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Background matters. Students with an immigrant background in higher education.

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The purpose of this evaluation report is to examine the national situation of the inclusion and participation of students with an immigrant background in higher education, the related obstacles and the currently functioning practices. The concept 'immigrant background' covers both immigrants and immigrants' children born in Finland. The evaluation combines both statistical and experiential data. In addition to statistics, materials have been collected in student and personnel workshops and in management interviews at Aalto University, Arcada University of Applied Sciences, Diaconia University of Applied Sciences, University of Eastern Finland, Karelia University of Applied Sciences, Oulu University of Applied Sciences, University of Oulu, Police University College, University of Tampere, Turku University of Applied Sciences and University of Turku.

The evaluation is based on the principles of enhancement-led evaluation. Enhancement-led evaluation emphasises interaction and engagement of the evaluation participants. The evaluations are carried out in a way that supports the higher education institutions' ability to evaluate and enhance its activities. One of the objectives of the evaluation is to enable students, providers of higher education and decision-makers of educational policy to identify the strengths and development needs of their activities with the help of the results recorded in the report.

One of the key results of the evaluation is that higher education institutions primarily do not identify those with an immigrant background as a distinct group. As a result of this, there are currently few established operating models. However, the evaluation group identified the following positive practices and strengths during the evaluation visits: during their studies tutor teachers, guidance counsellors, and peer students play an important role in study guidance for students with an immigrant background. Student organizations have also started a promising effort to integrate students with an immigrant background in student activities. Events and practices across various sectors with, for example, municipal operators and families have increased students' awareness of the opportunities created by higher education studies when it comes to integration with Finnish working life and society. Preparatory training for higher education studies, organised since 2010, is a highly functional practice at a national level. These activities should be continued and further established.

The key recommendations for increasing inclusion are:

- **The identification of students with an immigrant background must be made possible.** The evaluation visits show that higher education institutions primarily do not identify those with an immigrant background as a distinct group. As a result, it is difficult to monitor the amounts of students and the progress of studies as well as to allocate communication, guidance and support in an appropriate way. The evaluation group recommends that higher education institutions implement a common and systematic identification practice so that the monitoring and reaching of applicants with an immigrant background would become possible. In the future, this would support the knowledge-based steering of activities for the growing population group which is yet underrepresented in higher education.
- **The need for affirmative action must be identified.** Several higher education institutions have started to record objectives of a diverse community, equality and parity in their strategies and similar documentation. The evaluation visits showed that the special treatment needs for the target group are not identified. As a result, communications about various application methods and studying opportunities, for example, do not reach the target group and the students are not provided with sufficient support during their studies. At the moment, most of the supportive activities in the application process are also primarily focused on universities of applied sciences. The evaluation group encourages higher education institutions to actively consider various forms of affirmative action to provide support in the application process and during the studies, promote the sense of inclusion and assist in the transfer into working life.
- **S2 teaching is not always realised as intended.** During their visit, the evaluation group saw several examples of directing students who were born in Finland and have excellent Finnish language skills to the S2 (Finnish as a second language) path. As a result, they were not able to optimise their development of academic language skills. Also, during students' higher education studies institutions should guarantee language courses that meet the students' needs and build advancing learning pathways systematically or the students' linguistic development. Language clinics and "recap sessions" held once a month, for example, have proven to be functional. In the future, higher education institutions should identify the needs of students with an immigrant background when it comes to the development of specialist-level language skills.
- **The connection between studies and working life must be strengthened.** According to the statistical materials, the placement of students with a Finnish background after the completion of their degree is extremely different from that of immigrants as nearly one third of immigrants leave Finland five years after completing their studies. The evaluation group recommends that higher education institutions promote the connection between their students and working life during the studies. The identification of competence should be further promoted, apprenticeship opportunities during the studies should be increased and support should be offered for networking with potential employers during the studies.
- **A project-driven approach does not support systematic development of operations.** At the moment, the funding of the operations is mostly based on projects. The recurring application processes of different projects and their short-term nature are a strain for the higher education institutions and do not support long-term development work. The national entity formed by the projects is also fragmented and does not promote cooperation between higher education institutions. The evaluation group that the operations should be established in order to improve their systematic approach and impact at a national level. This also requires secured funding.

- **A follow-up evaluation** must be implemented after five years. The evaluation group recommends targeting the evaluation at the group that does not access higher education. According to the statistical materials, the number of young people with an immigrant background will considerably increase in the near future, which is why it is important to monitor the progress of the evaluation as the volumes of potential students with immigrant backgrounds increase.

Keywords

Evaluation, higher education institutions, universities of applied sciences, universities, students with immigrant backgrounds, inclusion