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# **Student Engagement in Finnish Higher Education – Conflicting Realities?**

Jani Ursin

## **Introduction**

Nowadays it seems that governments have become increasingly interested in measuring effectiveness of higher education and students' outcomes where student engagement is often seen as a proxy of quality of teaching and learning. However, governments rarely question the concept of 'engagement,' which in research literature is labelled to be very complex and multifaceted including behavioural (teaching practices and student satisfaction), psychological (internal individual processes) and socio-cultural (impact of the broader social context on student experience) elements (Zepke & Leach 2010; Kuh 2009; Fredricks, Blumenfeld & Paris 2004). Kahu (2013) highlights that while discussing engagement it is crucial to acknowledge the importance of the student and the institution, but it is also essential to recognise the critical influence of the socio-cultural context; that is, successful student engagement is a combination of the student, the teacher, the institution and the government. In Finland, discussion of student engagement has been dominated by the behavioural and socio-cultural perspectives, especially because of Finnish higher education has become more accountable over the two last decades; therefore, government and higher education institutions (HEIs) have become interested in such questions as whether students are satisfied with their studies, whether teaching practices are effective and whether students complete their studies on time.

How student engagement is understood is naturally related to the history and composition of the whole national higher education system. Finnish higher education is based on the Nordic welfare state ideology where education is considered to be public good and the higher education system is hardly stratified. Therefore, higher education is mainly free for students (no tuition fees except those coming from outside the EU) and all higher education institutions are for the most part funded by the government. This is also why government is steering universities heavily through the funding model (which also includes student engagement as one element). The Finnish higher education system consists of two complementary sectors: 14 universities and 24 universities of applied sciences (UAS) altogether with a little over 300,000 students. The mission of universities is to conduct scientific research and provide instruction and postgraduate education based on it. UASs train professionals in response to labour market needs and conduct research, innovation and development activities, which are expected to promote regional development. Institutional autonomy is secured in the Finnish Constitution and guaranteed by laws governing HEIs (Ammattikorkeakoululaki 351/2003; Universities Act 558/2009).

Evaluation policies for Finnish higher education can be characterized as enhancement oriented. In this approach the focus is not on the accreditation of the programmes but rather on providing support and information to further enhance the quality of the programmes and

institutions (Lomas & Ursin 2009; Välimaa 2012). Higher education institutions are responsible for the evaluation of their own operations and outcomes. Such evaluation is supported by the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC). FINEEC's role is to conduct evaluations on higher education institutions and fields of study and assist HEIs in their own evaluation activities.

Both higher education sectors in Finland have their respective student unions. University students are represented by The National Union of University Students in Finland (SYL), which is an interest organisation defending and improving the educational, financial, and social benefits and rights of the students. SYL represents over 130,000 university students, and membership in a student union is compulsory for all students studying for a full degree in Finnish universities. University of Applied Sciences Students in Finland (SAMOK) is an independent nonprofit organisation for students at universities of applied sciences representing about 140,000 students. Both of the student unions, and especially SYL, are influential in affecting education and evaluation policies of Finnish higher education.

How, then, are students engaged in Finnish higher education? The aim of this chapter is to shed light on this issue by describing issues related to student engagement from macro, meso and micro perspectives and highlight the fact that student engagement is more than representativeness in decision making bodies. In each perspective also a concrete example will be presented.

### **Student engagement at the macro level: quality audits**

Student engagement at the macro level refers to the socio-cultural climate on student experience, which typically is created at the national level. In Finland students are well represented in all the decision-making bodies at the national, institutional and departmental levels. Whenever a reform or any minor developmental activity at the national level is put in place, a steering group or committee always includes a representative from one or both of the student unions. Students are also members of University Board, which chooses the rector and defines the university's key operational and financial targets, strategy and management principles. Students also have representatives in a University Collegium, which, for example, decides on the number of members in the University Board, the duration of the term of office for the University Board and its members and elects the University Board members from outside the university community. Students are also represented in Faculty Council and all the department level decision-making and development bodies. All in all, students are considered to be important and equal stakeholders for Ministries, higher education institutions, faculties and departments. Next I will give an example of how students are engaged in the national quality assurance of Finnish higher education, that is, in the audit of HEIs.

In an audit, the quality system the HEI has developed from its own needs and goals is evaluated. Typically, students have participated in the development of a quality system in a higher education institution. Quality system refers to the development of the institution's activities as a whole, comprising quality management organisation, division of responsibility,

procedures, and resources. The audits assess how well the quality system meets the strategic and operational management needs of the HEI as well as how comprehensive and effective the quality management of the basic duties of the higher education institution is. Moreover, the HEI's quality policy, development of the quality system and how well-functioning and dynamic an entity the system forms are studied. In other words, audit does not evaluate the quality of the education or research of the HEI in question. The aim of the Finnish audit model is to support higher education institutions in developing quality systems that correspond to the European principles of quality assurance. After passing the audit, the HEI will receive a quality label valid for six years (FINEEC 2015).

The audit is carried out by a trained team of 5–7 members of which one is a student. The audit team visits audited HEI in order to verify and complement observations made on the basis of the audit materials about the quality system of the HEI. The aim is to make the visit an interactive event, which will support the development of the HEI's operations. During the site visit the audit team also meets and interviews students several times and asks their opinion on possibilities of giving feedback and being heard in university management, for example (FINEEC 2015).

Based on the materials and the visit, the audit team draws up an audit report, in which it also gives its appraisal of whether the HEI should pass the audit or be re-audited. The report highlights the strengths of the HEI's quality system and good practices, as well as makes development recommendations to the HEI. FINEEC's Higher Education Evaluation Committee, which has nine members, of which two are students, will make the decision on the audit result. Several audit criteria stress the importance of engaging students in quality assurance procedures of a higher education institution. The decision is based on the audit report produced by the audit team and the audit team's proposal for the audit result (FINEEC 2015).

As can be seen from this example, students are present at various stages and in various roles in the audit of Finnish HEIs. Students are an integral part of the audit team as well as key stakeholders in giving information on how well quality assurance procedures and processes are working in an audited HEI. Students are also members of the body that will make the decision as to whether an HEI passed the audit or not. Furthermore, whenever the audit model and criteria are revised, a planning group also has student members. This example of quality audits highlights the fact that in Finnish higher education students are always an inherent part of decision-making and assessment of higher education institutions.

In reality, the student representativeness relies on those who are active in either national or local students unions and as such represents only a very limited body of the whole student population and thus can be argued to be biased group of people. Therefore, the other, and more important, question is how willing the 'average Joe' students are to be engaged in their studies and in university life. This issue will be discussed in the next section.

## **Student engagement at the micro level: Not everything is what it seems**

In Finland, the government has made several reforms trying to engage students more in their studies and to encourage them to complete their studies on time. Behind these reforms is a concern for how long Finnish higher education can be considered a public good—in other words, how long it can be publicly funded. Therefore, government and higher education institutions have tried to rationalise and rebuild study paths so that students would come to higher education younger, graduate on time and transition smoothly to working life. However, students do not always see these initiatives in the same fashion and argue that government is trying to restrict and interfere with students' academic freedom by introducing various managerial measures, such as an upper limit on study times (Ursin, Rautopuro & Vålismaa 2011).

The main challenges, which are often interrelated, and are considered to have an impact on student engagement are the issue of a gap year, aimlessness in choosing study places, motivational issues, prolonged study times, the problem of dropouts, and entering into the labour market at a (relatively) advanced age (e.g. Uski 1999; Penttinen & Falck 2007; Litmanen et al. 2010). Government worries that too many students have a year off before transitioning from upper secondary school to tertiary education, leading to their entering both higher education and the working life too old (OKM 2010). However, from the point of view of the students, a gap year can provide an opportunity to clear up one's future study plans and fields. Furthermore, research evidence has shown that one gap year really does not have any effect on the future studies as 'gap year' students tend to catch up to those students who have started their studies immediately after high school (Parker, Thoemmes, Duineveld & Salmela-Aro 2015).

Students do not always make rational choices when choosing their study place, which can cause unnecessary changes between study programmes and discontinuing or even dropping out of the studies altogether. One of the reasons for this is that students do not get proper career guidance in senior high schools, which makes it difficult for young people under the age of 20 to make rational choices for future studies (Hautamäki et al. 2012). Government and HEIs tend to see this as a waste of resources, whereas for students this is a natural part of exploring one's own field of interest and professional identity. It is true that Finnish graduates enter labour markets at an older age, if compared to peers in OECD countries, for example (OECD 2009). However, this can partly be explained by the differences in educational systems, as Finns typically go to school one year older than in many other countries. Furthermore, in Finland a 5-year Master's degree is typically needed to enter the labour markets; in many other countries a 3-year undergraduate degree is good enough. Although there is no clear evidence, it is often argued in Finland that longer education provides more competent graduates.

Motivation obviously plays an important role in student engagement. Positive stance and motivation towards university studies enhance experiences of engagement (Haggis 2004; Chapman & Pyvis 2005). Motivation is often promoted by positive learning experiences

(Korhonen 2007). One of the main reasons for dropping out of the studies among the Finnish students is indeed motivational problems, which lead to poor commitment and engagement in the studies (Penttinen & Falck 2007), which in turn may lead to the experiences of anxiety and exhaustion. Furthermore, in addition to lack of motivation, uncertainty of selected study field, intentions to drop out, lack of prioritizing skills, problems in self-regulation, and insecurity regarding one's own skills characterize weak engagement in university studies among Finnish students (Törmä, Korhonen & Mäkinen 2012). These features are especially typical for those who proceed slowly in their studies (Haarala-Muhonen 2011).

It seems that the reality of student engagement is very different from the government's point of view and the students' point of view. These two realities often collide in the everyday practices of higher education institutions, which have to deal with the pressure coming from the government and wishes stemming from the students. In the next section, I will present two examples of how a higher education institution can try to enhance engagement of students in a student-centered way and at the same time try to meet the need of the government, too.

### **Student engagement at the meso level: 'ePortfolios and Goodies'**

In Finnish HEIs various measures have been taken to tackle with the challenges of student engagement as presented in the previous sections. Many of these measures are 'soft' ways of promoting students' commitment to their studies. The measures can often be characterized as student-centered practices to support personal development as a student and as a future employee. The University of Jyväskylä, which is a multidisciplinary university of 15,000 students and 2,500 faculty and staff members, has created a concept of 'Student Life' (<https://www.jyu.fi/studentlife/studentlife/en/>), which aims to create optimal conditions for successful and engaged studies and overall wellbeing for students. The two corner pillars of the model are ePortfolios and the Goodie wellbeing advisers.

#### *ePortfolios*

At the University of Jyväskylä, ePortfolio is a tool designed for tracking learning and experiences, planning for personal development and making visible expertise and competencies. The ePortfolio provides students with the possibility of tracking their learning, planning their studies and presenting their learning process or resulting expertise in a multimodal, layered and creative way. From the perspective of guidance and counseling, the ePortfolio can be used for recognising students' skills and objectives, discussing their career goals and supporting them in their study plans. Sharing the portfolios provides opportunities also for peer learning and feedback. The ePortfolio is structured in a way that helps the individual learner align their current experience and skills, their development and their future goals, and make visible their development and learning. Furthermore, it makes it possible to link the experiences to learning and skills development, and to the evidence of that learning or skill (Figure 1).



Figure 1. ePortfolio process of the University of Jyväskylä (<https://www.jyu.fi/studentlife/en/eportfolio>)

The ePortfolio environment is a combination of a working portfolio, objectives, skills and competences as well as presentation portfolios. The working portfolio helps students to write down what kind of previous skills they have. It also encourages students to think about their extracurricular skills. The working portfolio works as a private environment, where students can add their work experiences, studies, hobbies, voluntary work and international experience, for example. ePortfolio enables students to build their own skill archive in which they can collect different kind of documents, texts and other electronic material. Most importantly ePortfolio is not only a tool where students can gather samples of their skills and demonstrate their previous experience, but students will also be able to plan and design their own studies in a way that is meaningful for the future. Therefore, ePortfolio provides an opportunity to think of one's professional aims and goals. When setting a new goal, students can use ePortfolio to define what kind of special skills are needed to achieve this goal. This helps to plan studies in a goal-oriented way. A crucial element in ePortfolio is that students are able to tell and recite the skills that they have. In the Presentation portfolio, student are able to practice how to express themselves in the form of shared texts, pictures, videos, blogs, audios etc.

Naturally, the ePortfolio has its challenges as it demands that students be able to reflect the development of their expertise in the course of the studies, to make this development explicit and to be very target-oriented in their studies. At its best an ePortfolio can help students to become consciously engaged with their studies and to compose a narrative which shows the development of student identity through time.

*'Goodies'*

The aims of the Goodie operating model are to ensure that students have easily accessible wellbeing counselling for every need and phase of their studies, to support students in taking care of their study ability and to overcome any difficulties, and to help students find motivation to study and meaningfulness in their studies. The Goodie wellbeing advisers are voluntary university staff members who have been selected and trained to support the wellbeing of students, but they are not therapists or psychologists. A student can come with any issue or problem and discussions are always kept confidential. Indeed, the whole idea of the Goodie operating model is student centeredness in which the student is the one who approaches a Goodie when s/he needs advice on any student-related matter. Goodie advisers can help students find information on how to promote and enhance their own wellbeing, put them in touch with available peer support groups and share ideas regarding how to build their own support network.

The Goodie operating model is not only important from the point of view of enhancing student engagement. It also increases faculty members' and departments' understanding and awareness of those issues that might be problematic from the student's point of view and thus helps to react to any challenging issues as soon as possible. As is the case with ePortfolio, the Goodie model requires students to be active in seeking help.

These two models from the University of Jyväskylä show alternative ways of trying to engage students in their studies. Traditional ways, such as engagement surveys, are also used in some Finnish universities as complementary information. However, in the Finnish context typically students are invited to be engaged through student-centered ways. This kind of inclusive higher education is in line with the idea of intentionally offering incentives, opportunities, and reinforcements for broadened student learning experiences (Sandeen 2004; Harper & Quayle, 2009).

## **Conclusion**

In Finnish higher education, student engagement seems to have two layers or realities. First, at the level of representativeness, students are well engaged and students have strong voices in decision-making bodies and strategy development (macro level). Naturally, we can always pose critical questions like who do the student representatives actually represent and is student engagement then seen as a form of activism and policy rather than development-oriented activity. Therefore, it is crucial to see beyond the 'official student agenda' in order to be able to see the big picture of student engagement. Secondly, at the level of everyday practices (micro level), students are less engaged and therefore HEIs (meso level) in collaboration with students have developed various initiatives to tackle these issues. There has been a tendency to move from external support systems (like a student's financial aid) to internal support models and structures of which the ePortfolio and Goodies well-being advisors are examples. Hence, when improving student engagement, individual students are not only to be seen as the customers of the university teaching or counselling services, but rather as active constructors of their own lives, careers and employment (Stuart, 2005;



Sallinen, 2006). This indeed is a way to move forward and close the gap between the two, occasionally conflicting realities of student representativeness and actual student engagement in their studies.

Korhonen (2012) has presented a model of inclusive and student-centered higher education in which student engagement is seen to be constructed in the triangle of the meaning of the studies, learning identity and social practices of guidance, which in turn can create a sense of belongingness, artistry of academic learning and participation in various relevant communities during the studies (Figure 2).

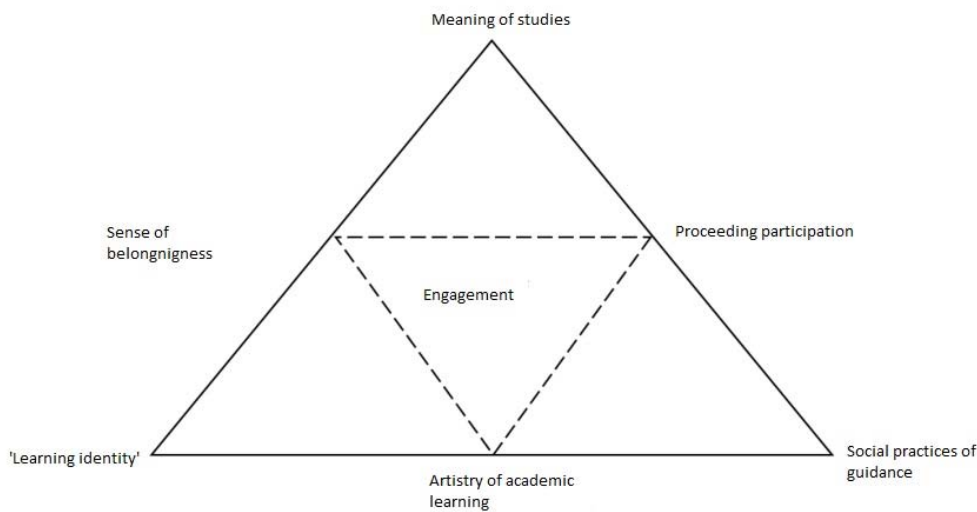


Figure 2. The elements of student engagement (Korhonen 2012)

The *sense of belongingness* is pivotal when considering engagement in studies and communities in education. Students may anticipate a range of objectives and outcomes for their studies, from personal growth to more practical and vocationally oriented objectives. When a student experiences the studies as meaningful through his/her objectives, the sense of belongingness will also be stronger. On one hand, the sense of belongingness is also very personal, but on the other hand, the community can also strengthen or weaken it socially with its own practices and expectations. *Proceeding participation* refers to the ‘memberships’ in various communities during students’ studies, such as a student peer community. The dimensions of proceeding participation are constructed around a joint enterprise, a mutual engagement, and a shared repertoire of those practices, knowledge and values. The studying process can be at its best a multi-membership in intersecting and simultaneous communities, where knowledge is shared and constructed, and where meaningful experiences can arise. In the worst case, when contacts and participation remain superficial, or they are totally missing, studying can be a lonely grind without meaningful engagement and memberships in any community of practice (Korhonen 2012).

*The artistry of academic learning* is connected to academic studying competence and how capable students perceive themselves to be in the higher education environment. Artistry

in an academic learning setting is connected to the learner's self-conception, but also to those social, emotional, and physical learning abilities that are needed for academic achievement and success in a higher education context. The barriers to student engagement may depend on a weak self-concept of 'learning identity' or relate to concrete deficiencies or difficulties in academic studying competence (Korhonen 2012).

Although there seem to be conflicting views, especially between government and students, on how engaged Finnish students are in their studies, higher education institutions have, nonetheless, implemented several novel and student-centered ways to get students to be more committed to their studies. How successful these initiatives will be remains to be seen as current globalised and occasionally turbulent higher education environments can pose new and unforeseen challenges, which may or may not underline already existing differences in views of student engagement.

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