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OPTIMISING THE WEB-PAGES CONCERNING THE INCOMING EXCHANGE
STUDENTS TO KYMENLAAKSO UNIVERSITY OF APPLIED SCIENCES

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ABSTRACT

Student exchange is a growing trend among students in higher education institutions around Europe. With the increase in the numbers of both outgoing and incoming exchange students the different educational institutions see an increase in the workload handling the requests concerning the exchange periods the students will undertake.

The objective of this thesis was to analyse the main information source, provided for the potential incoming exchange students to Kymenlaakso University of Applied Sciences, the web-pages concerning the incoming students, and compose suggestions to the optimisation of these web-pages.

A quantitative method was used to analyse the web-pages by sending a questionnaire to the exchange students who have used the pages. Further a comparative analysis was carried out of the web-pages, concerning incoming exchange students, of six other universities of applied sciences in Finland.

The result of the research outlines suggestions and hints for improvements which can improve the user experience of KyUASs web-pages.

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1   INTRODUCTION

The first place potential exchange students, to Kymenlaakso University of Applied Sciences (KyUAS), are likely to find information about KyUAS, is from the Internet. For that reason the web-pages of the International Office of KyUAS should be seen as the main tool for informing the exchange students of e.g. application procedures, availability of study programs, guides and forms for the application. During every application period the International Office of KyUAS receives several questions along the same lines e.g. regarding the procedures of the application, course availability and arrival. This makes it clear that some information areas on the web-pages are not emphasised enough or are simply missing from the web-pages.

The reason for the choice of this research topic is that when starting working in the International Office of KyUAS, handling the matters concerning the incoming exchange students to the Kouvola and Kuusankoski campuses, no guidelines were available on how to maintain e.g. the web-pages concerning the incoming exchange students. Therefore creating a set of suggestions that can be utilised, also by others, when working with this area seemed like a good idea.

As such, the web-pages for the International Office in KyUAS are only a sub part of a very large web-site, built for the whole organization. Therefore there are certain guidelines that must be followed, such as general layout, font and font size. In general the layout of what is published there should be similar to the rest of the site. This makes it easier for the staff of the International Office since then they only have to concentrate on the content of the web-pages.

Many universities of applied sciences (UAS) in Finland are also striving to obtain quality certificates. For the years 2010-2012 eight UASs were selected by The Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council (FINHEEC) as Centres of Excellence in university of applied sciences education. KyUAS was one of them. (FINHEEC 2010). With 25 universities of applied sciences in Finland, of

which many were applying to be Centres of Excellence, it was certainly beneficial to attain such an accreditation.

1.1 Research setting

The objective of this research work is to get an idea of what the users/customers of the web-pages for incoming exchange students think of the pages created for them. Secondly, to try and get an idea why exchange students ask questions about information already provided in the web-pages. As a result, proposals on how to set up the pages, so the users will get the most out of them, meaning what can be done so the web-pages will be easy to overview and use. This thesis is for KyUAS International Office, the objective is to use the results as a tool for improvements and optimising the services provided on the web-pages, in order to better meet the expectations of the exchange students.

This research will try to answer the following question:
What improvements can be made to the web-pages concerning the incoming exchange students to KyUAS, in order to improve the user experience?

1.2 Limitations to the research

Analysing the web-site in general could have been the main target of this research but it would have been too large an undertaking, therefore it was decided to delimitate the research to focus on the web-pages concerning the incoming exchange students.

Since the web-pages of the International Office is only a sub part of the whole KyUAS web-site, there are limitations to which the International Office can influence the pages, such as general layout, colour scheme and so on.

Since the target group to whom the questionnaire was sent is rather small there might be a low amount of respondents. The result of this can be a

skewed view on what incoming exchange students really thinks of the web-pages.

1.3 Explanation of concepts frequently used in this research

International Office – the unit that is taking care of the issues concerning outgoing and incoming exchange students, lecturers and staff exchanges e.g. paperwork related to the exchanges. Further the International Office is taking care of the partner institution contracts and payments of grants e.g. ERASMUS grant.

Exchange student – In this thesis the term exchange student is to be perceived as a student from one country who is going to another country for one or two semesters for the purpose of studying.

Web-page – In this thesis the term web-page is to be understood as a sub part of a web-site. A web-site usually consists of several interconnected pages.

UAS – University of Applied Sciences

2 COMMUNICATION THROUGH WEB-PAGES

2.1 Online communication

The internet is, among many other things, an interactive communication medium which facilitates broadcasting and publishing in a way that is not bund to face to face contact or time limits. The information is available whenever and in most cases wherever, provided one has access to a computer, or another device, that is capable of connecting to the internet. (Berthon, Pitt and Watson, 1996)

In terms of the marketing communication mix, the internet can be seen as a tool that places itself somewhere between face to face servicing of customers

and awareness through broadcasting on e.g. TV or radio. There are several different reasons for developing a web-site. Some of the more common are to create awareness about and selling a product or service, or to assist as a customer service tool. (Berthon, Pitt and Watson, 1996)

Garrett (2003, 31) states that when designing a web-page or web-site there are two distinctive types of sites. There are the web-sites which are software interface orientated, and there are web-sites that are Hypertext system orientated. The main differences between the two types are that one, web as software interface, is meant for web-sites where there are possibilities for e.g. selling and buying goods, playing games or even Social Medias. The web as Hypertext system is focusing on information and the distribution of it.

The pages of KyUAS are primarily Hypertext system orientated. Since mainly information is provided there. It is used as a tool to reach students, staff and other interested parties.

2.2   Need of the internet as a communication tool

In 1976 when the forerunner of the ERASMUS programme, Joint Study Programmes, was started, a university would have one or two partner contacts. In 1990 the number was around 10 partners. In the year 2000, universities participating in the ERASMUS programme had on average 50 partner institutions. (Teichler 2004, 398). By, October 2011, KyUAS had 105 partners in 24 different countries, who were sending exchange students to eight different study lines. (KyUAS 2011)

KyUASs 105 partner institutions are mainly placed in the European Union but also in Russia and one in Malawi/Africa. To send leaflets and application material to all these partners on a yearly basis is very costly and time consuming. Therefore concentrating these matters on one place, online, makes it possible to reach all partners and their students when they need the information. Furthermore fast updates of materials are possible when only having to maintain one source. In practice it means that when there have been

significant changes, to the content of the materials or procedures communicated on the web-pages, the partners will be notified by an e-mail announcing these changes and at the same time awareness is created about the exchange possibilities at KyUAS.

Another argument supporting the use of online communication would be the sheer number of internet users. According to Internet World Stats (2011) there were 2 billion internet users in the world as of 31 of March 2011. All these people are from many different countries and cultures so when building a web-page one should keep in mind that not all users are fluent in English, so the pages should be kept simple, straight forward and user friendly.

2.3   Designing web pages with user-experience in focus

There are countless ways to design a web-site or a web-page, and what looks good and functions for some users might not appeal to others at all. One way of approaching the task of designing web-pages is to make it a user-centered approach. Meaning the end user is in focus all the way through the process, from the planning stage to the ready product that is launched. Garrett (2003, 134) describes how web-sites should not be designed with features just because they are possible but because they enhance the user experience. One of the key elements in information design is to get the information elements arranged and grouped, in ways that sustain the goals and tasks of the users.

Garrett lists five building planes as the foundation in the design process:

1. The surface plane, is what the user see and what the user will be using, meaning the published web-pages.

2. The skeleton plane, here is determined the optimal placements of the different buttons pictures to make the site as efficient as possible.

3. The structure plane, defines the categories of the pages, how they fit together, and essentially how the user gets around to all the parts of the web-pages needed.

4. The scope plane, meaning the range or capacity, determines what is included on the web-pages. This can be features, pictures, links and text.

5. The strategy plane, here it is determined what the owner of the pages want to get out of them and what the user should get out of them.

The planes are created from starting with strategy plane and ending with the surface plane. However in the time span during the development the different planes overlap each other in the way that one plane should not be ready and "set in stone" when moving forward to the next plane. Ideas change and compromises have to be made. Just because one can think of it, does not mean that it would physically function. One still can't taste or smell through the computer. Throughout the development of the different planes the work moves from an abstract strategy towards a concrete surface. (Garrett 2003, 20-24)

In the case of KyUAS International Office web-pages, the target is to ease the process to become an exchange student at KyUAS, and usually the users want to have clear and useful information.

Another perspective that has to be kept in mind when designing web-pages is how people really use the internet. Studies indicate that users don't read the text but merely scan the page. (Nielsen, 1997) Even though the study was carried out in 1997; it is still referred to and quoted in many places on the net. The test concludes that instead of reading the text thoroughly the vast majority only scan the content for keywords relevant to their search. In a later test by Jacob Nielsen (2008) the conclusion was that the time spent on reading web-pages would only allow readers to actually read about 20 percent of the content. (Nielsen, 2008). Of this time, 80 percent is spent above the fold, the point where one have to start scrolling down, leaving only 20 percent of the

time for everything below the fold. This has changed since the launch of the internet, in 1994-96 tests concluded that users simply did not scroll down at all. (Nielsen, 2010)

Main message by Krug (2006 11-38) to web designers is "*Don't make me think*" closely followed by "*Get rid of half the words on each page, then get rid of half of what's left*". The idea is to eliminate the content, on the web-pages, that have the slightest chance of confusing a user even for just a fraction of a second. This can be simple wording, abbreviations or other things that create "noise" on the pages.

Meaning the optimal design would be where everything is clear for the user, and the navigation through the pages would be natural and not leave anything to be in doubt of.

The second thought Krug (2006, 45-47) highlights, is the fact that web-pages contain too much information. When looking at the studies of Jacob Nielsen and the statements that users only read about 20 percent of the content of a web-page, it only makes sense to follow the advice of Steve Krug. *"Get rid of half the words on each page, then get rid of half of what's left".* Omitting half the content might be an easy task but reducing the text even more after that might be difficult or even very hard. However he is trying to encourage people to be cold-blooded when chopping away in the content. The content that must be omitted is the "Happy talk" and instructions on how to use the site. With happy talk is meant the content free text filling the pages to be polite and to introduce the site.

2.4   Total quality in the web-pages

Already in the 1990s manufactures discovered that quality in their services was crucial in maintaining customers. Today this has spread far beyond manufactures into all service sectors, also education. (Evans & Lindsay 2011, 48).

Looking at the International Office as an organisation the term total quality can be applied. An article by Dean and Bowen (1994) cited in Evans and Lindsay (2011. p 20) defines three fundamental principles in total quality:

1. A focus on the customers and stakeholders
   From the point of KyUAS International Office view the exchange students, lectures going and coming on exchange and the partner institutions are the customers, and the University is the stakeholder.

2. Employee engagement and teamwork by everyone in the organisation
   It will take the team of staff members in the International Office to continually be engaged in the "keeping up" of the web-pages to ensure total quality. This includes also the areas where the International Office is in need of input from other departments of KyUAS, in regards to e.g. course availability and scheduling.

3. A process focus supported by continuous improvement and learning
   In defining a process it is meant to be a series of activities that when carried out should bring a result. So when updating the web-pages one has to listen to what the students ask and where they communicate the problem areas to be. In this way knowledge can be attained on what has to be improved. Then the end result should be that the "problem" areas are identified and by updating them the web-pages have improved.

By using these three steps in regards to the web-pages of the International Office of KyUAS it would be possible to maintain a quality level that perhaps could give a competitive advantage.

According to Krug (2006, 60) one must remember too, that the web-site and the web-pages also reflect the image the users get of the organisation that runs the site. If the layout and navigation on the web-site is unorganized and /

or bad the users might lose confidence in the organisation and take their business elsewhere. So by creating a well balanced, well functioning web-site it is possible to create a positive image of the institution, and in that way attract and retain customers.

In KyUASs case, exchange students who come to find information from the web-pages and fail to find what they need might choose to disregard KyUAS as an option for their exchange period simply because they were not able to navigate through the web-pages.

Evans & Lindsay (2011, 91-92) state that when defining quality there are many places to look. A few gurus have stood out in the creation of quality management. One of them is Dr. W. Edwards Deming, American born but helped to revolutionise the Japanese industry after the Second World War. He recognised that through statistical measuring of the processes of a whole business from the floor worker to the top manager, it would be possible to bring awareness of quality to the people who could improve it, and in that way bring quality to the company. Edwards stated: *A product or a service processes quality if it helps somebody and it enjoys a good and sustainable market.* In that way he never defined quality in a clear-cut manner. Edwards was mainly focusing on reducing variations in specifications for productions and inconsistence in human behaviour. By streamlining the way things are done it is possible to measure them and improve them.

Evans & Lindsay (2011, 103-105) point out another guru who was more precise in the formulations of quality. Joseph Juran, he too, worked in the US and in Japan at the same time as Dr. W. Edward Deming. Juran's approach to defining quality was *"fitness for use"* meaning quality should be viewed internally and externally, since quality is related to two factors. The first: customer satisfaction due to product performance. The second: elimination of product deficiencies which results in customer dissatisfaction. To achieve this Juran stated that one needs to know what to control and use the right tools like, specific units of measurements and preset standards to do so. Then by

measuring the actual performance and analysing the difference and acting on the results it would be possible to create quality.

2.5   Insurance of quality

One way of assuring that the quality level is sufficient, and that it will maintain this level of quality, could be to apply Deming's "Plan Do Check Act" cycle also known as the PDCA cycle. (EAIE 2010, 18) The PDCA cycle break down the process into four manageable areas.
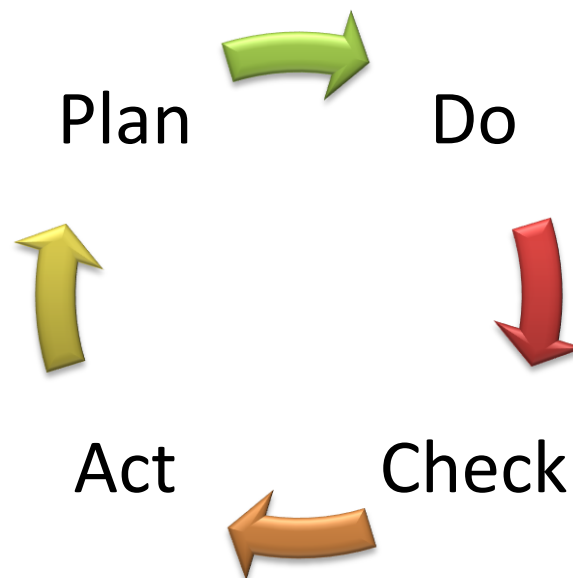
Figure 1 "Plan Do Check Act" – cycle

- Plan, is the start where the outline of what there have to be undertaken is created. In this case the plan can be to improve the user experience for users of the KyUAS web-pages for the incoming exchange students. Some of the goals could be to reduce the amount of e-mails, the amount of questions, and improving the quality of the web-pages to name a few.

- Do, is the part where the initial changes are done, meaning you carry out the plan you have created. So one will have to do the updating of the web-pages and launch the new pages so the users would be able to start giving feedback.

- Check, is the section you check if the changes done have improved the user experience. The checking can be done by monitoring the amount of e-mails and questions. Further by using the feedback given by the users should be analysed.

- Act; action should be taken on the feedback and the results of the analysis and the final changes should be carried out.

Bork (2002) who also uses the PDCA cycle points out, that since it is a cycle the steps should be carried out regularly in order to ensure the quality level wouldn't decline. Also with time things change, making it needed to redo the quality control and carry out the PDCA steps again.

3   STUDENT EXCHANGE

In this section the main focus is on incoming student exchange which relates to the topic. Areas covered are the reasons for going on exchange, the different exchange programmes and key figures relevant to this thesis.

3.1   Reasons for going on exchange

There are several opportunities, under which students can go on exchange. Some of the more popular programmes within Europe are ERASMUS and NORDPLUS, additional to these there are several other options. The institutions own bilateral agreements with partners outside Europe and Scandinavia, free movers and Asia exchange just to name a few. Of the above mentioned programmes ERASMUS is by far the most popular, for students coming to and leaving from Finland. (Garam & Korkala 2011)

After supporting different pilot programmes for six years the ERASMUS programme was launched in 1987 with 3244 students from 11 countries participation that first academic year. (European Commission, 2011 a).

The ERASMUS programme was created by the European Commission and it currently facilitates the mobility of more than 200.000 students yearly. With an annual budget over 450 million Euros, more that 4000 higher educational institutions from 33 countries participating. It is believed to be one of the most successful EU programmes. (European Commission, 2010)

The two main types of student exchange possibilities that can be carried out within the ERASMUS programme are student exchange and practical training. With an exchange period of at least 3 but max 12 months abroad, and the possibility to do both types of mobility, a student can be abroad for total of 24 months under ERASMUS funding (European Commission, 2011 b). At the end of the academic year 2009-2010 nearly 2.3 million students have been participating in the programme. Of these 56 841 came to Finland (ERASMUS statistics, nd).

The philosopher, theologian and humanist Erasmus of Rotterdam, has been the inspiration to programme since he lived and worked in different parts of Europe, seeking educational enrichment that only could be obtained by actually staying in the different countries. Upon his death in 1536 he left his fortune to the University of Basel, who in turn would use that funding to allow their students to travel during their studies. The acronym ERASMUS could also be read as European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students. (European Commission, 2011 a)

The aim of the ERASMUS programme is to allow its participants to benefit from their period abroad in a cultural, lingual and educational way. In addition to that the exchanges should enrich the learning atmosphere at the receiving institutions, and promote international co-operation, resulting in future professionals who are international experienced, open minded and well-qualified. (European Commission, 2011 c)

Nordplus is a mobility programme offering financial support within the concept of lifelong learning. There are eight countries participating in the programme. The five Nordic countries Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Iceland and Finland,

these also includes the Faroe Islands, Greenland and Åland, who founded the programme in 1998-1999 however the structure it has today was created in 2004. In 2008 three Baltic countries Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania joined the programme. Education institutions can apply for financial support for projects of which the participants are from any of the above mentioned countries. (NORDPLUS, nd)

Garam & Korkala (2009) state, that there can be several reasons for students to go abroad. Some of the reasons for exchange students coming to Finland are that Finland is seen as a country with a high level of education in a society that is well-functioning. Further they state the fact that it is possible to study in English in a wide range of programs all over Finland.

About half of the exchange students leaving Finland, are doing so under the ERASMUS Programme. For the incoming exchange students to Finland, the number of ERASMUS students is close to 75%. (Garam & Korkala 2011)

Language, culture, international experience, new friends and moving one's own boarders are some of the most given reasons by the applicant to KyUAS for going on exchange.

Other reasons can be that the students are required to spend at least one semester abroad during their education. This kind of programmes forces the students towards internationalisation.

According to a survey conducted in 2010 by CIMO (Centre for International Mobility) close to 90% of the exchange students who submitted answers were generally happy or very happy with the institutions where they were on exchange to. (CIMO 2011, a)

3.2 Incoming student exchange key figures 2010

In 2010, Finland received 8990 exchange students, of these 3578 came to Universities of Applied Sciences (UAS). 113 came to KyUAS. That is only

3.2% of the national UAS intake; however it is 11.3% of the total annual intake to KyUAS.

Table 1 Countries sending most exchange students to Finland in 2010

Germany	1235	13.7%
France	1208	13.4%
Spain	896	10.0%
Italy	522	5.8%
Russia	425	4.7%

CIMO (2011)

Table 2 Countries sending most exchange students to KyUAS in 2010

France	16	14.2%
Czech	14	12.4%
Russia	13	11.5%
Germany	9	8.0%
China	8	7.1%

Statistical information obtained from KyUAS international office

When comparing the differences between the national intakes to the ones of KyUASs, the numbers are in fact quite similar. France, Germany and Russia are on both tables, and even if Spain is not in the list of KyUAS we received 7 exchange students during 2010 from there. The reason for the high number of Russian exchange students can be the geographical placement in the South Eastern Finland. One should keep in mind that these numbers fluctuate on a yearly basis. And since KyUAS only receive around 100 -115 exchange students yearly even small differences, like an increase with only two for any country in the list, would exhibit another picture.

Table 3 Most popular programmes for exchange students coming to UASs in Finland in 2010

Business and Administration	1494	41.8%
Technology and Engineering	735	20.5%
Social services and Health Care	519	14.5%
Culture	352	9.8%

CIMO (2011)

Table 4 Division of exchange students in KyUAS according to the study lines in 2010

Business & Administration	46	40.7%
Technology & Engineering	28	24.8%
Culture	14	12.4%
Forestry	18	15.9%
Social services & Health Care	4	3.5%
Maritime	3	2.7%

Statistical information obtained from KyUAS international office

The similarities between table three and four are also noticeable. Business & Administration and Technology & Engineering are in the top with quite similar percentages. The reason for Culture being on a third place, in the KyUAS table, is that it is a big study line at KyUAS. Furthermore it should be mentioned that not all Universities in Finland run the same programmes.

When looking at the statistics through the earlier years, the numbers for incoming exchange students have, with a few exceptions, been reasonably steady. The main reason for the number not increasing would be the limitation in available place for the incoming students. The tables only indicate the students who actually have been in Finland for a minimum of three months. They do not include the students that were rejected or who cancelled their exchange period here. However the international office still has to process these applications.

Table 5 Number of incoming students to KyUAS 2004-2011

Year	Incoming number
2004	120
2005	88
2006	115
2007	106
2008	112
2009	99
2010	113
2011	103

Statistical information obtained from KyUAS international office

4 MOVEON - MOBILITY MANAGEMENT SOFTWARE

The International Office of KyUAS has purchased, and is in the process of implementing the mobility management software "moveon", which is an Enterprise Resource Planning programme also known as an ERP programme.

The idea for the programme came from two students working in the International Office of Technical University Darmstadt in Germany. When moveon was launched in 2001 it became the world's first integrated cooperation and mobility management software. The concept of "moveon" is to incorporate all the student data in one programme which works in a way that data easily can be used in many different ways and that it will be easy accessible. (QS-unisolutins)

The reason the international office of KyUAS is implementing such a programme is sheer necessity. The numbers of incoming and outgoing exchange students is increasing, making it more difficult to keep track on even the basic information concerning the students, funding and statistics. Today Microsoft Office Excel sheets are used and students apply by "snail-mailing" their application to the International Office, who retypes the information into the worksheets. This process is slow and labour intensive; furthermore there is a risk for errors.

This type of Enterprise Resource Planning programme allows the personnel to focus on more essential tasks like servicing the students. Since e.g. the application will be online, meaning the students will type in the information themselves. Meaning the Coordinator would only have to screen for obvious errors. The programme "moveon" includes several tools for handling the exchange student's data; these tools include online application for both incoming and outgoing exchange students, statistics functions, financial management, and online publication of student reports to name a few. (QS-unisolutins)

By 2011 there were more than 350 higher educational institutions using moveon, most of these are located in Europe but there are also users in Australia, Asia, USA and Canada. (QS-unisolutins)

There are several similar programmes on the market all with similar functions but yet different prices. The reasons KyUAS choose "moveon" were that it seemed to be the most complete package to the best price.

5 METHODS

In this section explanations on the methods used to collect the data used in this research work, will be shown. Furthermore an explanation of the questionnaire and a description on the analysis of the web-pages of other UASs in Finland will be given.

5.1 Research method

The method used in the main body of this research is quantitative since there are around 100 - 115 yearly users (Garam 2011) of the KyUASs web-pages concerning the incoming exchange students.

The KyUAS exchange students for the study years 2010-2011 and 2011-2012 were chosen as the target group for the research. The reason for not sending the questionnaire to earlier exchange students is that the pages were thoroughly updated during the early spring 2010.

An online questionnaire was sent to 162 former and present exchange students. The reason for using the online questionnaire is to reduce costs in mailings, reaching the users quickly, assuring that the answers would not be altered in the case of having to manually entering the data to an analytical program.

A comparative analysis was done of the web pages of other Finnish university's of applied sciences, in order to get an idea of what information and

structures others are providing and using. Useful findings from this part of research will be used in the suggestion for the content of KyUASs web-page.

5.1.1 Breakdown of the questionnaire sent to the target group

The questionnaire can be found in appendix 2.

When designing the questionnaire, all questions except one, were mandatory. Meaning if they skipped one they would not be able to submit the answers. The respondents were asked to rate several questions, and a scale from 1 to 6 have been used, the reason for not using a 1 to 5 or 1 to 7 scale is that the 1 to 6 scale forces the respondent to take a stand of positive or negative, and leaves out the option for a neutral answer.

The questionnaire contains four sections, the 1st is background information. The 2nd is about the general attitude towards the web-pages. The 3rd is more specific towards each of the pages. The 4th section has place for comments and a self assessment question.

In the introduction of the questionnaire it is stated: the topic, why conducting the research, where the results will be used.

Preliminary questions
This first group of questions are easy, straight forward questions, to get the respondents into the mind setting of answering this questionnaire.
The exchange students were asked to state the country of their sending institution and also their home country, the reason for this were that in a few cases the student was already studying in a different country than their home country. It could be interesting to see if this group of respondents stands out in their answers. The questions are such as: home country, age, gender, period of exchange.

Main experience

Moving on in the questionnaire, the respondents were asked to evaluate the overall experience of using the web-pages. Meaning how easy they found the pages, did they like the layout, usefulness of the information provided, and the correspondence to the reality. This set of questions was included to obtain knowledge about the user friendliness of our web-pages.

Specific section targeted questions

The following set of questions is specific to the content on the web-pages, structured in the same order as online so the respondents better could relate to the questions. The questions were included to find out about the usefulness of the content.

Self evaluation and open-ended question

The self evaluation question were included to see if the users were using the pages and if they appreciate the effort made to provide information to ease their exchange period here in Finland.

The open ended question was included to get ideas from the users on potential changes and improvements, since they see the pages differently than the ones who have build them and the ones that uses them on a daily bases.

5.1.2 Analysis of web-pages from competing UASs in Finland

A small comparative analysis was carried out of the web pages of other universities of applied sciences. The comparative analysis was done in order to get an idea of what information and structures other UASs are providing and using. Useful findings from this part of research will be used in the suggestion for the content of KyUASs web-page.

A total of seven web-sites was analysed using the following questions:

1. From the front page, how easy is it to find pages for the exchange students?

One of the things heard often from the applicants to KyUAS is that the web-pages of the International Office are hard to find. So as a start up question the intention were to find out how easy it was to find the relevant pages from the front page of the different web-sites.

2. What headings do they have?

Probably the most important is what content the others have on their pages. Is it similar to KyUASs?

3. What is emphasised?

With this question the idea was to look for sections they have made a special effort on highlighting, since this could help to identify areas what they see as problematic for them. E.g. topics their incoming students ask questions, or are confused about.

4. What kind of layout do they have?

Here is meant the structure and the flow of the web-pages, are they easy to read.

5. Is the layout good or bad?

Not everything works! This question was included in order to rate and evaluate the layouts used and to see if there are structures and ideas we could benchmark.

6. What kind of materials do they provide?

What kind of guides, links and other materials do they display? The question was included in order to get an idea on what the different UASs see as important issues for their incoming exchange students.

7. What is their application procedure?

How the application procedure is described. And what can we use in our application procedure?

8. General Impression

   This point was included to reflect on the general impression of the web-pages.

9. What can we use in our web-pages?

   Question created to easy remember what could be used in the KyUAS web-pages.

10. Statistical numbers

    The statistical numbers were included to see how many students the UAS has, how many cases the International Office's are handling. And the amount of English study lines.

The UASs in this analysis including their main statistical numbers:

Jyväskylä University of Applied Sciences

- Total 8000 students
- 7 English degree programmes (2 masters)
- 240 outgoing exchange students
- 225 incoming exchange students

Seinäjoki University of Applied Sciences

- Total 4700 students
- 3 programmes in English (1 masters)
- 145 outgoing exchange students
- 154 incoming exchange students

Laurea University of Applied Sciences

- Total 8000 students
- 9 English degree programmes (2 masters)
- 286 outgoing exchange students
- 198 incoming exchange students

Turku University of Applied Sciences

- Total 9000 students
- English degree programmes but several 30 or 60 cr. sub line courses for exchange students
- 390 outgoing exchange students
- 255 incoming exchange students

Satakunta University of Applied Sciences

- Total 6500 students,
- 4 English degree programmes
- 201 outgoing exchange students
- 140 incoming exchange students

Tampere University of Applied Sciences

- Total 10.000 students
- 7 English degree programmes,
- 347 outgoing exchange students
- 273 incoming exchange students

Kymenlaakson University of Applied Sciences

- Total 4500 students
- 3 English programmes (1 masters)
- 143 outgoing exchange students
- 113 incoming exchange students

Source: CIMO (2011, b) for outgoing and incoming exchange students and the Websites of the UASs, for the number of students and degree programmes.

The selection criteria for the different UASs analysed were based on the number of incoming exchange students since one should think that with a high number also would mean that they have more students using the information published. With the exception of Seinäjoki University of Applied Sciences the size of the different UASs are significantly larger than KyUAS. Furthermore

only one UAS from the capital are was chosen the rest are mainly from the bigger cities in Finland. The reason for including Seinäjoki UAS was that in many ways it is comparable to KyUAS. Numbers of regular degree students, study lines are very similar and the amount of English lines available is the same.

6 RESULTS

In this section the findings of both the quantitative research and the web-page analysis will be presented.

6.1 Relevant results of the questionnaire

The questionnaire was sent to 162 former and present exchange students, 73 replied. As shown in figure 2, the gender division of the respondents is quite significant since there is more than twice the amount of females who responded. This is in coalition to the fact that more females than males come on exchange to KyUAS.
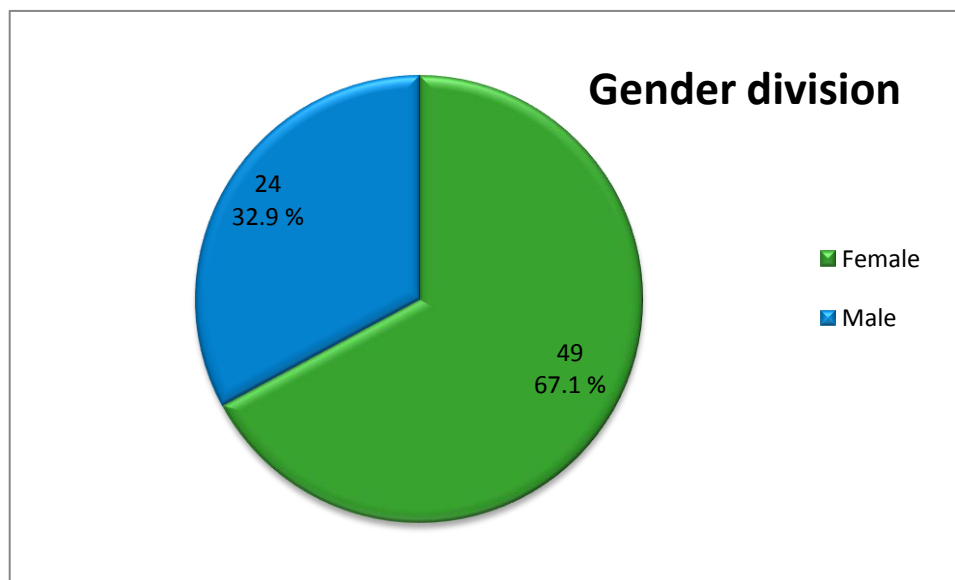

Figure 2 Gender division

Exchange students can start at two different times during the academic year. The students that are here for the whole year or the autumn semester, start in the end of August or in the beginning of September, the students that only are here for the spring semester start in January. Figure 3 shows that of all the respondents, only eight started in January. Even there usually is less students starting during the spring semester compared to the autumn, it is worth mentioning that the difference is not that great. The questionnaire was only sent to one group of students who started in January and to two groups who started in the autumn. That can explain the outcome of that question.
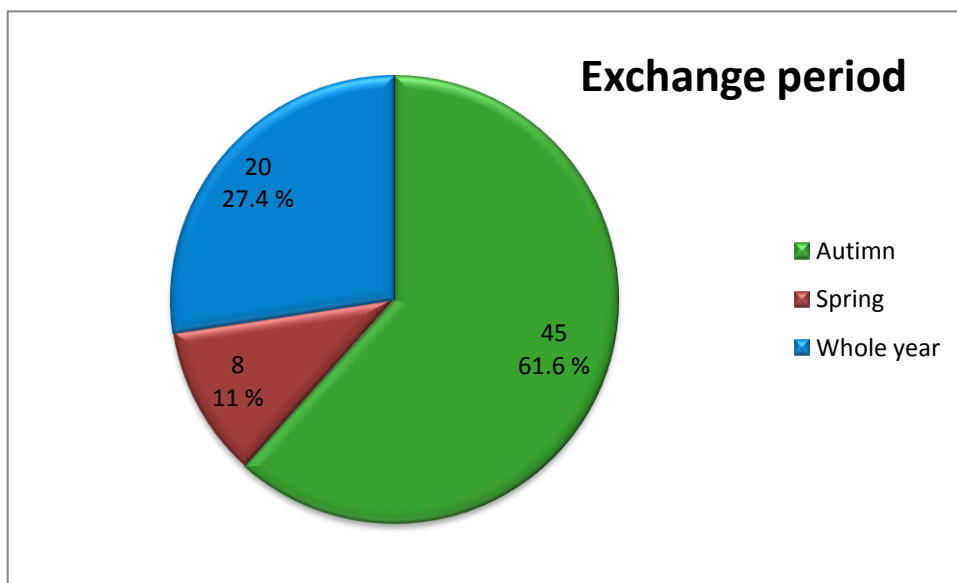

Figure 3 Exchange period

The age division of the respondents as shown in figure 4 seems to be reflecting the average student age. One has to keep in mind that exchange students usually are 2nd or 3rd year students. So if they start their studies around the age 18 to 20 it seems reasonable that the majority is in the age group from 22 to 25 years. The actual highest age group are 21 years of age with 17 of the respondents, followed by the 22 year olds, 16 of the respondents.
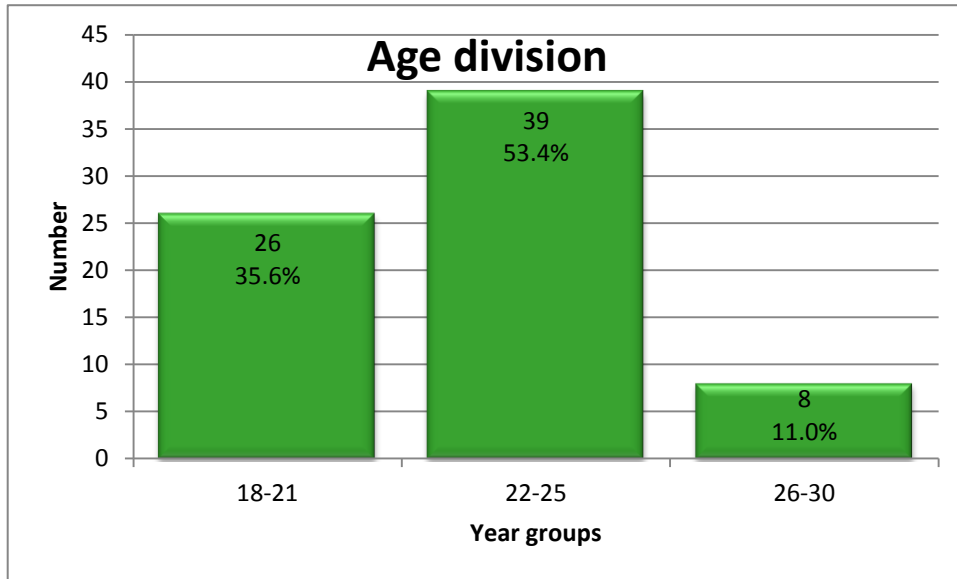
Figure 4 Age division

After the preliminary questions the target group was asked about the general experience of the web-pages. Figure 5 shows the answers to the question: From the front page of KyUAS, how easy was it to find the web pages concerning Incoming exchange students? The target group was asked to rate how difficult or easy it was to find the web-pages, using the scale: 1= very difficult 6= Very easy. 21 of the respondents found it more difficult to find the web-pages, than easy. The answers might be skewed since the applicants most likely are offered straight links from the partner lists of their respective leaving institutions. I believe that the result would be quite different, if the applicant had to find the pages without the help of different links. The reason for this conclusion is the fact that several emails concerning student exchange are sent to the admissions office or the registry (main/ common email account for KyUAS). If these applicants, who clearly are referring to student exchange could find our web-pages the mails would come straight to the International Office.
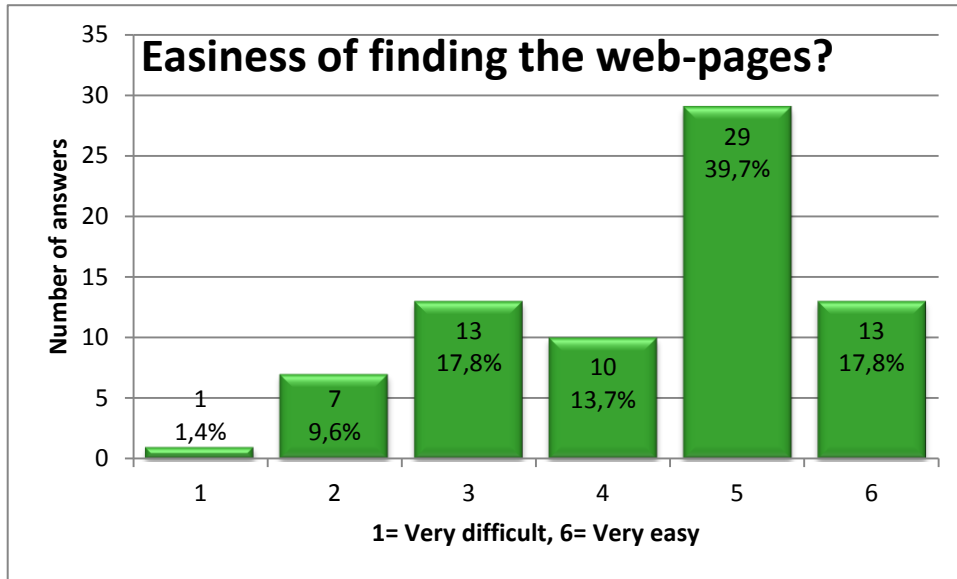
Figure 5 Easiness of finding the web-pages

The target group was asked to rate the structure and layout on a scale from one to six, 1 = Very Poor – 6 = Excellent. Figure 6 displays that only 11 of the replies to this topic were negative, meaning 62 found the structure and layout positive. This corresponds to my own perception of the structure and layout, "in general it is good but there is space for improvement". One has to keep in mind that the general colour scheme and layout is following the guidelines of the institution.

Figure 6 Evaluation of structure and layout

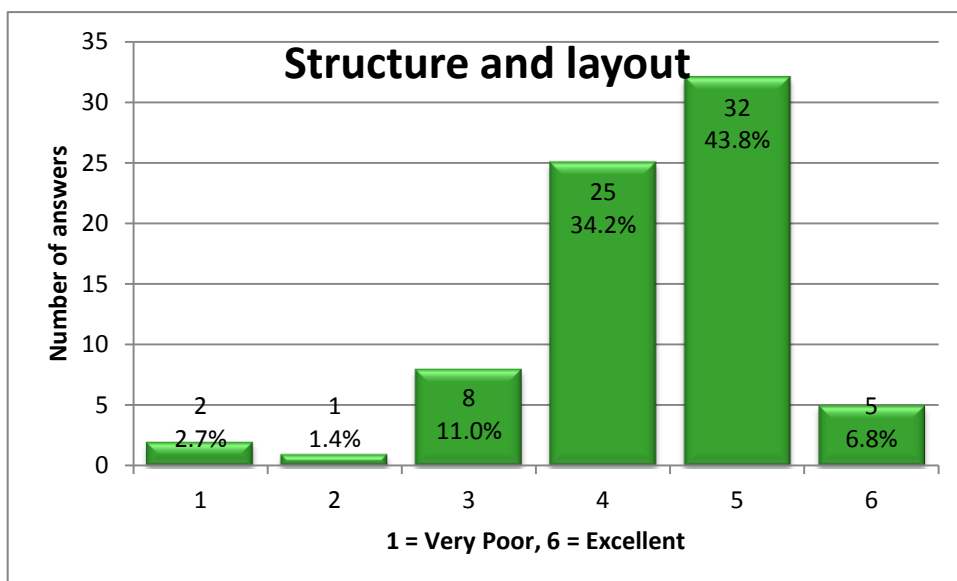Figure 7 demonstrates that the information provided in the web-pages is generally thought to be positive. The target group was asked: How useful did you find the general level of the information provided? The scale the target group was using was 1= Very Poor – 6= Very useful. Again most answered positive to the question, this can indicate that the information provided is what is needed. Then we can look at simplifying it or presenting it in a different way. It should be mentioned too that in the analysis of the other UASs the general content is very similar. In the comment section of the questionnaire there was mentioned a few places that timetables and course availability and descriptions could be presented better. Some had difficulty in finding the information other would have liked it to be clearer.
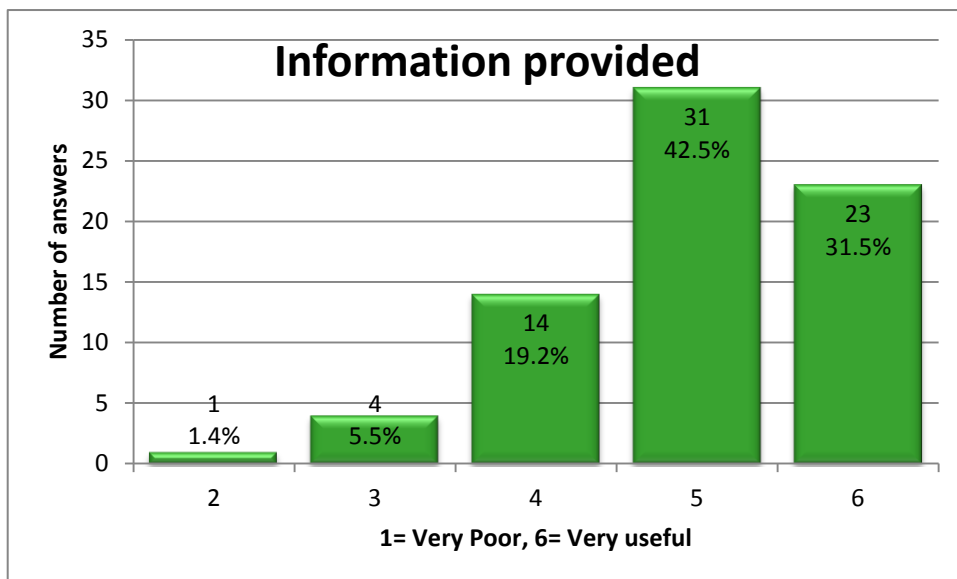
Figure 7 Assessment of information provided

As the last question in the section about the general experience the target group was asked to answer the following question: How did the information provided correspond to the reality? The scale used, 1= Not at all – 6= Very accurately. From the answers shown in figure 8 it must be concluded that the content is close to be very accurate. This also corresponds to the previous question, usefulness of the information provided.
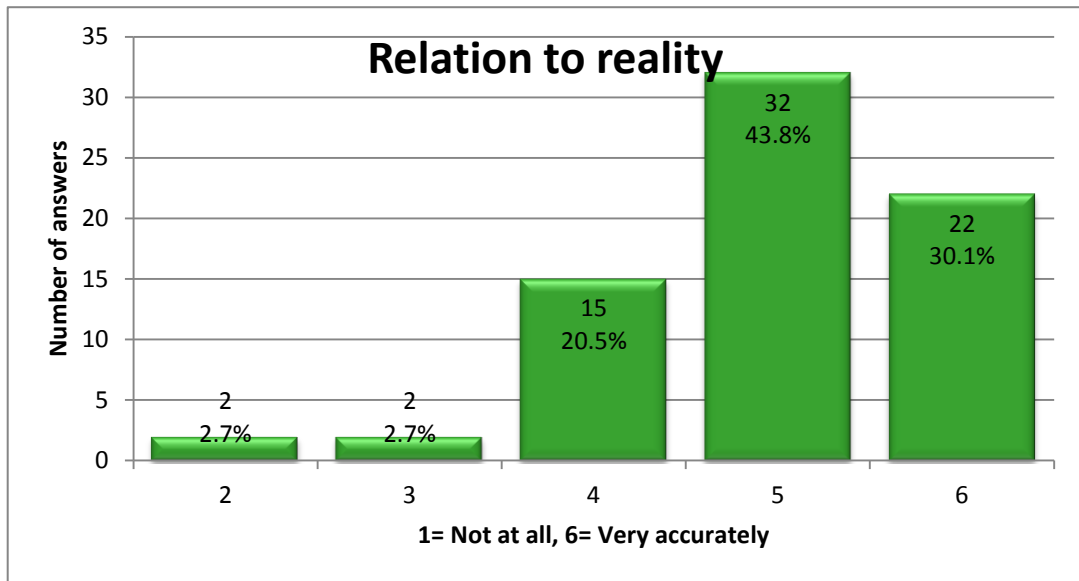
Figure 8 Relation to reality

Associated to figure 8, a few points from the comments can be mentioned, e.g. a better explanation of the bus platforms in the airport, emphasis on the needs of bikes since the student housing is quite far from the campuses. These are easy points to update in the arrival guide.

At the end of the questionnaire the respondents was asked to rate themselves, on how thoroughly they read the web-pages during the time they applied and after they got accepted, the results are shown in figure 9. The scale was 1= Not so thoroughly – 6= Very thoroughly. The question was included to see if the applicants actually read the web-pages or if they just skim though them. I was happy to see that so many indicate that they in fact did read the pages provided.
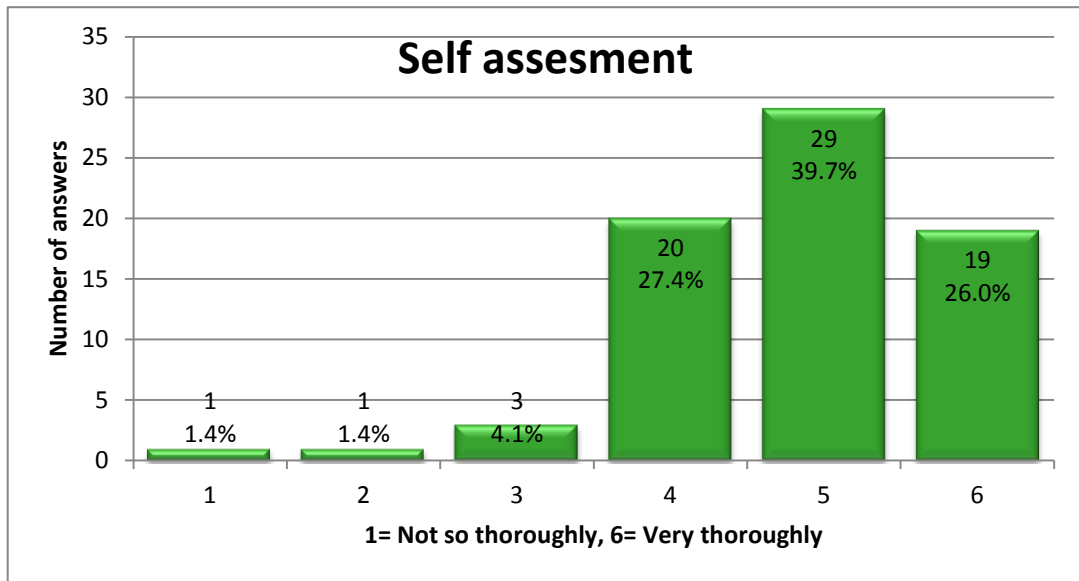
Figure 9 Self assessment

The following figures are from section three of the questionnaire, the scale used in the evaluation is 1= Not useful – 6= very useful. The web-pages are divided in four sections and the name of the figure is also the name of the section of the web-pages.

The bar chart in figure 10 shows the mean's of the answers to each of the questions in the section "Info for applicants" on how useful the respondents found the information provided in each section. Even all means are in the positive part of the scale it should be noted that FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions) and Study programmes have a lower score. The FAQ page is not developed enough and there could be more questions and answers there. The Study programmes are one of the areas to where we receive the most questions and indications of concern.
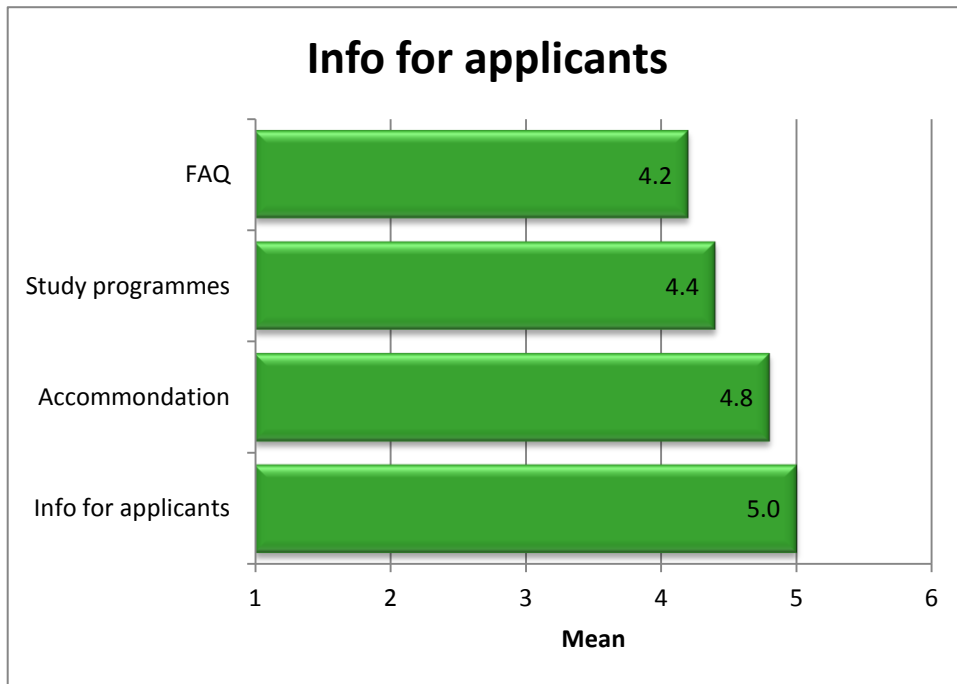
Figure 10 Info for applicants

This following section contains the information minded for students that have been accepted to come on student exchange to KyUAS. The fact that in all questions the mean is over five, as illustrated in figure 11 is a good indication that the applicants read the pages and also find the information provided useful. When thinking about it, these pages should be the ones they pay most attention to since they know that they are going to KyUAS and would need, and in most cases want, to prepare themselves for the exchange. The high score also indicates that the information provided is useful.

Info for accepted students

	Mean
Info for accepted students	5.1
Welcoming days	5.2
Important for incoming students	5.2
Arrival information	5.2
Documents required	5.3
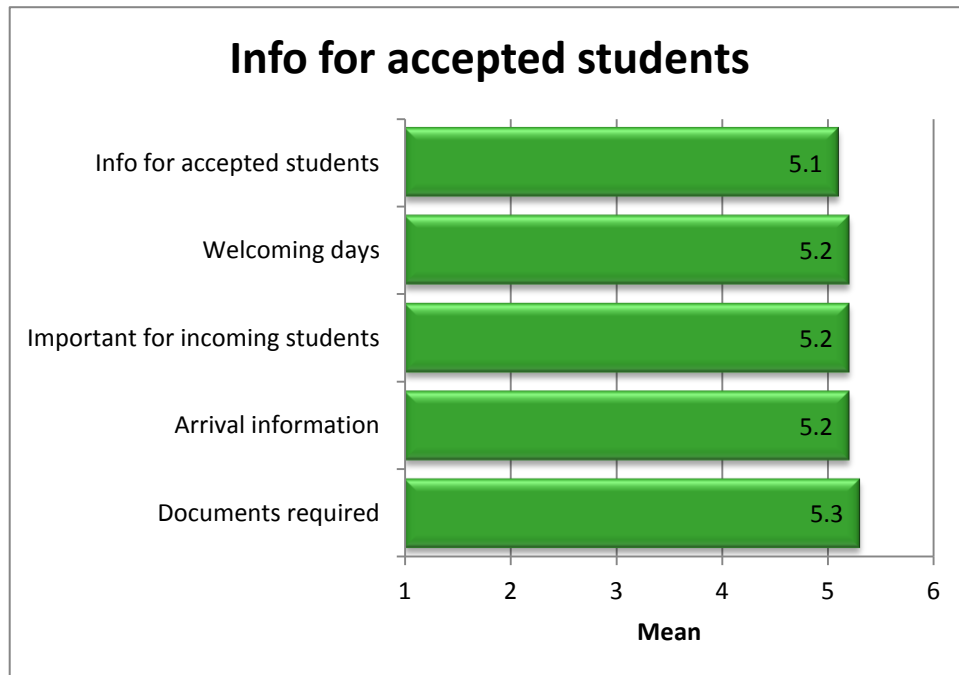
Figure 11 Info for accepted students

The last two sections of the questionnaire have been placed in the same graph in figure 12 since they are rather small. The page, additional information, has a lower mean, yet still positive, than the other. This can be a reflection of that it is mainly an introduction page so the usefulness can be seen as limited to some. For the other two pages the mean score is quite positive, this can indicate that the pages are read and the users find them useful. E.g. Before going home is a checklist of topics to get sorted out before leaving Finland.

**Additional information &
Before going home**

	Mean
Additional information	4.5
Brfore giong home	4.9
What is good to know before coming	5.0
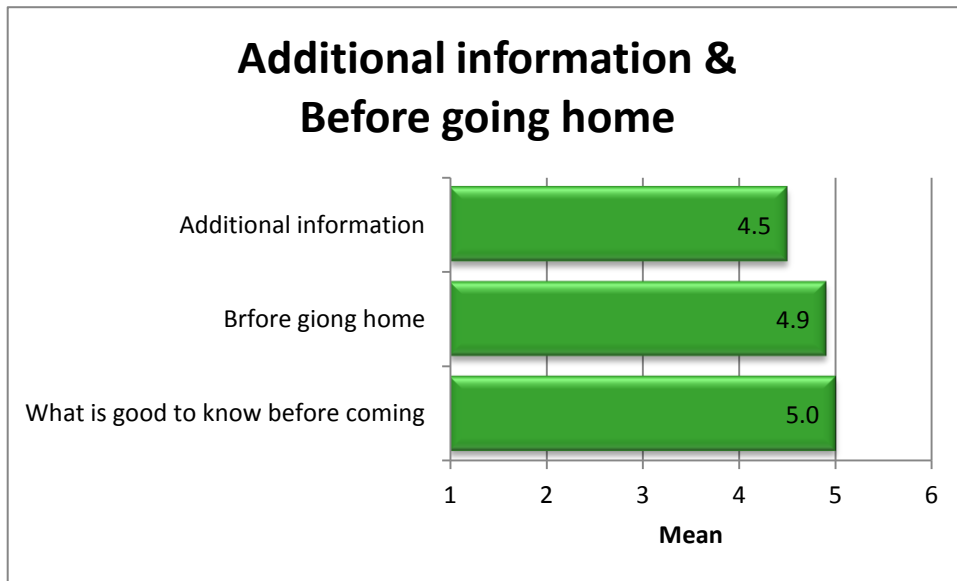
Figure 12 Additional information & before going home

Table 6 Crosstabulation of Exchange period & Self assessment

	Please rate yourself						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	Total
Exchange period							
Autumn	0	1	1	14	20	9	45
Spring	1	0	2	1	1	3	8
Whole Year	0	0	0	5	8	7	20
Total	1	1	3	20	29	19	73

Even the amount of responses to the questionnaire is quite low for crosstabullations it is still worth mentioning that for the exchange students who have been on exchange during the spring periods, three out of eight answered that they were in fact not thorough, when they prepared themselves for their exchange periods in regards to reading the web-pages. On the contrary, as table 6 shows, are the students that came for the whole year, they all answered that they did read through the web-pages thoroughly. This makes sense too, since going to another country for nine months or more is a long time and not to be taken lightly.

6.2 Useful finding from the Web-page research of other UASs in Finland

From the front page how easy is it to find pages for exchange students?
Clearly the experience of using the pages is nicer when they can be found easily. Four of the investigated web-pages have a link on the front page, so this is a serious point to consider.

What headings do they have?
As to the Headings/headlines on the web-pages I found that the structure KyUAS have is very clear, since it is divided in sections as follows:

- Info for applicants
- Info for accepted students
- Additional information
- Before going home

Each of the above sections then has sub sections with more specific content. Compared to a web-page where everything is presented on the same page, there it might be hard to determine what is relevant at that moment and what would be relevant later.

What is emphasised?
In the question on "What is emphasised?" All UASs had the application procedure as the main point. This makes sense, since the only way for exchange students to be accepted would be to apply, and apply in the correct way with all documents needed.

What kind of layout do they have?
Layout: Good/ Bad?
The layout, how the pages are setup, have a big influence on the user experience. If the user can't find what they are looking for, they might ask where they can find the needed info, or they might discard that institution as an option for their exchange period. In all of the web-pages analysed the links were on the left side of the screen and the text in the centre, which seems to be an easy overview able layout that works well for the purpose, displaying information and guidelines.

What material do they provide?

Generally the materials provided are quite similar. Most of the UASs provide arrival guides, usually in term of a PDF file which should be read once the students have been accepted, in order to get answers of potential questions, and to get an idea of what it means to live in Finland.

Besides the arrival guide there are provided forms and course lists in all cases.

Application procedure:

All but one of the sites analysed are using online application forms. Soon KyUAS will also have the online application. Since these online forms are linked to the providers of the program the International Offices use to control their incoming and outgoing students there is not much KyUAS can use directly.

General impression:

As an overall conclusion of the analysis of the web-pages it can be mentioned that all the sites in general provide the same information, only in different ways. The fact that most of the information is similar can indicate two things; first, students in general probably have the same concerns about their application, arrival, accommodation, courses and so on, no matter where they are going or coming from. Secondly when designing the different web-pages it must be assumed that a certain level of benchmarking has taken place or that there have only been one or a few books on the topic that everybody chose to follow.

Statistical numbers

Gives an indication on the amount of student the International Offices and servicing and also the amount of English study-lines to where the students can apply. A clear fact is, that the more English lines there are available, the higher the number of incoming students.

7 CONCLUSIONS

The conclusions are based on the suggestions highlighted in the theoretical part, the findings of the analysis of the other UASs web-pages and the questionnaire. Furthermore findings from working with KyUASs web-pages concerning the incoming exchange students are also used when outlining the suggestions for improvements.

7.1 Summary of results

When looking at the answers of the questionnaire and the analysis of the other UASs in Finland. One must conclude that the web-pages of KyUAS International Office are on the right track. However there is a need for updating and renewing. Suggestions for these improvements follow in the next section.

The web-pages are in respect to the content, quite similar to those of the competitors, and what there can be used from the analysis are ideas towards the way the context is presented and explained. With small changes it is possible to improve the user experience of KyUASs web-pages.

Answers to the questionnaire were more positive than negative. As mentioned earlier this can be the result of different factors. One reason, and this one is hopefully the right one, would be that the users of the web-pages find them good and useful. With content that is important for them to read and understand. The second reason which I hope isn't the case, is that the answers were positive simply to be nice. Meaning the target group has not understood the importance of their answers. And that they would have had the chance to influence the content of the web-pages, making them better for the future users.

7.2   Suggestions for the improvements to enhance the user experience

At the moment the web-pages for the incoming exchange students are structured under four headlines "Info for applicants", Info for accepted students", Additional information" and "Before going home"
The present structure is in my opinion good but there is always space for improvements. In the following section the most critical points, which should be included when re-designing the web-pages for the International Office will be outlined.

The access to the International Office web-pages should be easier; an easier access could be done in two ways. The first, a 1 click setup which would be optimal, meaning there should be a direct link from the front page to the pages concerning International Office meaning both for outgoing and incoming students. The second, and perhaps the easiest, option could be to place a link in the "short cut" box on the front page.

The main idea is to create visibility above the fold line of the web-site. Meaning users should not "scroll down" to see these links.

An overall structure, which clarifies what and when the different issues are important, e.g. something along the lines of KyUASs present structure would be good to keep.

Clear step by step guide for the application procedures. The application procedure is the most important part of the web-pages; therefore it is very important that the applicants have clear and simple guidelines concerning the application. Fortunately the Enterprise Resource Planning programmes such as "moveon" are a great help concerning this topic. With an online application there is an opportunity to get much more precise information than on an old fashioned paper application form. One way of ensuring this is, that the online application form can be coded in a way that if some fields aren't filled the form simply can't be submitted.

Clear lists of available courses for exchange students with clear and updated links to the course descriptions and time schedules. At the moment the information is too hard to get. There should be one system where the students would be able to find the available courses, the course content and the timetables. In this way the students would have a fair chance of creating their learning agreements before they arrive. The end result of this would be a decrease of the paperwork needed to be carried out. This part is out of the hands of the International Office since it is the departments who create their course lists.

Reducing the content load, there is no need for long explanations if it can be explained in a short and clear manner. If the content is too extensive users tend not to read it. The last thing we want is to overload the users so they would perhaps fail to get the important information they need concerning their exchange period.

Clear information about accommodation, moving to another country even for a shorter time period is a big deal. Questions about accommodation are frequent during the application period and the weeks before arrival. So a clear explanation about the apartments, distances, rules and so on should ease up the flow of questions.

Getting to Kouvola or Kotka, from Helsinki, Tampere or Lappeenranta. Since there is an increase of low-cost air carriers using other airports than Helsinki Vantaa, there should be included instructions from these places, too.

"When in Finland" is a topic I did not see when analysing the web-pages. The reason for this might be that issues that would fit in to this category would be explained and dealt with during the welcoming days. In my opinion this is not optimal, since not all will arrive on time for the welcoming sessions. But by listing the topics of concern the students would have an idea of what is needed to be done during the first few weeks after arrival. This could include topics like arrival confirmation, changes to the learning agreement, signing up for courses and other issues.

7.2.1 Head of International Office

The head of the International Office, and overall responsible for the incoming and outgoing students, should make sure that the web-pages are updated by delegating the tasks and responsibility areas. Next to that they should ensure the visibility of the pages and that they are easily found. They should also be the ones to emphasise towards different departments, of which the International Office web-pages are dependent on, the importance of clear and correct information, e.g. in regards to course schedules, media releases etc.

7.2.2 International Office personnel

When the new control programme "moveon" is taken into use, a natural update of the application procedures is needed. At the same time the rest of the pages should be scrutinized and updated where needed. This should be done by the persons working with the issues on a daily basis since they would also be the ones that face the load of questions the applicants ask, giving them first hand information on critical errors or missing topics.

When doing the updates the end users should be kept in mind, meaning one have to remember to whom these web-pages are designed for and why they are using these pages. It seems very obvious to do so but without paying careful attention to this approach, it might soon be forgotten. Thus important information, that the person doing the updates takes for granted, might be left out.

In the future, on a regular basis, it is important to keep updating the web-pages so the information is correct and that all links are working.

7.2.3 Institutional departments

For the International Office web-pages to function optimally, information from the different departments (Design, Media, Business, Social & Health Care,

and Technology) to where the exchange students are applying is needed too. The main topic in question here are lists of available courses including the course descriptions, and when the course is taking place, meaning is the course taking place in the autumn or in the spring semester. This information has to be available before the application period starts (during April), so the applicants for a student exchange can see what they can study. When the students aren't able to see what they can study here there tend to be many questions about the courses. One could assume that also a significant amount of potential applicants would refrain from applying due to the uncertainty, and potentially wasting a semester or two and thus delaying their graduation. The more detailed and structured the course lists and timetables are, presented online, the less work there is once the students arrive with changing the learning agreements or study-plans.

7.3   Evaluation of the thesis

In evaluating the thesis, in regards to the objective and the research question, I would say that I have gained insight in what users think of the web-pages as they are now. By using the proposals made from the investigations, it is possible to get ideas on how to optimise web-pages for International Offices.

In regards to finding out why exchange students, who are coming to KyUAS, ask questions about information already provided it is more difficult to come with clear answers. The fact is that incoming exchange students ask questions about things that are explained on the web-pages. However in the questionnaire the vast majority answered that they read the web-pages more thoroughly than not so thoroughly. From this I conclude that insecurity, doubt and low understanding of what is read could very well be the reasons for asking questions.

7.4   Further research

As a further research an analysis could be done on the general structure of the website: www.kyamk.fi. Research question could be "Who is the site meant to service, and is it servicing this target group to its fullest?

A second study could be made to find out if the structure of KyUASs web-site would change if the site was only meant for the students. The research question could be: Would it be a benefit for the organisation to launch a web-site that would primarily focus on applying to the UAS and student services? When I was researching the websites of the other UASs I found that there were two distinctly different ways they were structured. One type was aimed at servicing the students and applicants the other type was more a blend of students, staff and the organisation in general. In my opinion the main web-site should mainly aim to reach and service the students, with the organisation as a separate but still visible section. The web-pages for the employees should be an entirely separate site.

A third option for further studies could be: What is the most efficient way of guaranteeing the information reaches the exchange students? Would it be to place it online, as it is now, and expect the students to find it themselves? Would it be more efficient to create e.g. data-packs and send them directly to the students once they have been nominated for an exchange period?

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APPENDICES

E-mail sent to the target group

Dear former and present exchange student at KyUAS

I would greatly appreciate if you could spare a little time on a questionnaire concerning the web pages for incoming exchange students to Kymenlaakson University of Applied Sciences (KyUAS).

In order to improve the services for the exchange students, coming to KyUAS, I would like to ask you about your experiences with using KyUASs web pages concerning the incoming exchange students.

The answers will be for analysis purposes only and will be treated as confidential. The results of the research will be published in my thesis. No names or references to people completing this questionnaire will be mentioned.

I know that some of you have left some time ago so please feel free to revisit the pages whilst answering the questionnaire.
www.kyamk.fi/exchange

Link to questionnaire:
https://docs.google.com/spreadsheet/viewform?hl=en_US&pli=1&formkey=dEZULXBVN0
NvR0t4eVdxVGFUZlc2Nnc6MQ#gid=0

Thank you in advance
Kind regards
Ulf

Ulf Jensen-Munk
Mobility coordinator

Kymenlaakson ammattikorkeakoulu, University of Applied Sciences
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Finland
Tel +358-44-702-8479

Questionnaire concerning the International Offices web pages for incoming exchange students to KyUAS

In order to improve the services for the exchange students, coming to Kymenlaakson University of Applied Sciences (KyUAS), I would like to ask you about your experiences with using KyUASs web pages concerning the incoming exchange students. The answers will be for analysis purposes only and will be treated as confidential. The results of the research will be published in my thesis. No names or references to people completing this questionnaire will be mentioned.

Country of your home University / Sending institution *

Your home country *

Your age *

Gender *
Female
Male

Exchange period *
Autumn
Spring
Whole year

The following questions are only concerning the "Incoming exchange student" web-page's of KyUAS

Please rate the overall experience of using the web pages

From the front page of KyUAS, how easy was it to find the web pages concerning Incoming exchange students? *

Very difficult 1 2 3 4 5 6 Very easy

Please rate the structure and layout? *

Very poor 1 2 3 4 5 6 Excellent

How useful did you find the general level of the information provided? *

Not useful 1 2 3 4 5 6 Very useful

How did the information provided correspond to the reality? *

Not at all 1 2 3 4 5 6 Very accurately

Please rate how useful you found the following sections.

The following questions are more specific minded to each section.

"Info for Applicants"

Info for applicants *

Not useful 1 2 3 4 5 6 Very useful

Accommodation *

Not useful 1 2 3 4 5 6 Very useful

Study programmes *

Not useful 1 2 3 4 5 6 Very useful

FAQ *

Not useful 1 2 3 4 5 6 Very useful

"Info for accepted students"

Info for accepted students *

Not useful 1 2 3 4 5 6 Very useful

Important for incoming students *

Not useful 1 2 3 4 5 6 Very useful

Documents required *

Not useful 1 2 3 4 5 6 Very useful

Arrival information *

Not useful 1 2 3 4 5 6 Very useful

Welcoming days *

Not useful 1 2 3 4 5 6 Very useful

"Additional information"

Additional information *

Not useful 1 2 3 4 5 6 Very useful

What is good to know before coming? *

Not useful 1 2 3 4 5 6 Very useful

"Before going home"

Before going home *

Not useful 1 2 3 4 5 6 Very useful

Please rate yourself! *
How carefully did you read through the pages concerning "Incoming exchange students", during the time of your application and after you were accepted?

Not so thoroughly 1 2 3 4 5 6 Very thoroughly

If you have any suggestions for improvements, feel free to write them below
If you e.g. know of any information missing in regards to your exchange, please let me know.

Link to online questionnaire:
https://docs.google.com/spreadsheet/viewform?hl=en_US&pli=1&formkey=dEZULXBVN0NvR0t4eVdxVGFUZlc2Nnc6MQ#gid=0
The questionnaire has been closed for answers.

Name of the UAS

Assessed (date)

From the front page how easy is it to find pages for exchange students?

What headings do they have?

What is emphasised?

What kind of layout do they have?

Layout: Good/ Bad?

What material do they provide?

Application procedure

General impression

What can we use in our web pages?

Statistical numbers