

EXTENSION OF EDUCATIONAL AWARENESS INTO HIGHER EDUCATION

Introduction to the special issue on higher education

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This collection of papers highlights the higher education conference held in Tallinn, Estonia in January 2013, sponsored by the European Social Fund via PRIMUS-programme. The conference drew together a 350-plus audience from all Nordic and Baltic countries plus educators from the UK, Ireland and Russia. Some keynote speakers and workshop leaders represented Estonian universities (Larissa Jõgi, Mari Karm and Kristjan Port), others were from overseas: James E. Groccia from Auburn University (USA), L. Dee Fink from University of Oklahoma (USA), Lynn McAlpine from University of Oxford (UK), Kathryn Sutherland from Victoria university of Wellington (New Zealand) and Susan M. Zvacek from Fort Hays State University (USA). Overseas lecturers were invited to share their varied experience while regional presenters discussed the steps needed to meet the stakeholders' expectations. Four subtopics extended ranging from strategies for teaching non-traditional, diverse students to applications of modern technology in teaching. Some speakers voiced their concerns about the reduced competitiveness of mass higher education. A lot of current higher education issues were left off the agenda, e.g. ranking, governance, financing, management, special education needs. A prominent local politician admitted the necessity to move away from the model of free higher education adopted as recently as in 2013 by Estonian public universities as it was not viable.

This collection of articles features scholarly work selected through peer review process to the conference. The studies represent both qualitative and quantitative approaches to issues in higher education.

An international team of authors discusses entrepreneurship education, covering a vast array of countries. As reflected by the EU documents published since 2001, European higher education seems to lack entrepreneurial spirit although the importance of entrepreneurship issue has extensively been addressed by policy documents in almost all societies of the world. (Higher) education institutions need to increase their efforts in encouraging entrepreneurship while maintaining the high quality of specialist training and promoting research-related knowledge and skills. The authors of these two papers represent teaching and research communities in three countries, some of them were originally drawn together during graduate spring school in Aarhus in 2012.

Liina Adov, Olev Must, Mari-Liis Mägi Karin Täht, and Gerli Silm from the University of Tartu, Estonia, focus on the results and motivation of students related to low-impact testing. Tests of this kind may be applied to assure a competitive or threshold-based admission to the studies, while the low-impact tests are widely used to collect fair and comprehensive feedback throughout the studies. Among the wide range of formative assessment tools in use in higher education, the impact of any individual assessment instruments remains low. This article represents a collaborative research model joining together senior academics, young researchers and PhD students.

There is a paper on intercultural issues by Kirsi Kettula and Maija Lampinen from Aalto University, Finland, Fei Fan and Dan Jiang from Tongji University, China. Universities in many parts of the world claim to have consolidated their experience in providing quality education for Asian and African students. Newcomers to international higher education market need to elaborate their approaches, which means modifying the national (traditional, conventional) teaching style, assessment technique and administrative provisions – beyond just mastering the English language. This article was prompted by specific challenges faced by the authors.

Laura Hirsto from University of Helsinki together with Maija Lampinen and Maire Syrjäkari from Aalto University, Finland, present a long-term study following a process-oriented university teacher-training course that sought to integrate students with different disciplinary backgrounds. The design of this full-year course was inspired by the idea of community of practice and collaborative inquiry learning.

Liina Lepp, Marvi Remmik, Mari Karm, and Äli Leijen from the University of Tartu, Estonia, have explored PhD supervisors' ideas of faculty requirements towards supervision of doctoral candidates. The study shows that the faculty supervising PhD dissertations across the disciplines agree that the main objective of doctoral study is that a PhD candidate has to become an independent researcher. Another issue highlighted by the study was the gap between the years required until graduation from science-based doctoral programs on the one hand, and humanities and social sciences on the other. The reasons include the availability of more laboratory-centred teamwork and better funding options in natural sciences, which will lead to timely graduation.

To sum up, may I assert that research in higher/tertiary education has grown exponentially including a wider range of topics, levels of education and applying a growing range of research methodologies since the 1970s. Some of the more recent topical additions include issues with student harassment, special needs, study motivation, fair access, and efficiency. Throughout this process of growth, in Estonia similarly to other countries who have welcomed a wider, non-traditional population to institutions of higher education, foci have obviously shifted, as there is more need than ever to provide additional support to educators in the classroom. These developments have been accompanied by the extension of education research into the higher education. In a tiny Estonia in charge of a distinct Finno-Ugric language with less than one million native speakers there are more than 30 higher educational institutions and around 70 000 students, while the expenditure per student remains quite low and this discrepancy causes a value conflict in academy (Jaakson and Reino 2013).

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