



Internationalising Finland's Leading Graduate School of Universities of Applied Sciences

Ulla Kotonen, Päivi Huotari, Katri Ojasalo

Lahti University of Applied Sciences (Finland)

ulla.kotonen@lamk.fi, paivi.huotari@lamk.fi, katri.ojasalo@laurea.fi

Abstract

During the last few years, higher education institutions (HEIs) in Finland and worldwide have faced a lot of challenges such as decreasing public funding, increasing demand to improve productivity, efficiency and quality of education, increasing international competition as well as changing needs and expectations of students and other university stakeholders. As an answer to these challenges there have been several reforms to increase the strengths, quality and attractiveness of Finnish higher education institutions. This paper focuses one of them: Federation of Universities of Applied Sciences (FUAS Federation) and FUAS Graduate School as one of its new operating models.

FUAS Graduate School is a unique form of network-based cooperation between three universities of applied sciences in Finland. It covers more than 20 Master's degree programs in various fields of study varying from healthcare to technology and natural resources, from business to design and hospitality. The central aim of the FUAS Graduate School is to improve the quality and impact of the master degree programmes, and thus boost the international competitiveness of the Greater Helsinki Metropolitan area.

The paper analyses the development process and implementation of the FUAS Graduate School. This is an action research that has lasted for over three years. In action research, the purpose is to develop solutions to practical problems and, at the same time, develop new knowledge. The development work of FUAS Graduate School started in 2009, and the first practical action was an intensive cross-evaluation in 2010. In 2013 the development and implementation have already a firm basis. The paper shows that organizing international symposiums with and for master students is a good and easy way to enhance their international competences. In the future, the master degree programmes of FUAS Graduate School need to recognize and enhance their international profiles. Also, developing the international competencies of the staff tends to be important.

1. Introduction

The Federation of Universities of Applied Sciences (FUAS) was established by three independent universities of applied sciences to better serve students, business life and public sector and to seize opportunities of a strongly internationalising environment of the Greater Helsinki Metropolitan area. The educational profile of FUAS is focused on being an international pioneer in workplace-oriented pedagogical solutions integrated into RDI. FUAS is based on network-based cooperation in several operating areas for example in summer studies, virtual studies and master's level education [1].

FUAS Graduate School is by quantitative measures Finland's leading graduate school of universities of applied sciences (UASs). It produces about 20 per cent of all master's degrees at UASs in Finland. FUAS Graduate School co-operation is based on networking with the attempt of developing Master-level education and providing the students with a wide choice. The purpose of this paper is to analyse the development process and implementation of the FUAS Graduate School focusing especially on the internationalization of the master degree programmes.

2. Internationalization as a challenge of Master's degree education at Universities of Applied Sciences in Finland

The higher education sector worldwide is being challenged with issues it has never confronted before. The challenges such as tightening finance [2], increasing demand to productivity and efficiency [3], increasing



demand to improve the quality of education [3; 4; 5; 6], increasing competition between HEIs [3; 7], integration of the higher education systems, and internationalization [8; 9] force HEIs to elevate their efforts toward some of the most radical changes it has ever been required to undertake [9].

Internationalisation of HEIs is an important part of the renewal for several reasons. First, the local mental and financial resources are limited. By international networking HEIs can improve their competence level, available resources, competitiveness and innovation ability. Second, international cooperation is seen as the best way to improve quality and remove overlapping activities. So far internationalisation has not played an important role in the strategies and profiles of the Finnish HEIs [10]. In practice, this means that HEIs have not offered students, researchers, teachers and other personnel enough genuinely international and multicultural operating environments. HEIs are seen also as key players in the internationalization of society. For students studying in international study groups improves the students' language skills and increase cross-cultural understanding [11; 12]. Thus, in the future, the HEIs have to include more contents that enhance internationalisation in their degrees [10].

The strategy for the internationalization of Finnish HEI system [11] aims to create a genuinely international higher education community that would promote society's ability to function in an open international environment, support the balanced development of a multicultural society and participate actively in solving global problems. Thus, the strategy highlights that the HEIs should actively utilise international cooperation opportunities. HEIs should also actively support the multicultural higher education community and promote internationalisation in the home country [11].

Consequently, in addition to a profound knowledge and skills needed for developing the professional field, studies leading to a master's degree should provide students with knowledge and skills needed to function and communicate internationally [13]. This is also evident in the descriptions of the level 7 in the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) to which the master level studies belong [14]. Also the recommendations for generic competences for master level programmes defined by Arene, i.e. the Rector's Conference of Finnish UASs, highlight internationality. A student should be able to communicate internationally, operate in international environments and sense new opportunities for internationalization [15].

3. Methodology of the study

The data for this study have been collected and analyzed in an action research process that has been going on for over three years. This study reports the first two cycles of the action research. The idea of action research was introduced by Lewin [16] and several definitions have been provided for action research [17; 18]. In action research the purpose is to develop solutions to practical problems, and to develop new knowledge. When applied in educational contexts, action research aims to understand, evaluate and change some educational practice [19].

The process of action research is a flexible spiral which allows change and research to be achieved at the same time [20]. In this cyclical process, action and critical reflection take place in turn, and the process goes through a series of steps including planning, acting, observing, and reflecting [18]. The purpose of the reflection is to review the previous action and plan the next one. In educational contexts, action research involves deciding on a focus for research and action, planning to implement an intervention, implementing the intervention, observing the outcomes, reflecting on what has happened, and then planning, implementing, observing and reflecting a further series of activities if necessary [20].

The action research presented in this paper went through two cycles. The first cycle consisted of a wide cross-evaluation of master programmes in 2010. The purpose of the evaluation was to assess the present state of the programmes and to find out shared development areas. A comprehensive self-evaluation, based on a thoroughly planned evaluation form, was conducted in altogether 11 master programmes. Each of the profound self-evaluation reports were then cross-evaluated by representatives of another programme, and finally the representatives of the 11 programmes participated in a two-day workshop for reviewing and discussing the reports. After the workshop, the data from the self- and cross-evaluation reports and workshops were analyzed with conventional qualitative content analysis by coding and



analyzing data to identify common salient themes and grasp the major development areas of the master's programmes.

Internationalization was one of the development areas identified in this first cycle of the action research. A concrete action to promote internationalization was then created together by teachers from different master programmes at FUAS: they started to organize an annual international symposium for FUAS master students. In the second cycle of the action research, the data were collected during two international symposiums in 2011 and 2012 by a questionnaire given to all participating students. The questionnaire contained closed and open questions related on the symposium lectures, workshops and internationalization. Altogether 342 students responded.

4. Research findings

Based on the data gathered during the cross-evaluation process, internationalization was identified as one of the most important development areas. The programmes had typically established some basic forms of internationality: international course contents, English learning material and a few international lectures. In some curricula there were also one or some courses in English. One programme was planned and carried out totally in English. In this programme the student group was multicultural, and internationalization was a natural part of the studies. In almost all programmes the staff took actively part in international cooperation. However, the students' international exchange seemed to be very rare. Only four students in eleven programmes had participated in a student exchange. This is partly because in Finland most of the master students of UASs work full time while they study. Based on the data, two programmes had no international activities. At the entire FUAS level, the internationalization of the programmes obviously needed to be strengthened.

Based on the results of the first action research cycle, FUAS Graduate School started to organize international symposiums. The symposium 'Ethical approach in social and health care leadership and management' has been organized twice, in autumn 2011 and 2012. The symposium focuses on ethical dilemmas in changing social and health care environment and organizations, and it brings international experts to Finland. Based on the data, the first symposium was seen as a useful and a different way to learn and enhance international competencies. The lectures were seen useful, but the level of usefulness varied. Half of the lectures were useful for most of the students (84 - 86%), but the other half of them were less useful. The results of the second symposium show that the students found the international lectures useful or very useful (84 %). Also the symposium workshops were evaluated to be useful or very useful (83 %). According to the open comments on the questionnaires of both symposiums, students emphasized the symposium's contents more, when the themes were more related to their own programme. The students did not find it too difficult to understand the lectures and discussions in English. Still, some students preferred the lectures and courses to been given in Finnish, and according to the results some of the students do not tend to see international competencies or internationalization important.

5. Discussion

The FUAS Graduate School was formed to better serve master students and other stakeholders and to increase the international competitiveness of the master degree programmes. Based on the results presented in this paper and in the international FUAS curriculum review [13], there is an evident need for further systematic development of internationalization of the master degree programmes. Establishing stronger bonds with international HEIs and RDI networks should be a strong priority. Organizing international symposiums with and for the master students is a good and easy way to enhance their international competences. After the two cycles of action research described in this paper, the third cycle has begun with an aim to organize further international symposiums by expanding to other professional fields, such as responsible business, in order to get larger amounts of master students involved. Moreover, organizing the annual symposiums in various fields has got a systematic procedure, and the symposiums have now a more formal role in the FUAS master studies. In the future, the master



programmes in FUAS Graduate School need to further enhance their international profiles. International competencies of the staff should also be emphasized.

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