs to manage their quality systems, but quality management knowledge was applied in many other types of organizations as well. At least 38% of the respondents worked either in HEIs or organizations dealing with higher education. Some students reported having devised quality manuals for their employers, while others stressed the philosophy of enhancement-led evaluation as a guiding principle for other types of research and investigative tasks. Quality evaluation also seems to provide the individual with an understanding of the structures and operating principles of complex expert organizations, which in turn is transferable to realms beyond higher education.

When asked about other ideas or thoughts on how FINHEEC could better utilize students in evaluations, the student experts emphasized the need for a reserve of students ready to draw from whenever required. The students clearly recognized the technical challenge of quality audits and accumulation of quality system knowledge, and recommended using the same students in subsequent evaluations, if possible. In addition, the students recommend arranging opportunities for student experts to meet in workshops and seminars to share experiences and discuss topics related to quality and evaluation. FINHEEC and the student unions will also be able to use the information gathered in the study to motivate future students to take part in evaluations.

### **Conclusion**

The role of student experts in Finnish higher education is a central one and it would be difficult to envision a major reform or development process on a national level or inside a HEI that would not include student representatives. Finland benefits from extremely professional and well-organized student unions that make a significant contribution not only to the everyday development of universities and universities of applied sciences but also to the direction of the higher education system as a whole. Nevertheless, audits of quality management systems of modern higher education institutions are difficult and laborious ventures. One should not assume that it is done well with the greatest of ease or that 23-year-olds will not find it difficult to produce 5-10 pages of evaluative analysis on these complex structures, sometimes in a foreign language, and to a critical audience. In the light of the findings in this study, it seems clear that higher education institutions, quality agencies and student unions must continue to work to find the best ways of using student experts for them to reach their full potential.

### Questions for parallel sessions:

How can we ensure that student members of the evaluation teams are utilised to their full potential?

Should student members of the evaluation teams be trained separately from the other experts?

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