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Changing education – QA and the shift from teaching to learning

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Short bio (150 words max): Eriksson has just started working in SEFE for educational policy questions. She worked previously three years for the National Union of University Students (SYL). She has been a member in the council of FINHEEC (The Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council) and also member of the ESU's Students Experts' Pool on Quality Assurance since 2012. She is very interested in QA of higher education and further development of study programmes and learning.

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Short bio (150 words max): Teini is a 6th year student in Tampere University of Technology. Besides studying electrical engineering he has been focusing on educational politics for several years now, especially on Finnish academic engineer and architect education. He is currently working for TEK as a summer trainee and outside of summer he works for the Student Union of Tampere University of Technology. In the past he has been a board member of his student union, a student member of the university academic board and various other positions of trust around educational affairs. He is currently also a deputy student member of TEK's committee on educational affairs.



Proposal

Title:

STUDENT FEEDBACK GATHERED BY THE TRADE UNIONS - MUCH NEEDED PERSPECTIVE ON EMPLOYABILITY?

Abstract (150 words max):

Are universities responsible for the employability of graduates?

In Finland it has been more or less self-evident that people with a university degree are not struck by unemployment. Now, even though the situation in Finland is much less concerning than it could be and higher education still is a major protection against unemployment, the Trade Unions SEFE and TEK see that there are enough reasons to take better care of our higher education from the employability point of view.

To have a role in discussion around employability and to emphasize the importance of actual learning, SEFE and TEK regularly gather feedback from newly graduates. The results are utilized by influencing the universities as well as political decision makers. In this session we will discuss graduate employability in the university education from a QA point of view as well as the role that a trade union can have in this discussion.

Text of paper (3000 words max):

1. Background and some key definitions

The SAGE project of European Students' Union (ESU) (1) has been an interesting project that lately has helped to realize that employability is a somewhat complex totality of many different aspects. Therefore it is important to describe here what is meant with employability in this paper as well as in the national context.

1.1 Short description of the Finnish HE system

The Finnish higher education institutes have some peculiar characteristics. The students attending traditional universities are expected to aim for a Master's degree. The universities of applied sciences mainly provide a bachelor level degree and it is usually not extended to a masters level degree. Summertime (June-August) is usually not included in the semesters providing a chance for the students to work during summers. This is utilized very widely, giving students a chance to obtain valuable experience and networks in working life. Additionally, most of the students (depending on the research as much as 65 %) also work at least part time during the semesters. In some fields of study, especially in engineering and economic sciences, it is also very common for the students to do their Master's thesis to industry and commerce.

In a Finnish university, students are an integral part of the university community and the interaction between students and staff is often very straightforward and non-formal. Also, the Finnish law states that the most influential administrative organs of the universities must have student representatives along with professors and other staff members. In Finland individual students are collectively represented by student unions. The Finnish Universities Act states that every university must have a student union and every undergraduate to be a member of it.



Finnish universities are independent corporations under public law or foundations under private law. By the revised Universities Act from 2009 (2), it is mandatory that at a minimum of 40 % of the people in the University Board are not employees or students in the university. These seats are to be represented by a wide range of expertise of the surrounding society and labour market as well as give a strong voice in the decision-making for the quite extensive co-operation that the Finnish universities have with the working life.

The direct government funding covers about 64 % of university budgets, so the universities receive a substantial amount of their funding from the state but they are also expected to raise external funding from different paid services and co-operation with the labour market and other relevant stakeholders. Employability of the graduates has been one of the criteria in the universities funding, but at the moment it defines only 1 % of the public funding of the universities. This money is distributed for the universities based on the statistics on employment of the graduates one year after their graduation. The system does not however evaluate the quality of the vacancies even though this has been a major issue of lobbying for the trade unions quite some time now. There are no tuition fees charged in Finnish higher education degrees, so all funding has to be collected from other sources.

1.2 TEK and SEFE - part of the trade union system in Finland

Academic Engineers and architects in Finland - TEK is a service and labour market organization for highly educated professionals in the area of engineering and technology. The 73 000 members of TEK mostly hold a M.Sc. degree in engineering, technology, architecture or natural sciences. **SEFE, The Finnish Association of Business School Graduates**, is a central organization for graduates and students in economics and business administration. Graduate members from Finnish universities have a B.Sc. (Econ. Bus. & Adm.) or M.Sc. (Econ. Bus. & Adm.) degree. A member must have at least academic Bachelors (eq. BA, BSc) level degree in business studies. SEFE now has more than 50 000 members.

TEK and SEFE (later: Unions) implement several services concerning educational, professional, social issues and labour market conditions according to the needs of their members. The Unions and the representatives of the employers together negotiate and conclude collective agreements concerning salaries and conditions of employment in the relative fields.

In addition to labour market issues, the trade unions actively participate in the development of education and further professional development in their own fields. This is done in close collaboration with higher education institutes, political authorities, representatives of working life and other relevant stakeholders.

Almost 75 % of Finns are members of a trade union; the number is high by international standards. The main purpose of a union is to safeguard and improve the benefits and rights of its members. This includes, for example, income development, unemployment security and quality of working life. The individual unions are organised under three three main confederations, AKAVA, SAK and STTK, mainly by occupational and/or educational background. (3)

Both Unions are affiliates in AKAVA (Confederation of Unions for Professional and Managerial Staff in Finland), which has more than 30 affiliates with altogether half a million unionised members working as employees, managers, entrepreneurs and self-employed professionals in either the public or private sector. The members join one of AKAVA's affiliates based on their field of study, degree, profession or position. Additionally, the affiliates of AKAVA have altogether more than 100 000 student members of which TEK has around 22 500 and SEFE around 16 000. Both unions cooperate very closely with students, for example by having student representatives in their administrative organs and giving financial support to extra-curricular activities of student organizations related to the line of study.

1.3 Employability



Manz Yorke and Peter T Knight define employability as "a set of achievements, skills, understandings and personal attributes that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy." They also state that "as a set of achievements, employability is not something static but something that a person can develop throughout life." (4)

This definition is very close to how the Unions view employability. The questions of the surveys are based on the Unions' views of employability which have been discussed in close cooperation with working life and the universities. For example it is very important to find out the key competencies, skills and knowledge needed commonly in the field so that this can be studied in the student surveys.

2. The characteristics of Student Feedback systems of the Unions

The Unions' interest in education development is based on the satisfaction of present and future members. In order for the future members to have the right skills and competences for good employability, it is necessary for the Unions to influence today's education system. Both TEK and SEFE work with accurate and up to date information gathered by research and surveys made by their own researchers or by using customized research provided by other stakeholders.

Both Unions use the same practical tool in monitoring the quality of education: the graduate feedback survey on the newly graduated. TEK and the Finnish universities of higher engineering education have conducted a joint feedback survey on a national scale for graduates since 2011, SEFE on the other hand has had the same system since 2009. The main purpose of the feedback survey is to gather comparable information on the employability of graduates and the quality of the degrees and education. In 2013 60 % of the 2 433 engineering graduates participated in the survey, and in the year 2012 over 70 % of the graduates in economics filled in the questionnaire.

The themes of the surveys include employment situation, competencies gained by the degree, work experience during studies as well as the overall satisfaction and open feedback regarding the performance of the universities. The graduates are contacted by their departments prior to graduation and asked to participate. The data is then collected by the Unions, and they also are responsible to report both the national and university specific results. Both surveys are designed and evaluated in close collaboration with the participating universities. In TEK representatives of the universities also take part in a steering group coordinating of the feedback system.

Besides the feedback surveys on newly graduated, the Unions also work with other forms of research. Every second or third year SEFE conducts a separate study on the situation of those who graduated five years before. Both unions also track the employability and quality of education of doctoral degrees. SEFE is also currently conducting a longer term follow-up study using graduate feedback data collected since 2009.

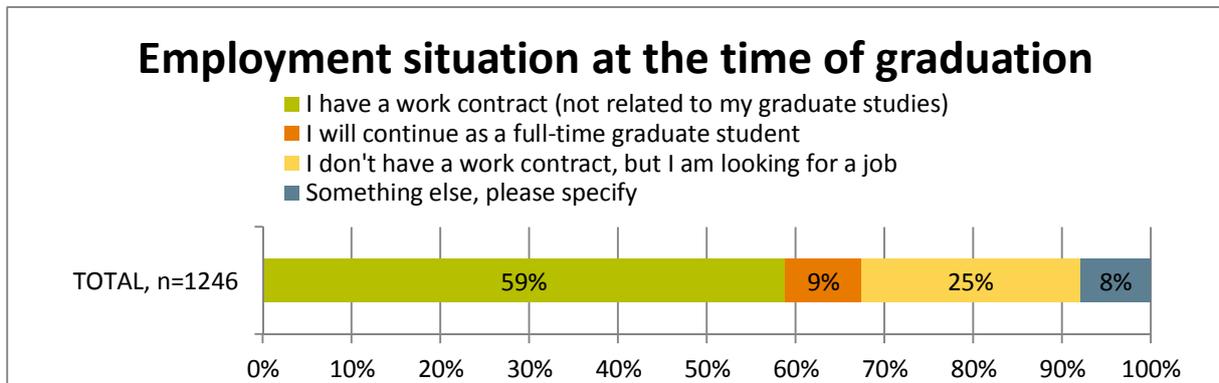
In addition to reporting and discussing the survey results with the universities, the Unions also utilize the results by influencing political decision makers and by actively taking part in political discussion. The results are published annually in an open seminar and distributed widely to cooperation partners and stakeholders.

3. Some survey results on employability

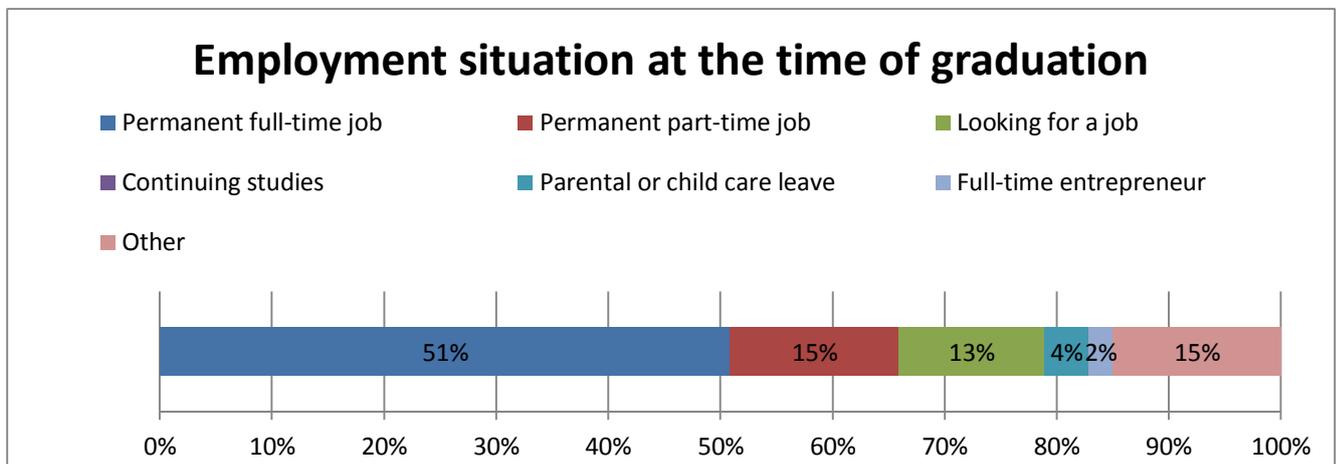
Some of the key results from the survey regarding the employability of newly graduated in 2012 (SEFE) and 2013 (TEK) are presented in the following graphs.

3.1 Employment situation

Altogether most of the respondents are employed at the time of graduation (graphs 1 and 2).



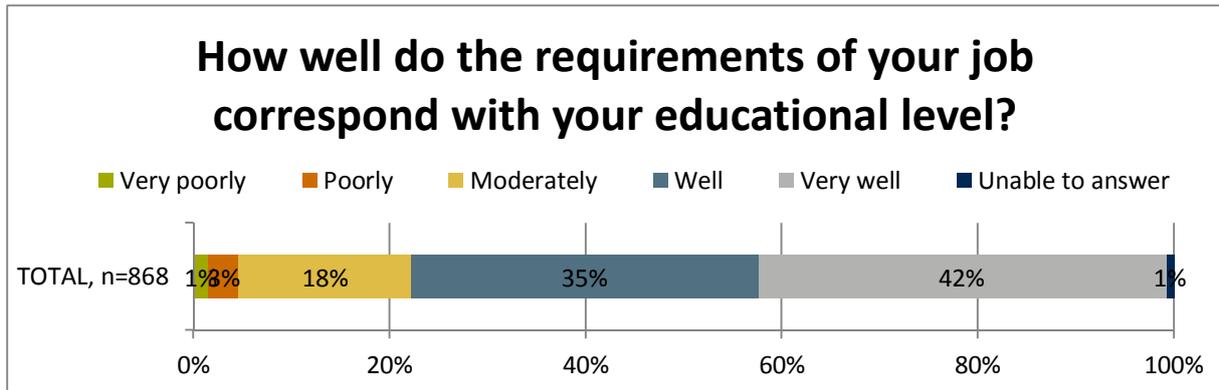
Graph 1: TEK



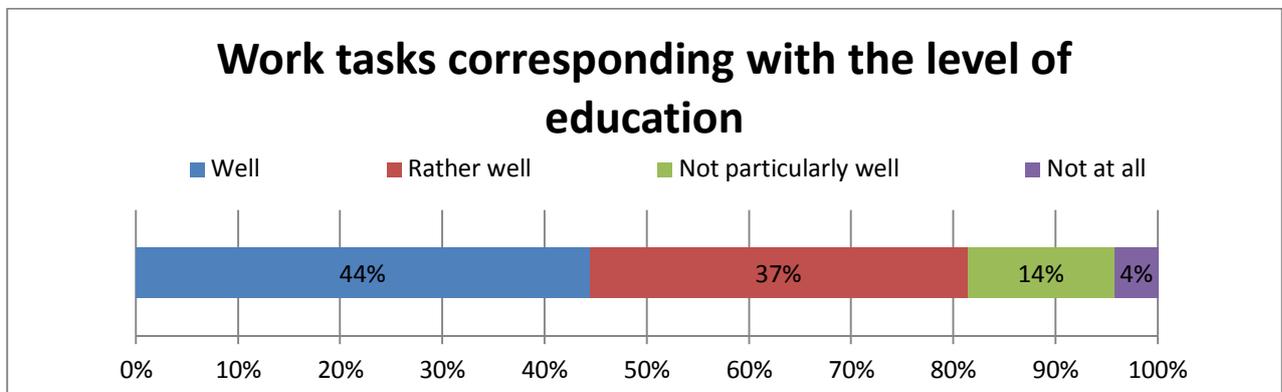
Graph 2: SEFE

3.2 Job corresponding with the education level and line of studies

The graduates of engineering and economics feel that they are qualitatively well employed: 79 % of TEK respondents feel the duties of their job respond well or very well with the level of their education (graph 3). 81 % of SEFE respondents feel that their work tasks correspond to the level of their education either well or rather well (graph 4).



Graph 3: TEK



Graph 4: SEFE

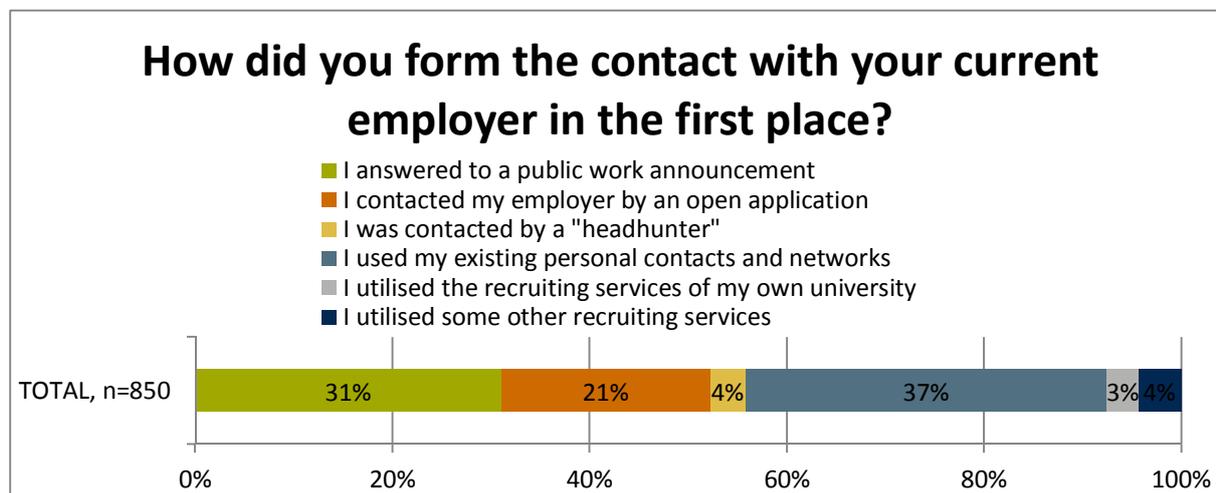
3.3 Previous relations with the employer

TEK asks the graduates about the relations with their employer prior to graduation. 78 % of the employed replicants have a previous relation with their employer at the time of graduation. 50 % of them having made their thesis work for the organization and 28 % having previously worked in the organization (graph 5).



Graph 5: TEK

The most common way for newly graduated to have formed contact with current employer in the first place was by using existing personal contacts and networks with 37 % (graph 6).

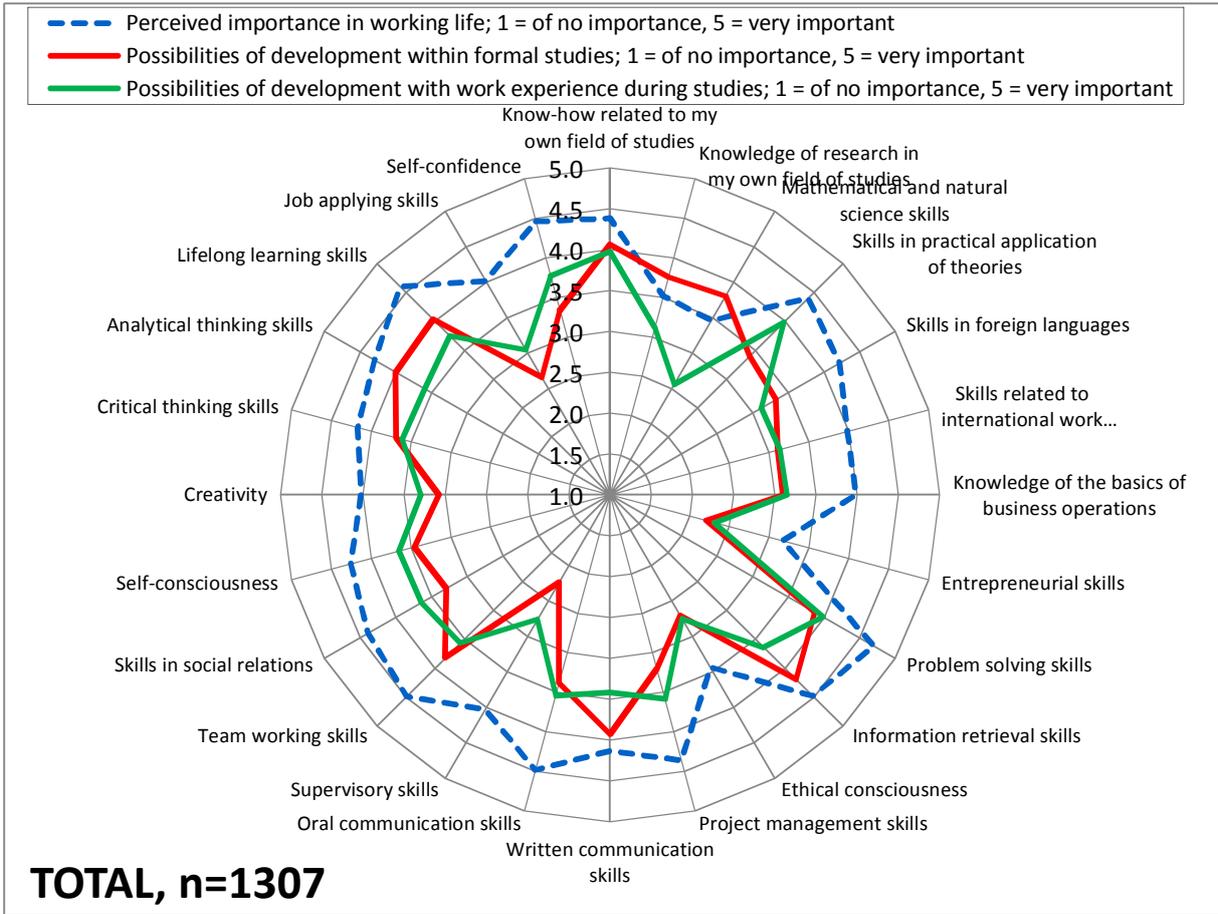


Graph 6: TEK

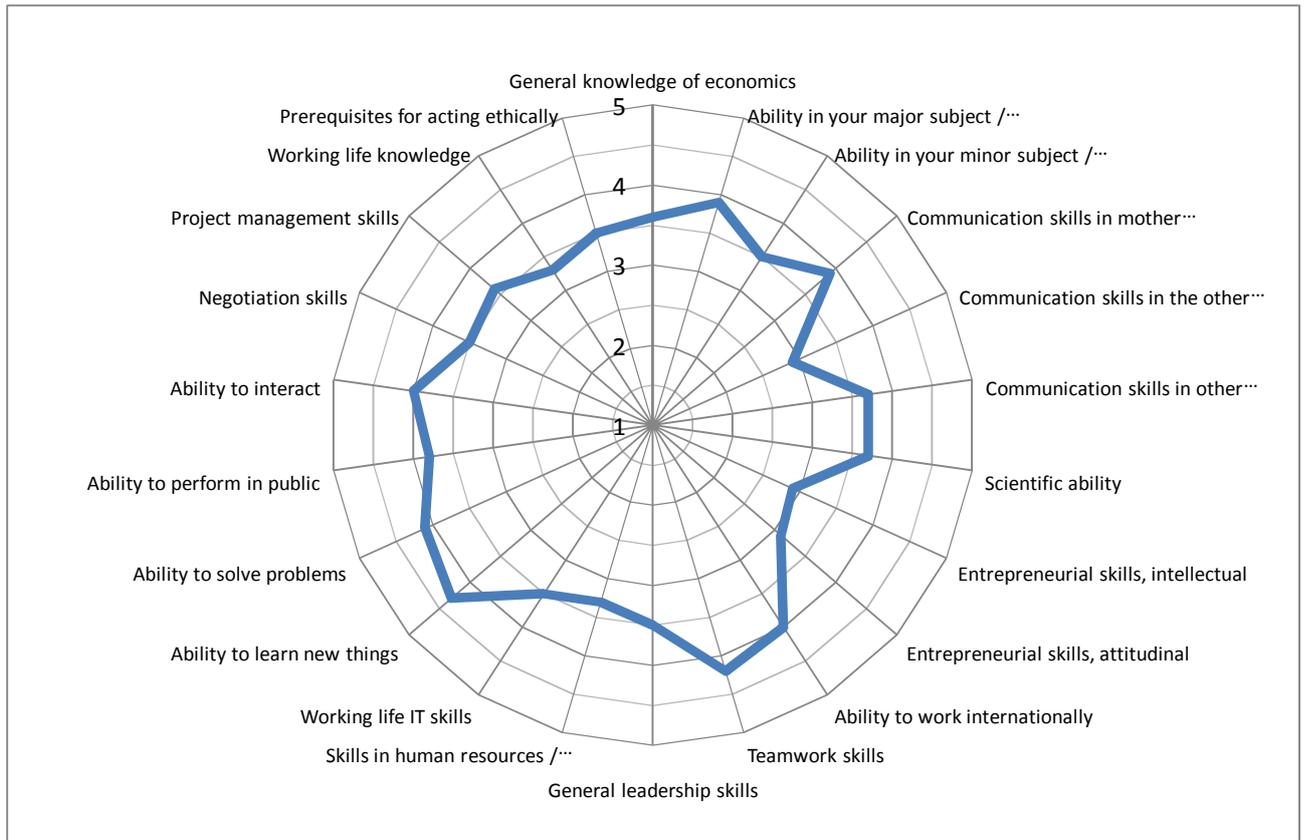
Employability can also be promoted by gaining work experience, especially in one's own field of studies. According to TEK survey, the average total work experience gained in the course of studies was 20 months of which 14,4 months work experience in own field of study. The average time to complete Mastersqthesis was 8,6 months, which can also be considered as relevant work experience.

3.4 Gained skills

The surveys also provide information regarding the knowledge, skills and competencies that graduates have gained during their studies. From TEK survey we can also read how the graduates perceive importance of the skills in working life and how well their formal studies and work experience gained during studies have developed these skills. The results are presented from TEK survey in graph 7 and from SEFE survey in graph 8.



Graph 7: TEK



Graph 8: SEFE

4. The Student Feedback as part of the QA systems of the universities

The universities receive a huge amount of data from various surveys, so the graduate feedback collected by the Unions is only one type of data they use. One new QA element worth mentioning in the Finnish HE is the new Kandipalaute-survey, which is the first joint survey for all the bachelors in the Finnish universities. This was launched about a year ago. The public funding of the Finnish universities is partly (3 %) distributed by the results of this Kandipalaute-survey on student satisfaction with the university and studies, which forces the universities to focus a lot of resources on the survey. However, the results from the bachelor survey contain a lot less information for actually developing the education than the surveys the Unions provide for the engineering and business studies. A big difference between these two from the staff perspective is the qualitative information they contain, as TEK and SEFE surveys contain also open feedback. Additionally, Kandipalaute-survey is a national survey covering all academic fields and the form of the survey resembles the student survey used for example in Germany (Kandipalaute is provided for Finland by CHE Consult GmbH). Therefore the questions are inevitably more general because they have to fit every field of study. As already mentioned, in the surveys TEK and SEFE provide, the staff and the students in engineering and economics have a lot of influence on what questions the surveys actually contain, so they really fit their purpose. This encourages universities to really own the survey and therefore utilize and be involved with the further development of the surveys.

Both the engineers and business school graduates in Finland are generally very extensively employed, most already before their graduation (see chapter 4.3). But as stated before, with academic unemployment on the rise, also the universities need to have increasing interest in supporting graduates' employability and matching the demands of the labour market. This is probably why both the university staff members as well as the student representatives welcome feedback with the employability type of viewpoint very warmly. The feedback in the Finnish universities (and this coming



from the Unions point of view) is also traditionally more or less focused on the view that students have on teaching. The type of feedback where graduates are asked to evaluate their skills and competencies is important for evaluation of learning outcomes.

In the Finnish universities the guardian of students' interests is the student union. Their administrative boards and employees represent the whole student body in the university organization and community. The student unions keep themselves up to date with relevant data and provide information to the student representatives in the university administrative organs, for example about the results of the surveys on the newly graduated. It is up to these student representatives to promote the necessary developments in education in their relative organs. A concrete example of student influence on educational politics on employability is constantly promoting the importance of gaining relevant work experience and networking during studies, while the government constantly puts pressure on graduation times. The student unions and many field-related student organizations (in multidisciplinary universities) have for example used the feedback information from the Unions to lobby for development of learning and evaluation methods, more flexible ways to study, better support services and interaction between students and staff.

5. Some (critical) thoughts: Employability in the Universities? How does it really work?

It is apparent that all academic graduates do not get employed by the universities or research centers, but have to be employed outside the academic community. Graduate employability should be one of the key QA elements in higher education. The Unions emphasize that the students should not only get a glimpse of the methods and abilities of the scientific work during their studies. Also generic working life skills are vital for the employability and later career performance and should therefore be included in the degree learning outcomes.

The QA systems of Finnish universities are more or less focused on specific course feedback, mainly focusing on teaching. The Unions claim strongly that employability and feedback on the whole degree should shift the QA systems focus from teaching to learning. The Unions are not, however, of the opinion that the universities should act like vocational schools or to forget their academic mission and passion. On the contrary, the most important skills and competencies from the employability point of view are possible to be acquired through well planned, versatile and student-centered methods of teaching, learning and evaluation.(5).

The Unions, students and usually even the university management are by default committed to developing education according to the feedback results. However, the actual measures are up to the teaching staff of the universities. This should therefore be adequately encouraged, resourced and monitored.

References:

- (1) Student Advancement of Graduates Employability (SAGE) -project: <http://www.esu-online.org/projects/current/sage/>
- (2) Universities Act (558/2009) <http://www.finlex.fi/fi/laki/kaannokset/2009/en20090558.pdf>
- (3) Worker Participation. Description of the Trade Union system in Finland <http://www.worker-participation.eu/National-Industrial-Relations/Countries/Finland/Trade-Unions>
- (4) Knight, P. and Yorke, M. (2006). Embedding Employability into Curriculum. Learning and Employability, series 1. York. Electronic version: http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/documents/employability/id460_embedding_employability_into_the_curriculum_338.pdf



- (5) Time for a new paradigm in education: Student-centered learning . project,
Student-centered learning SCL toolkit:
<http://www.esu-online.org/pageassets/projects/projectarchive/100814-SCL.pdf>

Questions for discussion:

- To what extent is it the responsibility of a university to help a student gain the necessary skills and competencies for good employability?
- What kind of a role could or should a trade union have in the further development of university education? Why or why not?