

# What is higher education all about from the student perspective?

Phenomenographic study on student experiences

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## Abstract

Higher education has been challenged in various ways in the last three decades. Massification, emergence of new teaching and learning methods, marketization and trade agreements, change in funding schemes, cooperation/competition dynamics – all these challenges fundamentally change higher education sector. These changes in education context influence the way the idea of higher education is understood and redefines the role of higher education actors, including students. Moreover, the changes have consequences for higher education policy as a whole. In order to better understand and cope with the changing education context, higher education researchers need to examine closely the higher education processes and the position of the higher education actors. The present research will contribute to this agenda, by focusing on higher education in Finland.

The purpose of the research is to discover the variety of conceptions experienced by students – conceptions about the idea of higher education and about the role of students in higher education – in order to better understand student perspective on these matters. The main questions guiding this research are: (1) How do students understand the idea of higher education?; (2) How do students perceive their role in higher education? The research applies qualitative phenomenographic methodology which focuses on personal experiences with different phenomena. Phenomenography is an inductive qualitative research methodology that explores phenomena through different descriptions of ideas, understandings, and conceptions. The research method used is individual, in-depth interview with open-ended questions; interview which often had a form of dialogue. 8 interviews were conducted with 8 participants-students from the University of Tampere in Finland: 4 participants study in the Schools of Social Sciences and Humanities and 4 study in the School of Information Sciences.

The research discovered 21 categories of description – 10 related to the idea of higher education and 11 related to the role of students in higher education: (1) Higher education is related to society, (2) Higher education is a network, (3) Higher education is binary, (4) Higher education is related to knowledge, (5) Higher education is related to time, (6) Higher education is personal growth, (7) Higher education is profession provider, (8) Higher education is on the top, (9) Higher education has changed, (10) Higher education is something else than university; (11) Students are members of the wider society, (12) Students are members of the student population, (13) Students are part of higher education system, (14) Students are active, (15) Students are resource, (16) Students are customers, (17) Students are neglected, (18) Students are stressed, (19) Students are transformed, (20) Students are employed, (21) Students are free. The categories of description are analysed in terms of their referential and structural aspects, and illustrated by participants' quotes. The research results, including the relationships between the categories, are visually presented in an outcome space.

Key words: higher education, students, role, phenomenography, Finland.

# Contents

List of Tables .....	4
List of Figures .....	4
List of Appendices .....	4
Acknowledgements.....	4
1 Introduction.....	6
1.1 Research topic .....	6
1.2 Purpose of the research.....	6
1.3 Research questions .....	8
1.4 Context – Higher education in Finland .....	8
1.5 Research gap.....	10
1.6 Main concepts.....	13
2 Research methodology .....	15
2.1 Research approach - phenomenography .....	15
2.1.1 Non-dualistic ontology .....	16
2.1.2 Relational epistemology .....	16
2.2 Phenomenographic methodology.....	16
2.2.1 Conceptions, categories of description and experience.....	17
2.2.2 First- and second-order perspective.....	18
2.2.3 Bracketing .....	19
2.2.4 Outcome space .....	20
2.3 Variety within phenomenography .....	21
2.4 Phenomenography in this research.....	23
2.5 Data collection .....	25
2.5.1 Sampling .....	26
2.5.2 Interviewing .....	28
2.6 Data analysis .....	32
2.6.1 Transcribing .....	32
2.6.2 Data analysis steps .....	32
3 Research findings .....	35
3.1 Categories related to the idea of higher education .....	35
3.1.1 Category 1: Higher education is related to society .....	36
3.1.2 Category 2: Higher education is a network.....	37
3.1.3 Category 3: Higher education is binary.....	38
3.1.4 Category 4: Higher education is related to knowledge .....	39

3.1.5	Category 5: Higher education is related to time.....	40
3.1.6	Category 6: Higher education is personal growth.....	41
3.1.7	Category 7: Higher education is profession provider.....	42
3.1.8	Category 8: Higher education is on the top.....	43
3.1.9	Category 9: Higher education has changed.....	44
3.1.10	Category 10: Higher education is something else than university.....	45
3.2	Categories related to the role of student in higher education.....	46
3.2.1	Category 11: Students are members of the wider society.....	47
3.2.2	Category 12: Students are members of the student population.....	48
3.2.3	Category 13: Students are part of higher education system.....	49
3.2.4	Category 14: Students are active.....	50
3.2.5	Category 15: Students are resource.....	51
3.2.6	Category 16: Students are customers.....	52
3.2.7	Category 17: Students are neglected.....	53
3.2.8	Category 18: Students are stressed.....	54
3.2.9	Category 19: Students are transformed.....	55
3.2.10	Category 20: Students are employed.....	56
3.2.11	Category 21: Students are free.....	57
3.3	The outcome space – relationships between categories.....	58
3.4	Other relevant observations.....	62
3.4.1	Variety of conceptions.....	62
3.4.2	Variety introduced by stratified sample.....	63
3.4.3	Interview feedback from participants.....	64
4	Discussion of the research findings.....	66
4.1	Reflecting on the research findings through predominant ideas of higher education.....	66
4.2	Understanding the roles of students through relevant literature.....	73
5	Conclusion.....	80
5.1	Reflection on the research process and validity and reliability checks.....	80
5.2	Implications of the research findings.....	84
5.3	Recommendations for further research.....	86
	Bibliography.....	87
	Online sources.....	92
	Appendices.....	95

## **List of Tables**

- Table 1: Categories related to the idea of higher education
- Table 2: Referential and structural aspects of Category 1
- Table 3: Referential and structural aspects of Category 2
- Table 4: Referential and structural aspects of Category 3
- Table 5: Referential and structural aspects of Category 4
- Table 6: Referential and structural aspects of Category 5
- Table 7: Referential and structural aspects of Category 6
- Table 8: Referential and structural aspects of Category 7
- Table 9: Referential and structural aspects of Category 8
- Table 10: Referential and structural aspects of Category 9
- Table 11: Referential and structural aspects of Category 10
- Table 12: Categories related to the role of students in higher education
- Table 13: Referential and structural aspects of Category 11
- Table 14: Referential and structural aspects of Category 12
- Table 15: Referential and structural aspects of Category 13
- Table 16: Referential and structural aspects of Category 14
- Table 17: Referential and structural aspects of Category 15
- Table 18: Referential and structural aspects of Category 16
- Table 19: Referential and structural aspects of Category 17
- Table 20: Referential and structural aspects of Category 18
- Table 21: Referential and structural aspects of Category 19
- Table 22: Referential and structural aspects of Category 20
- Table 23: Referential and structural aspects of Category 21

## **List of Figures**

- Figure 1: The anatomy of experience by Marton and Booth
- Figure 2: Steps of Discursive phenomenography
- Figure 3: Research structure
- Figure 4: The outcome space of the idea of higher education
- Figure 5: The outcome space of the role of students in higher education
- Figure 6: The final outcome space

## **List of Appendices**

- Appendix 1: The invitation for participation in research
- Appendix 2: Participants in the research
- Appendix 3: Interview outline
- Appendix 4: Consent to Participate in Research
- Appendix 5: Preliminary categories of description

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# **1 Introduction**

We will introduce you, the readers, to the topics of the idea of higher education and the role of students in higher education through the first section and its six subsections. Firstly we will present the research topic and the purpose of the research. Then we will specify the research questions in the third subsection, and the context of the research in the fourth. Fifth subsection deals with the research gap and the sixth provides working definitions of the main research concepts.

## **1.1 Research topic**

Higher education has been challenged in various ways in the last three decades. Massification, emergence of new teaching and learning methods, marketization and trade agreements, change in funding schemes, cooperation/competition dynamics – all these challenges fundamentally change higher education sector (Ashby, 2009; Barnett, 1990; Barnett, 2000; Bauman, 1997; Bienefeld & Almqvist, 2004; Kerr, 2009a; Nybom, 2006; Smith & Webster, 1997b). Mentioned changes have an impact on every aspect of higher education on national, international and global level. Understanding of the core processes and purpose of higher education, i.e. the idea of higher education, has been affected by these developments as well. Moreover, in this different education context the position of the actors in the higher education, including students, and the roles assigned to them are being redefined. As Bienefeld and Almqvist (2004, p.431) state, the concept of students has changed and this trend brings some conflicting characteristics. The changing idea of higher education and the (potential) conflicts between different concepts of students not only affect students themselves, but have consequences for higher education policy as a whole (Bienefeld & Almqvist, 2004, p.432). In order to better understand and cope with the changing education context, higher education researchers need to examine closely the higher education processes and the position of the higher education actors. The present research will contribute to this agenda by focusing on higher education in Finland, specifically, investigating the idea of higher education and the role of students in the context of Finnish higher education system.

## **1.2 Purpose of the research**

The purpose of the research is to discover the variety of conceptions experienced by students – conceptions about the idea of higher education and about the role of students in higher education – in order to better understand the student perspective on these matters.

Questions concerning the mission and the nature of higher education have usually been integrated under the phrase “the idea of higher education” (Rothblatt, 2009, p.178) and they have been contested over time. Historically, various understandings and ideas about the idea of higher education can be found in education literature. We can easily discern the ideas of higher education promoted by a certain scholar, individual institution, or even a policy paper. Similarly, various scholars, institutions

and policies assign certain roles to students thus defining their position in higher education. Student perspective, however, on these basic questions is often omitted while the higher education research “has largely left unasked and unexplored matters as to what it is to *be* a student” (Barnett, 2007, p.8). Moreover, as Barnett (2007, p.8) notices, many seem to believe we can have intelligible debates about higher education without mentioning students. When they are mentioned, often students are objectified as units of resource or cost (in terms of completion rates), bearers of flow of income (as fees) or contributors to the economy (as future employees) (Barnett, 2007, p.8). We agree with Barnett (2007, p.8) that it is prime time to return the student back to its rightful place – the centre of educational thinking. Therefore, the ultimate aim of this research is to develop understanding of the students’ perspectives on higher education in Finland by investigating their conceptions about the nature and purpose of higher education on one hand, and on the other discover the roles that students assign to themselves within the higher education.

Furthermore, the investigated issues gain a different outline and importance in the context of transformations recently occurring in higher education globally. As identified in the first subsection, higher education is being challenged by many new societal trends, to mention only few: massification, emergence of new teaching and learning methods, marketization and trade agreements, change in funding schemes, cooperation/competition dynamics, internationalization and globalization forces, etc. These trends influence also the Finnish education context and redefine the basic processes of higher education as well as the position of higher education actors. Additionally, these changes affect the institutional and national policy-making in Finland. Therefore higher education researchers need to examine closely these transformations and their effects, and provide tools and input for evidence based policy-making. This research presents a humble contribution to this project, by focusing on the higher education’s largest population – students.

The significance and main contribution of the present research lies in the potential input for the higher education policy-making in Finland, especially student related policies. When designing the policies and strategies related to students, decision-makers can gain insight into the student perspective through detailed descriptions of the student experiences in higher education. We hope that the findings of the present research will be useful for researchers, practitioners, policy-makers, or even students, to better understand and take into account the student perspective in their everyday higher education activities.

The research applies qualitative phenomenographic methodology which focuses on personal experiences with different phenomena. Phenomenography is an inductive qualitative research methodology that explores phenomena through different descriptions of ideas, understandings, and conceptions (Svensson, 1997). Ference Marton, a Swedish scholar who developed this methodology, explains that the unit of phenomenographic research is a way of experiencing phenomena and the object of phenomenographic research is the variation in ways of experiencing phenomena

(Marton & Booth, 1997, p.111). The results of this research are presented in the form of an outcome space that illustrates the relationships between the main result categories (categories of description). We will present phenomenographic methodology in more detail in the second section.

### **1.3 Research questions**

Based on the defined topic and the purpose of the research, the main questions guiding this research are:

1. How do students understand the idea of higher education?
2. How do students perceive their role in higher education?

The two research questions are directly operationalised in the interview conducted with participants. Namely, the phenomenographic interview used in this research is individual, in-depth interview with open-ended questions. The interview is conducted in dialogical manner led by two overarching themes which are directly transferred from the research questions: (1) the idea of higher education, and (2) the role of students in higher education.

### **1.4 Context – Higher education in Finland**

The reason for focusing on higher education in Finland and conducting the research in University of Tampere specifically, is twofold. First, the researcher's academic curiosity was awoken during the studies in the Finnish higher education system which seemed rather different from the previous education experiences. The interest to learn more about higher education in Finland combined with the personal experience with it has lead the research to Finnish context. The second reason to conduct the research in the University of Tampere lies in accessibility and networks developed in this particular university that facilitated the research process and provided an easier access to information, facilities and participants.

In order to better understand the research context and place the discussion about the idea of higher education and the role of students in higher education in it, we will now present a brief overview of higher education in Finland.

The history of Finnish higher education began with the establishment of the Royal Academy in Turku in 1640 (Välilä, 2012, p.29). The rapid development of the Finnish higher education sector was related to the industrialization and modernization of society during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The period after the Second World War was characterised by massification and expansion of the system resulting in the establishment of universities all over the country (Välilä, 2012, p.29). Besides the industrial and commercial needs, the expansion was also supported by internal academic interests and by political processes involved in the making of the welfare state (Välilä, 2001, p.31). To support the expansion, many reforms were initiated by the Ministry of Education in the period between the 1970s and the 1990s (under the Act on the Development of Higher Education between 1967-1986) among which the most important are: regional decentralisation, establishment of the vocational

education sector, reform of the degree system and doctoral education, changes in the funding structure of universities, development of the evaluation system and introducing practices that increase competition between and within higher education institutions (Hölttä, 1988; Välimaa, 2001, p.33). The context for the implementation of the Universities Act in 1998 was strongly influenced by the marketization of the higher education sector (Välimaa, 2001, p.37-38). The new Universities Act from 2009 gave universities the status of independent legal entities with increased economic and institutional autonomy (Universities Act, 2009, Section 1). According to Välimaa (2001, p.43), the public sector in Finland has gone through the reorganisation in the spirit of new public management which resulted in significant changes in higher education: the decentralisation of management authority, introduction of “quasi-market” type mechanisms, and performance targets and output objectives for staff.

Steering of the higher education system is based on management by results. Universities are governed by performance agreements negotiated with the Ministry of Education and Culture, and concluded with the government. Direct government funding covers about 64% of university budgets while the rest comes from other public and private sources; the core funding is divided among the universities based on a formula (Ministry, n.d.1). Monitoring of the system is supported by the Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council (FINHEEC) as well as by the national higher education databases (KOTA, AMKOTA, Vipunen).

The higher education policies follow the egalitarian and regional policy principles and support the welfare-state agenda; equal educational opportunities is one of the basic principles of Finnish education (Välimaa, 2012, p.30). Universities are seen as institutions important for the regional development, as well as for the development of the nation state (Välimaa, 2001, p.48).

The Finnish higher education system consists of two complementary sectors: universities and universities of applied sciences (also called polytechnics). The mission of universities is to conduct scientific research and provide undergraduate and postgraduate education based on it (Ministry, n.d.1). In the two-cycle degree system students first complete a Bachelor's degree, after which they may go for the higher Master's degree. As a rule, students are admitted to study for the higher degree. Studies are quantified as credits (ECTS) and one year of full-time study corresponds to 60 credits. Bachelor's level degree is 180 credits and takes three years, while the Master's degree is 120 credits, which means two years of full-time study on top of the lower degree.

In terms of the student numbers, Finnish higher education has become a mass higher education system during the 1970s (Välimaa, 2012, p.29). In 2014, there was 162 900 students in 14 universities and 143 200 students in 26 universities of applied sciences (Statistics Finland, 2015a). Based on the Eurostudent IV report, average age of a Finnish student is 25.9, and there is slightly more females (54.6%) than males (Eurostudent IV, 2009, p.4&7). In order to enter the higher education, one needs to graduate from secondary school, and the beginning of studies usually means leaving

the parents' home (only 6.3% of all students reported to be living with their parents) (Eurostudent IV, 2009, p.44). In 2013, Finland's tertiary education attainment rate among the population aged 30-34 years was 45% compared to an EU average of 37% (Melin et al., 2015, p.7). Finland reached the target set by the EU 2020, that at least 40% of 30-34-year-olds should complete higher education. In 2011 higher education dropout rate was about 24%, compared to the OECD average of nearly 32% (Melin et al., 2015, p.7). Duration of higher education studies in Finland is among the longest in the OECD countries (in 2013 the average time to Master's degree completion was 6.5 years) (Melin et al., 2015, p.7; OECD, 2014). Young people graduate later than in other OECD countries and enter the labour market at an older age (OECD, 2014). Universities in Finland do not charge tuition fees from Finnish students, and the government supports students with non-repayable student financial aid; nearly 58% of students receive some sort of student financial aid (Kela, n.d.). It is also common for higher education students to work while studying: in 2013, 58% of university students, and 56% of polytechnic students had an employment contract while studying (Statistics Finland, 2015b).

## 1.5 Research gap

Higher education studies in Finland have broad coverage of topics – from pedagogical to management issues, from topics related to the structures of the education system to education practices and issues related to the higher education reforms (Välilmaa, 2012, p.43). Moreover, as the previous section shows, various statistical data on students and studying in Finland are available (e.g. national databases KOTA, AMKOTA, and Vipunen). Besides the statistical data, there is a great number of studies examining student life, student satisfaction, student engagement, employability of graduates, etc. Relevant are international projects such as Eurostudent (joint research project of 30 European countries), annual publication by OECD, *Education at a Glance*, as well as the research projects commissioned by the Ministry of Education and Culture, and the research produced by the national research groups (Välilmaa, 2012, p.43).

Research related to our topic, i.e. the idea of higher education, includes practice-inspired and policy-oriented studies, as well as various theoretical analyses. Some of the strong themes are cultural studies on higher education – disciplinary cultures, academic leadership, changes in academic work, and academic identities (Välilmaa, 2012, p.41-42). When it comes to research focused on students, one of the most prominent topics is the social mobility of students (Välilmaa, 2012, p.35). Also notable are the research topics addressing the expansion and massification of the higher education system, as well as the topics related to the education equality analysed through the perspectives of Pierre Bourdieu (Välilmaa, 2012, p.35). Furthermore, topics focusing on the transition from higher education to labour market were extensively studied from the sociological, pedagogical and comparative perspectives (Välilmaa, 2012, p.36). Based on an extensive literature review as well as on the overview of the higher education research topics provided by Välilmaa (2012), we can

conclude that the phenomena that the present research is exploring were not in the focus of the researchers in Finland recently.

Most similar research (published in English) that was also conducted in the Finnish context is by Antikainen and colleagues (1995) on meaning of education and learning in the lives of Finns. The research explores differences between educational generations (cohorts) and focuses on three questions: (1) How do people use education in constructing their life-courses? (2) What do educational experiences mean in the formation of identity? (3) What sort of significant learning experiences Finns have in different stages of their lives? (Antikainen et al., 1995, p.63). Authors used life-history approach and conducted two rounds of life-story interview and semi-structured thematic interview with 44 participants who belong to four different educational generations. Related to the educational generations, Antikainen and colleagues (1995, p.64-65) have discovered four core categories of education and life course:

1. Education as an ideal, life as a struggle;
2. Education as a means to an end, work as a substance of life;
3. Education as a commodity, the self as a problem;
4. Education as self-evident, personal pursuits as the substance of life.

For the oldest generations, education is an ideal, for the middle a means to an end, while for the youngest it is commodity and self-evident (Antikainen et al., 1995, p.71). Furthermore, the study showed that the meaning of education has been constructed in the context of major changes in Finnish society, such as the Second World War, post-war reconstruction, demographic changes in 1960s and 1970s, and the development of the welfare state (Antikainen et al., 1995, p.66). Changes in the subjective meaning of education have not paralleled with the growth of objective, institutional meaning of education. At the same time, as the significance of education has considerably grown (e.g. in seeking employment or in life in general), education was subjectively seen as meaningless and boring (Antikainen et al., 1995, p.66).

Comparing to our research, the research done by Antikainen and colleagues (1995) has a wider research focus (education in general; general population as a sample) and significantly different methodological approach (life-story approach). Still, it is useful for the present research mainly as an orientation in our topic; we can get a glimpse of anticipated conceptions about the idea of higher education within the findings related to the meaning of education. More importantly, it also exemplifies the changeable nature of both, subjective and objective meaning of education. Besides the above described study, a thorough literature review has not discovered any additional previous research published in English language that could be relevant or similar to our research. The literature review, however, omitted studies that could potentially be relevant for our research and that were published only in Finnish language. According to the researcher, this language barrier is the major limitation of the present research. Related to the motivation of the researcher, as well as to the research gap, there are three articles that are especially pertinent to our topic (even

though they do not refer to the Finnish context specifically). Firstly, an article by Bienefeld and Almqvist (2004) that addresses student life and the roles of students in Europe has initiated the interest of the researcher into the investigated phenomena. Bienefeld and Almqvist (2004) argue that higher education has gone through significant changes recently (massification, Bologna Process, emergence of education market), and that these changes transform the roles of students in higher education. Authors identified several (conflicting) roles of students in higher education today; students are seen as potential customers (trends of marketization), as partners (Bologna process), as non-traditional students (lifelong learning policies of EU), and as junior researchers (Humboldtian approach) (Bienefeld & Almqvist, 2004, p.431). Therefore, the roles ascribed to students by different actors and trends in higher education differ, or even contradict, depending on who is conceptualizing the student role. Constituting the largest population in higher education, we believe that students are what higher education is all about. Therefore, their role in higher education is defined by understanding of basic processes and mission of higher education, but also vice versa – their role is what defines the processes and mission of higher education.

Second article that contributed to the researcher's interest in the phenomena under investigation is the one written by McInnis (2004); the article provides an overview of studies that focus on student life (in the period 1999-2004). This overview shows that there are significant differences in the focus of the studies on student life. However, some emerging universal themes on international level are also evident (e.g. impact of globalization on the nature of the student experience). McInnis (2004, p.383) argues that assumptions about student life are dated and many of them become obsolete during the course of time. Assumptions about a "typical" student coming from secondary education is out-dated in the new context of lifelong learning where increasing number of students are "non-traditional" coming to university from work. McInnis (2004, p.383) emphasises that this reality needs to be taken to the forefront of studies about student life. Referring to the idea of a changed context of student life, McInnis (2004, p.383) speaks about the shifted position of university in student life – university needs to reposition itself in order to fit into the student's life. He illustratively names this shift as the "mix of learner-earners and earner-learners" (McInnis, 2004, p.383). The position of higher education in student life, specifically whether the student learns-to-earn or earns-to-learn, changes the concept of a "typical" student.

Learner-earner dynamics that McInnis (2004) illustratively explains builds upon the third article that was crucial in the development of the present research – article by Bergan (2006) which analyses the changeable purpose of higher education. In his article Bergan (2006) explores the main purposes of learning in the context of European countries and argues that the purpose of higher education changes over time. The understanding of the purpose of higher education is reformed in the light of new developments, both for individual participants and for education as a whole (Bergan, 2006, p.3). Bergan (2006, p.3) discerns four major purposes of higher education: (1) Preparation for the labour market; (2) Preparation for life as active citizens in democratic societies; (3) Personal development; and (4) Development and

maintenance of a broad, advanced knowledge base. All four purposes are equally important, Bergan argues, and should complement each other; yet, the order of four purposes indicates a certain hierarchy – from the most debated purpose to the least prominent one (Bergan, 2006, p.4).

Combination of these three articles – Bienefeld and Almqvist (2004), McInnis (2004) and Bergan (2006) – and the ideas presented in them was decisive in forming the research topic of the present research, as well as in focusing the research on student perspective. Namely, in higher education literature related to Finnish context, one can find numerous conceptualisations about the ideas of higher education and about the role of students in higher education. There are also many studies that focus on the students' experiences during their studies. There are not, however, many empirical studies that focus on the students' experiences and conceptualisations of the ideas of higher education, and specifically, their role in it.

Existing research gap regarding the role of students in Finnish higher education is the main source of academic motivation for the researcher to engage in the present study. Furthermore, Finnish higher education context provides an interesting research environment for gaining insight into the issue of students' role in higher education. This topic becomes even more relevant especially in the light of recent changes in higher education globally (such as marketization trends, funding reforms, emergence of new teaching and learning methods), but changes in the Finnish national higher education as well (such as introduction of tuition fees for international students, internationalization of higher education, development of education market and education export activities).

## **1.6 Main concepts**

In this research we developed working definitions of the main concepts that are being frequently used – concepts of “higher education”, “the idea of higher education” and “the role”. The working definitions provide a conceptual framework for the collection, analysis and interpretation of data.

The concept “higher education” includes all forms of post-secondary, i.e. tertiary education, which in the Finnish context means that it includes universities and universities of applied sciences. We differentiate higher education, as a form of education, and higher education system, as a system of higher education institutions. Our participants, however, use terms “higher education”, “higher education system”, “higher education institutions” and “university” interchangeably seeing the higher education system and institutions as implementers of higher education. For that reason we will apply the broader understanding of the term “higher education” and include “higher education system” in it.

Secondly, we need to define the phrase “idea of the higher education”. We turn here to a thorough analysis of the idea of higher education by Rothblatt (2009). He traced the origins of the “idea of a university” back to 19<sup>th</sup> century philosophers in England and Germany and examined the way this concept was used and defined. Following

the analysis of this concept by Rothblatt (2009, p.178), the idea of higher education, as used in the present research, integrates two concepts:

1. The essence of higher education (definition of higher education – what is it?);
2. The purpose of higher education (including synonyms “mission” and “function”; description of its activities – what is it for?).

The concept of “the role” is the third concept that we need to specify. This concept has three equally important facets and integrates three meanings:

1. A character assigned or assumed (who are students?);
2. A function or part performed in a particular operation or process (what is the students’ part in higher education?);
3. A socially expected behavior pattern usually determined by an individual's status in a particular society (what do students do?).

It is important to note that the interview questions were designed to cover all three facets of the term “role”. Although complex, this term was chosen intentionally because it (1) opens the possibility for multiplicity of roles (unlike the common understanding of “identity”), (2) does not imply a fixed, stationary condition (like the term “position”), and (3) does not imply hierarchy (that is often linked with the term “status”). This term is somewhat similar to Barnett’s term “being”; he tries to understand the student as being in their educational setting, and what is the nature of that “being” (Barnett, 2007, p.27-28).

## **2 Research methodology**

The following section will deal with the research design of the present study. Firstly the phenomenographic research approach and its ontological and epistemological assumptions will be discussed. The second subsection will give a detailed presentation of the phenomenographic methodology and its main elements. In the third subsection, the various approaches found in the phenomenography will be scrutinised and the position of the present research will be explained. Defined methodology of the present research, as well as the research structure and procedures will be presented in the fourth subsection. Fifth and sixth subsection are devoted to explaining the procedures of data collection and data analysis.

### **2.1 Research approach - phenomenography**

Following the research question and the overall purpose of the research, the research methodology that was chosen for this study is the qualitative phenomenographic methodology. In the process of developing the research design and reconsidering the methodology to apply, phenomenography has emerged as the best way to answer the research questions that initiated the present study. As previously explained, the role of students in higher education in Finland has been little researched. Particularly, the perspective of students, their understanding of the idea of higher education and of their role in it has not been previously in the research focus. Hence, this research is intended to provide preliminary understanding on the subject by exploring the students' experiences and conceptions regarding the higher education.

Before we turn to explaining the phenomenography as a methodology, we need to address the philosophical standpoint that underlies the research approach, and thus the research design. The philosophical assumptions, researchers own worldviews (paradigms) as well as theoretical frameworks form the foundation of the research design process in qualitative research (Creswell, 2007, p.15). As such, the researcher needs to be aware of their influence and, at the same time, explicitly state them in the process of reporting the research (Creswell, 2007, p.15).

According to Guba and Lincoln (1994, p.107) qualitative research paradigms are basic belief systems, specific worldviews that are based on ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions. The overarching paradigm that leads the present study can be characterised as constructivism. However, the specificity of the phenomenographic methodology brings some new elements to constructivistic paradigm as defined by the authors analysing the qualitative paradigms (Creswell, 2007; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). These new elements mainly refer to the ontological assumptions (i.e. assumptions about the nature of reality), as well as epistemological assumptions, (i.e. assumptions about the nature of knowledge).

Phenomenography as a research approach initially emerged from a strongly empirical rather than theoretical or philosophical basis and only more recent phenomenographic research (such as Hasselgren & Beach, 1997; Marton & Booth, 1997; Richardson,

1999; Svensson, 1997) have paid more attention to epistemological and ontological assumptions underlying the approach (Åkerlind, 2012, p.115).

### **2.1.1 Non-dualistic ontology**

In phenomenography the ontological position is non-dualistic. The ontological problem refers to the relation between the individual and the reality, and phenomenographical approach explains this relationship as being constituted between subjective and objective perspective. Therefore, the reality is not a real world 'out there' nor a subjective world 'in here'; it is not imposed upon the individual nor it is constructed by the individual. The reality is experienced and constituted as an internal relation between these two perspectives (Marton & Booth, 1997, p. 13).

“We cannot describe a world that is independent of our descriptions or of us as describers. We cannot separate out the describer from description. Our world is a real world, but it is a described world, a world experienced by humans.”  
(Marton & Booth, 1997, p.113)

### **2.1.2 Relational epistemology**

Epistemological assumptions are closely related to ontological ones which in phenomenographical methodology implies that knowledge is relational and created between subjective and objective: it is neither only empirical nor only rational, but created through thinking about external reality (Svensson, 1997, p.165). Since there is a variety of relations between the internal thought and external reality, there is a variety of experiences that constitutes the knowledge. Phenomenography aims to capture this variety of experiences.

To summarise, the non-dualistic philosophical assumptions behind phenomenography mean that the research object (the phenomenon under investigation) and the research subjects (people experiencing the phenomenon) are not viewed or treated separately. Instead, phenomenographic research focuses on exploring the human-world relations which constitute experiences; these experiences combined represent the phenomenon as a whole (Yates, Partridge, & Bruce, 2012, p.98).

## **2.2 Phenomenographic methodology**

Phenomenographic methodology was developed in the 1970s by Ference Marton, a Swedish scholar, and his colleagues who studied perceptions of learning among university students in Sweden. The findings of his research showed that students had qualitatively different ways of comprehending what they read and learned. The purpose of Marton's research was to understand different experiences (of learning): “It is research which aims at description, analysis, and understanding of experiences; that is, research which is directed towards experiential description” (Marton, 1981, p.180). The exploration of personal experiences, subjective ideas and conceptions, as the object of research, was developed in contrast to the positivistic and objectivistic views dominant in educational and psychological research in the 1970s (Svensson, 1997, p.163).

Phenomenography is an inductive qualitative research methodology that explores phenomena through different descriptions of ideas, understandings and conceptions (Svensson, 1997). As Marton and Booth (1997, p.111) explain, the unit of phenomenographic research is a way of experiencing phenomena (in the present research “conceptions”) and the object of phenomenographic research is the variation in ways of experiencing phenomena. The authors continue arguing that the way of experiencing something regards to an internal relationship between the experiencer and the experienced (Marton & Booth, 1997, p.113); the relationship which is essential for the phenomenographic non-dualistic ontology. The crucial features that distinguish phenomenographic approach from other research methodologies are at the same time the main ways of describing various conceptions; these features are (1) focus on categories of description, (2) the open explorative form of data collection, and (3) the interpretative character of the data analysis (Svensson, 1997, p.162).

In the following subsections we will try to address phenomenography as a research methodology by explaining the main concepts in phenomenographic approach: conceptions, categories of description and experience; first- and second-order perspective; bracketing; and outcome space.

### **2.2.1 Conceptions, categories of description and experience**

In phenomenographic studies, terms “conceptions”, “ways of understanding”, “ways of experiencing”, and “conceptualisations” are all used interchangeably as synonyms (Marton & Booth, 1997). In the present research we opted for the term “conceptions”.

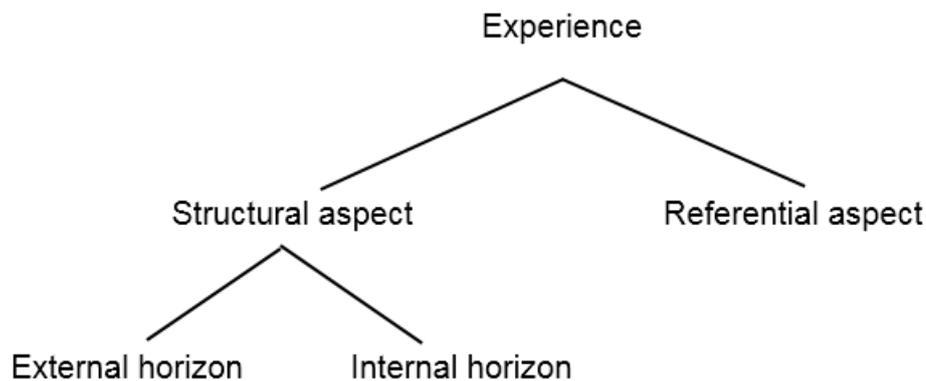
Conception is the unit of phenomenographic research and it refers to the quality of the human-world relation; variety of conceptions represent qualitatively different ways in which some phenomenon or some aspect of reality is understood (Yates et al., 2012, p.105).

Conceptions are represented by the categories of description, however categories are not identical to conceptions. Rather, the categories of descriptions are used to denote the conceptions (Yates et al., 2012, p.105). While making the categories of description the researcher must strive to reach the highest level of accuracy and faithfulness to the individual’s ways of experiencing, often using the words of participants in the final descriptions.

As we can see the term “experience” is pivotal in describing the phenomenographic conceptions, therefore, there is a need to define the experience as seen in phenomenography. Marton and Booth (1997, p.122) explain that experience is not taken as a mental entity – the focus is not on mental processes behind the experiencing (which would be the subject of research in psychology). Rather, the focus is on an internal relationship between the experiencer and the experienced. Second, experience does not refer to physical/material phenomenon which is usually studied in natural sciences. Phenomenography is interested in exploring the person’s way of experiencing the phenomenon. Being neither psychological nor physical, experiences are essentially non-dualistic (Marton & Booth, 1997, p.122). In order to operationalize

experience for the purpose of the phenomenographic research, Marton and Booth (1997, p.88) propose a diagram that represents the anatomy of experience (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: The anatomy of experience by Marton and Booth (1997, p.88)



Understanding this anatomy of experience is essential for the data analysis phase, specifically the phase of analysing the categories in terms of their structural and referential aspects. Marton and Booth (1997, p.88) explain the anatomy of experience using an example of a bird on a branch as an experience, i.e. the phenomenon observed by the subject. The recognition and definition of the phenomenon as a bird is a referential aspect, while the external structural aspect refers to the tree, branches and surrounding in contrast to which the subject recognizes the bird. The internal structural aspect is the structure of the bird, its beak, feathers, colour, etc. Therefore the anatomy of experience, as above described, needs to be taken into account during the data analysis phase and particularly when the description of the categories are being made.

Yates et al. (2012, p.106) summarize the four key qualities that underpin the categories of description. They are:

1. relational – the human-world relation comprising the conception;
2. experiential – based on the experience of participants in the study;
3. content oriented – focused on the meaning of the phenomenon under investigation; and,
4. qualitative – descriptive in nature.

### **2.2.2 First- and second-order perspective**

Phenomenography clearly differentiates between first- and second-order perspectives referring to two kinds of objects of research. When first-order perspective is taken in the research, it means that the focus is on the various aspects of the world, the

phenomena themselves, while second-order perspective focuses on people's experience of various aspects of the world (Marton, 1981, p.177). Thus, in phenomenography the second-order perspective is applied and the ways of experiencing the world are taken as a research object (Marton & Booth, 1997, p.118). Consequently, the second-order perspective has influence on the research design and the research questions' formulation, posing questions of a "how" nature (How do participants experience a specific phenomenon?) instead of "why" (Why do participants experience a phenomenon in a certain way?); phenomenography tries to capture the variety of experiences with a specific phenomenon, thus the question of why are those experiences seen in a certain way would be more in the focus of a psychological research. When research takes the second-order perspective, the research object is inevitably experience, i.e. subjective viewpoint of the participants, incommensurable with the "objective truth". Thus, it is impossible to expose personal experiences to some external criterion of truth: "second-order' conceptions may be completely 'wild' from some external point of view, but it is this very wildness which must be captured in the research." (Ashworth & Lucas, 1998, p.425)

Marton (1981, p.177) considered the second-order perspective to be a distinguishing feature and strength of phenomenography by arguing that the first-order perspective is "from the outside" and the second-order perspective is "from the inside". This insider's perspective provides a significant contrast to traditional first-order scientific research where the world is expressed as is (Marton, 1981, p.177). The present study follows the phenomenographic approach and takes the second-order perspective thus exploring higher education and the role of students in higher education as experienced by the students-participants; the research object is students' experience.

### **2.2.3 Bracketing**

The concept taken from Husserl's phenomenology, "bracketing", also referred to as "epoché", means suspending judgment and theories about the studied phenomenon and focussing on analysis of experience. Bracketing is a central methodological requirement to achieve understanding of the student experience, and it refers to the need for the researcher to set aside their own assumptions, as far as it is possible, in order to register the participant's own point of view (Ashworth & Lucas, 2000, p.297).

Since phenomenography deals with the second-order perspective, bracketing "requires a renunciation by the researcher of a number of assumptions and presuppositions which would tend to import 'objective' or 'first-order' matters into the descriptions" (Ashworth & Lucas, 1998, p.418). Ashworth and Lucas (2000, p.298) argue that there are several kinds of presupposition that the researcher must bracket:

- findings from the previous research;
- pre-given theoretical structures or particular interpretations;
- the researcher's personal knowledge and belief;
- assumptions built into the specific techniques (they tend to bend the data to a particular form, which may distort the clarity concerning student experience);

- researcher's concern to uncover the "cause" of certain forms of student experience (specifically, if imported, researcher's notions of cause-and-effect might distort the description of the experience).

The above described examples of assumptions may disrupt the researcher's careful listening: "It is the research participant's experience which should be revealed, not the researcher's expectations" (Ashworth & Lucas, 2000, p.298).

There are, however, some researchers that do not accept bracketing as a necessary methodological practice in phenomenography and prefer to use previous research findings and theories (Ashworth & Lucas, 1998, p.420 specifically name Entwistle & Ramsden, 1983; Laurillard, 1979; and Prosser, 1994). Such research can be considered as only partially phenomenographic "since the analysis is no longer a process of discovery, but a means of searching for predetermined categories" (Ashworth & Lucas, 1998, p.420).

Bracketing has one very important consequence for the structure of the research project - it suggests that the literature review should be done *after* the data collection and data analysis (Ashworth & Lucas, 1998, p.421). Moreover, reviewing literature in the early stage, as in conventional empirical research, is viewed as a danger: it might draw the researcher's attention to certain aspects of the participants' experience which have been suggested by the previous research and existing theories (Ashworth & Lucas, 1998, p.421). It may mislead the line of data gathering as well as data analysis.

This research has accepted the approach of bracketing to large extent. There was a literature review phase before data collection, specifically the most relevant literature on the currently prevailing idea of higher education as well as several articles that deal with the role of students in higher education system. This literature review, however, was not in-depth review and it was not directly translated into the process of constructing the instrument (interview questions). Rather, the pre-reading was meant for the researcher to learn more about the topic beforehand. This literature was later fully employed in the analysis of the results – categories of descriptions regarding the participants' personal understanding of the idea of higher education were further analysed and related to the prevailing ideas of higher education as presented in higher education literature. Bracketing, as suggested by Ashworth and Lucas (2000, p.298) was fully employed in the data collection phase in order to achieve the highest possible level of data relevance and accuracy in understanding the participants' experiences. Specifically, in order to capture various individual conceptions, the interview responses are not considered individually but as a single dataset. This analysis across the data enabled the identification of a variety of conceptions of the idea of higher education, as well as of the role of students in higher education.

#### **2.2.4 Outcome space**

The results of phenomenography are categories of description in which different ways of understanding the phenomenon are logically and hierarchically organised to

establish a typology, a so-called “outcome space”. The outcome space portrays a variety of conceptions which together comprise the phenomenon; it is a logically structured complex of the different ways of experiencing the phenomenon (Yates et al., 2012, p.106).

The outcome space may be illustrated through a table or a diagram which depicts the conceptions and relationships between them. Therefore, the outcome space ought to communicate the results of the research in the research report. In every phenomenographic research the outcome space is a visual representation of the way the participants of the study constituted the phenomenon through their experiences. This means that any outcome space is inevitably partial when compared to the hypothetically complete range of ways of experiencing a phenomenon (Åkerlind, 2012, p.121).

### **2.3 Variety within phenomenography**

Phenomenography as a research methodology has been developed in the field of education, and it has been also widely used within the higher education research. Mainly it is focusing on different ways of understanding learning and approaching to studying, and recently it has extended into the exploration of how students understand disciplinary concepts and how lecturers experience their teaching (Ashworth & Lucas, 2000, p.295; Tight, 2012, p.191). Entwistle (1997, p.129) recognizes that for higher education, which aims to develop the conceptual understandings in students, phenomenography is useful and relevant since it directly relates to teaching and learning.

While reporting the research, many of the phenomenographic studies devote a part of their text to the issue of phenomenography as a methodology, its assumptions and procedures (studies such as Åkerlind 2008; Entwistle 1997; Martin et al. 2003; Marton et al. 1997; Prosser & Trigwell 1999; Yates et al. 2012). This implies that the authors have the need to define their phenomenographic approach since there is a variety of ways in doing phenomenography. When comparing phenomenographic studies, one can notice different approaches to assumptions behind phenomenography, as well as different research procedures. The reason for this variety within phenomenography might lay in the fact that the literature which deals with articulation of the phenomenographic methodology lacks details about practical procedures, while research reports often do not reveal the research process itself (Ashworth & Lucas, 2000, p.296; Entwistle, 1997, p.128; Richardson, 1999, p.53). This vagueness in the articulation of the practical research procedures is the main point of critique directed toward phenomenographic methodology, and it can be somewhat resolved by transparency and by the means of good and ethical research practices. Another criticism concerns the generalisability of research results (Moisio, 2014, p.116). Due to the interpretative nature of the phenomenographic research and high level of context dependency of the research data and results, the set of categories of description is inevitably changeable. Relational epistemology of phenomenography sees phenomena as constituted from variety of relations between internal and external

perspectives making them inevitably context bound (Yates et al., 2012, p.98). This means that the research results of a specific phenomenographic study are inevitably partial, because they portray the experiences of specific participants in a specific context (Åkerlind, 2012, p.121; Ashworth & Lucas, 1998, p.426). Related to the research results, phenomenography has also been criticised for the process of constructing the outcome space. Namely, the critique suggests that the structure of the outcome space may potentially be imposed upon the data by the researcher, rather than emerging from the data (Åkerlind, 2012, p.122). There is a variety of views among phenomenographers regarding the degree to which outcome space may reflect the professional judgement of the researcher in contrast to emerging purely from the data (Åkerlind, 2012, p.123). Åkerlind (2012, p.123) asserts that this is a question of degree only, as the final outcome inevitably reflects both the data and researchers' judgements in interpreting the data.

The lack of detailed research procedure in phenomenographic literature has resulted with phenomenography being compared and even identified with other research methodologies, such as phenomenology and grounded theory.

When comparing phenomenology and phenomenography, Marton himself (Marton, 1981, p.180; Marton & Booth, 1997, p.116-117) recognized that there are some significant similarities between the two methodologies, mainly the research object being experience, as well as the fact that both apply bracketing. There are however several important differences:

1. From a strictly phenomenological point of view, the distinction between the first- and second-order perspective is simply not feasible.
2. Phenomenologists apply a philosophical method while exploring their own experiences; phenomenographers adopt empirical orientation investigating experiences of others.
3. Phenomenology clearly differentiates between prereflective experience and the conceptual thought; phenomenography having the non-dualistic approach does not make that distinction.
4. The purpose of the two methodologies is different: phenomenology aims to discover the essence of the person's experience; phenomenography's goal is to capture a variety of experiences. (Marton & Booth, 1997, p.116-117)

Svensson (1997, p.163-164) argues that, despite all the similarities, phenomenography cannot be reduced to phenomenology because, from a historical point of view, phenomenography was *not* developed on the basis of phenomenological philosophy, making it problematic to totally include phenomenography as a part of the phenomenological tradition.

When talking about similarities between phenomenography and grounded theory, the most obvious ones are in regards to research procedures. Specifically, the methods of data analysis used in phenomenographic research seem to be indistinguishable from those of grounded theory (Richardson, 1999, p.68). The process of coding

applied in the grounded theory research indeed does have some similarities with the process of making the categories and finding the conceptions in phenomenographic research. However, when one takes a better look into both of the processes of data analysis, differences clearly emerge: phenomenography aims to discover the variety of conceptions of the participants, while grounded theory research tries to formulate a theory based on conceptual ideas of participants continually comparing and looking for similarities (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). Another similarity can be found in regards to the research findings – in both methodologies the findings are grounded in the data. Nevertheless, the major difference that clearly divides these two methodologies is in the goal of the research – grounded theory research aims to discover a pattern, a theory, while phenomenography's goal is to find a variety of conceptions of a specific phenomenon.

It is important to note that the present research is not grounded theory research due to two main reasons:

1. The present research is not generating or discovering theory. Moreover, some previously defined ideas of higher education and roles of students exist, e.g. in institutional strategies, national and international policies.
2. As previously explained, phenomenography and grounded theory have certain similarities, but in this particular case the research procedures differ significantly. The present phenomenography is not completely grounded in the data; rather, the final conceptions are built based on, both, the data and the relevant literature.

#### **2.4 Phenomenography in this research**

Marton (1986, in Ashworth & Lucas, 1998, p. 416) identified three lines of phenomenographic research in regards to the object of research:

1. Phenomenography that focuses on general aspects of learning;
2. Research dealing with learning but within specific disciplinary context, i.e. the understanding of a specific disciplinary concept or a theory;
3. Study that investigates individual conceptions of the various aspects of life.

The present research belongs to the third line of phenomenography – investigating individual conceptions of the various aspects of life, specifically students' conceptions of higher education and the role of students in higher education.

Concerning the research procedures, as we explained earlier, phenomenography can be developed in different ways and thus, gain different features of the structure of the research design. Hasselgren and Beach (1997, p.195) argue that in practice, phenomenography has at least five possible modes of application:

1. Discursive – relies on discourse as the source of data;
2. Experimental – design similar to experimental approach to research;

3. Naturalistic – data collected through observation in the natural environment;
4. Hermeneutic – data are statements and texts not originally collected for the purpose of phenomenography and analysed in terms of their whole-part relation;
5. Phenomenological – searching for the metadata, e.g. what is happening in the participants' minds during the interview.

The mode that the present research employed is one of discursive phenomenography. This mode is also known as the “pure phenomenography” (Hasselgren & Beach, 1997, p.197) referring to the form of phenomenography which was not directly related to any specific pre-directed learning (which is the case in an experimental mode). Hasselgren and Beach (1997, p.197) named this mode of phenomenography discursive because of the fact that the data is collected through a conversation – a discourse – about the phenomenon under investigation. The responses that are analysed are collected specifically for the purpose of the phenomenographic research (Hasselgren & Beach, 1997, p.197). Figure 2 clearly illustrates the research structure of discursive phenomenography.

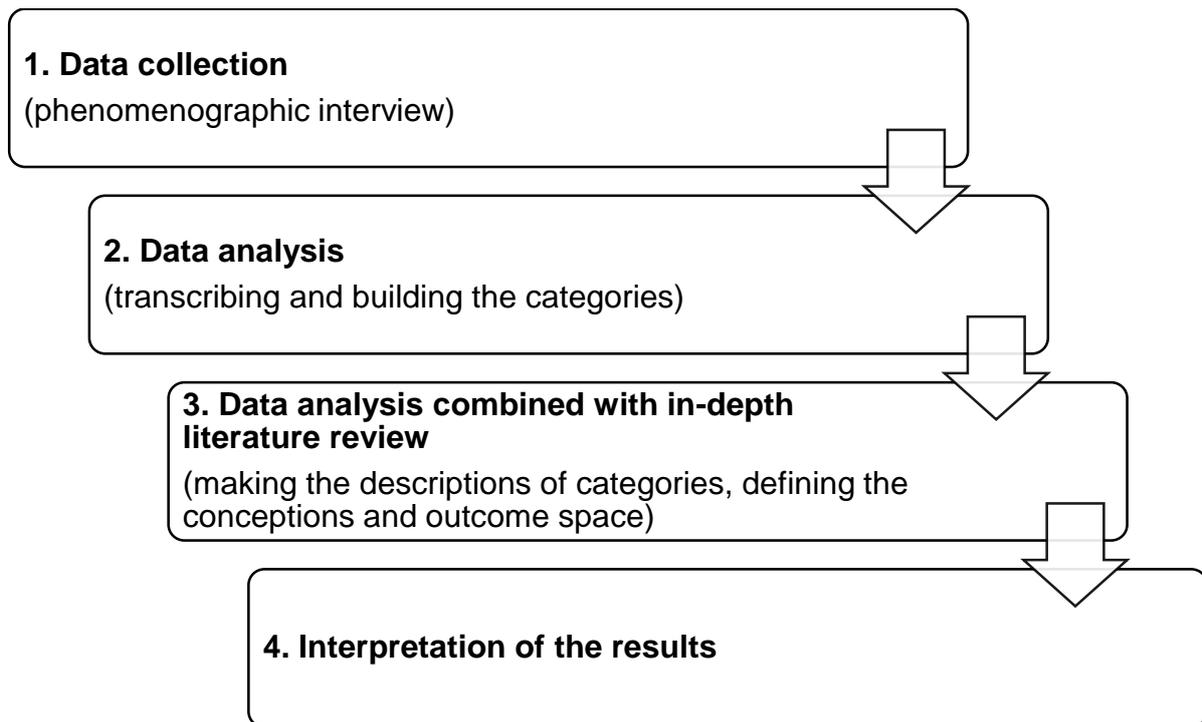
The main reason for choosing discursive phenomenography lies in the researcher's perspective regarding the research data collected via a phenomenographic interview. Namely, Säljö (1996, p.26) explains this perspective by arguing that “phenomenographers have access to nothing but discourse”. The research data collected via interviews cannot have the status of being “correct” or “false” because they are lived experiences and do not fall under any criteria of truth. This idea is closely related to the second-order perspective that phenomenography takes. Furthermore, Säljö (1996, p.31) elaborates that language constitutes our interpretations of reality. Thus, researchers can only access and analyse the discourse produced about the phenomenon in the situation of interviewing.

Figure 2: Steps of Discursive phenomenography (Source: Hasselgren & Beach, 1997, p.197)



The steps presented in the Figure 2 were relevant in the process of defining the structure of the present research; they were taken as the basis upon which the researcher built and defined the specific stages of the present research (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Research structure



There are several reasons for the proposed structure. Firstly, there is no previous research on the topic of students' role in higher education that could serve as a comparative reference in the process of developing the research instrument. The research is, in that sense, grounded in the experiences of the participants. Second, closely related to the previous reason, is the application of phenomenographic bracketing; this research clearly does not start with an in-depth literature review stage (which is later combined with the last data analysis stage). In order to arrive to the experiences of students, pre-given theoretical structures or particular interpretations needed to be bracketed in the stage of data collection. Lastly, in the process of making the methodological choices, the research structure that has been utilised emerged as the best way to answer the research questions.

## 2.5 Data collection

The data for the research were collected during the March and April 2015 for the purpose of the research on the students' conceptions of higher education and the role of students in the higher education system. The research method used is (phenomenographic) interview. The participants are 8 students from the University of Tampere in Finland.

In the following sections we will outline the applied procedure of sampling and briefly describe the participants in the research. We will also present the chosen research method – interview – and report the process of interviewing.

### 2.5.1 Sampling

The technique of sampling that was applied in this research is purposive sampling. While researching a specific population (in this case students), sampling aims to find the participants that are “information rich” (Patton, 2002, p.242). That means that the sampling techniques are often combined in order to collect data that are relevant and informative for the research question. Thus, in practice the purposive sampling in the present research was further supported by two additional sampling techniques – criteria sampling and stratified sampling.

Purposive sampling is a technique often used in qualitative research and it involves identifying and selecting individuals or groups of individuals that are especially knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest (Cresswell & Plano Clark, 2011, p.112). In addition to knowledge and experience, in this research we have sought for the individuals that are motivated and agreed to participate. The motivation of the participants is critical for phenomenographic interview and that was the defining characteristic that lead the sampling process.

Stratified sampling was also used aiming to introduce variety in the sample, thus introducing the variety in the experiences and conceptions regarding the research object. Stratified sampling refers to a sampling technique that tries “to capture major variations rather than to identify a common core” (Patton, 2002, p.240). The present research has two strata – students from two Schools in the University of Tampere – School of Social sciences and Humanities and School of Information Sciences.

The reason for choosing these two schools lies in numerous research which find that the disciplinary culture has a great influence on its members. Namely, “the academic culture and the disciplinary epistemology are inseparably intertwined” and influence greatly on the members of a specific discipline (both academics and students) (Becher & Trowler, 2001, p.23). “The way in which academics engage with their subject matter, and the narratives they develop about this, are important structural factors in the formulation of disciplinary cultures” which are further disseminated through values, attitudes and practices that are articulated and reinforced within a specific discipline (Becher & Trowler, 2001, p.23). Based on these arguments, Becher and Trowler (2001, p.20) propose that academic tribes and disciplinary territories with their specific organizational, cognitive and social contexts interact and affect the individuals within the discipline. In their analysis, Becher and Trowler (2001, p.35) follow the previously identified dimensions by Biglan (1973, p.198): hard pure, soft pure, hard applied and soft applied. “There are reasonably clear distinctions between the knowledge domains” (Becher & Trowler, 2001, p.35-36) among these 4 dimensions, specifically in terms of objects of enquiry, the nature of knowledge growth, the researcher-knowledge relationship, research procedures and results, and criteria and extent of truth claims. In this anthropological framework of academic tribes and disciplinary territories, students can be seen as novices of the tribe that are being socialized into both cognitive and social elements of the disciplinary culture in order to be accepted into the tribe (Ylijoki, 2000, p.340). Following these arguments, the present research

has tried to introduce further variety in the sample by introducing two strata – School of Social sciences and Humanities (which represents the pure soft area), and School of Information Sciences (which represents the hard area). To be more precise, Information Sciences can be placed in the hard-applied area; no hard-pure discipline is involved in the research because in the University of Tampere, where the study has been conducted, there is no faculty of science.

Both strata in the present research constitute a fairly homogeneous sample due to the third sampling technique - criteria sampling. As the name suggests, criteria sampling introduces one or more criteria that participants must meet in order to assure that the collected data are relevant for the research questions. Individuals were selected based on the assumption that they possess knowledge and, most importantly, experience with the phenomenon of being a student in higher education. There were 4 criteria that students had to meet:

1. students who are Finnish degree students;
2. study in the School of Information Sciences or School of Social Sciences and Humanities;
3. have obtained at least 120 ECTS credits, or more;
4. speak English.

Since this research aims to capture the conceptions of the idea of higher education and the student's role in it, specifically in the Finnish context, we needed to include only the students who have ample experience with those specific phenomena. Therefore, we focused on the Finnish degree students who obtained at least 120 ECTS credits or more to ensure that they spent at least two years in the higher education system in Finland (one academic year usually equals to 60 ECTS credits). The last criterion, that they speak English, needed to be clearly stated because the research is done in English with Finnish native speakers.

In practice, sampling process started with disseminating the call for students-participants via various E-mailing lists (see Appendix 1: The invitation for participation in research). In this point the researcher was actively in communication with the student associations, people responsible for study affairs in respective schools, as well as with professors and lecturers that had on-going courses during the 4th study period (16.03.2015-31.07.2015). Looking back, this was the most challenging process of the research because of the significant amount of time it consumed and the difficulty of reaching the students. Nevertheless, the students replied to the invitation and the interviewing phase started. 10 students that were willing to participate and that met the criteria contacted the researcher, out of which 8 were interviewed. With two remaining students the researcher was not able to set a common available time for the interview.

8 interviews were conducted with 8 participants-students from the University of Tampere: 4 participants study in the Schools of Social Sciences and Humanities and 4 study in the School of Information Sciences (see Appendix 2: Participants in the

research). Also, the gender distribution is ideal – 4 male and 4 female participants equally distributed among both sample strata. The gender of the participants was not considered to be relevant in this research; however, it is a fortunate coincidence that both genders are equally represented. All participants meet the previously established criteria: Finnish degree students who obtained more than 120 ECTS credits. All the participants are on the Master's level of their studies and on average they have around 200 ECTS credits (or more). The participants contacted the researcher via E-mail after receiving the information about the research through different E-mailing lists, which proves their interest and motivation to participate in the research. During the interview they expressed their motivation to participate as being mainly oriented toward helping out a fellow student in conducting the research “that sounds really interesting” (SSH2). In addition, some of the participants are in the process of writing their master theses at the moment which increased their motivation to cooperate fully.

A remark regarding the sample size is worth making here. “Only” 8 students were participating in the research which is a fairly small number to represent the entire student population. Literature does not offer any prescriptive sample size for a phenomenographic study, but argues that there are several factors influencing the sample size: (1) the number of interviews conducted needs to be sufficient to enable discovering variation in conceptions; (2) sample size must also ensure that the amount of resulting data remains manageable; (3) sample size can be determined by a saturation point, with data collection continuing until no additional conceptions of the phenomenon under investigation can be discerned (Yates et al. 2012, p.103). These three factors were taken into consideration when determining the sample size in the present research. Namely, as previously mentioned, the present research aims to provide a preliminary understanding of the student experience of higher education and students' role in it. Therefore, the sample size is not intended to represent the entire population; rather, the time and resources available for this research combined with the chosen phenomenographic methodology have limited the number of students that have been interviewed. The research aimed to provide a basis for more extensive future research. Moreover, the interviewing process proved that the sample size did not endanger the research results. Particularly, during the last two interviews it was evident that the responses started to repeat and that the research indeed discovered the variety in conceptions about the idea of higher education and the students' role in higher education. Researcher believes that a larger number of participants would not change the current research findings.

### **2.5.2 Interviewing**

Interviewing is a research method of data collection often used in qualitative research. The main purpose of interviewing is to understand other people's perspective and to obtain information about things that we cannot directly observe (Patton, 2002, p.341). Qualitative interviewing begins with the assumption that the participants' perspective is “meaningful, knowable and able to be made explicit” (Patton, 2002, p.341). The present phenomenographic research employs interviewing as a primary data

collection technique mainly due to the methodological choices that were previously explained (specifically, non-dualistic ontology, relational epistemology, and second-order perspective). The predominant method for collecting data in phenomenographic research is the individual interview, which is carried out in a dialogical manner (Marton & Booth, 1997, p.129). The second reason for choosing interview as a research method lies in the research question and researcher's belief that interview is the best open-ended approach to detect the variety of students' conceptions of higher education and their roles in it. Ashworth and Lucas (1998, p.417) point out that the interview questions need to be as open-ended as possible in order to let the subject choose to answer the dimensions they wish, thus revealing the "individual's relevance structure". Although there is a certain set of questions at the beginning, each interview may take different course because we need to "follow" the subject (Ashworth & Lucas, 1998, p.417).

"If the point of the interview is really to discover the conceptions of the student, then it is in the student's words that these understandings should be found and their meaning should not be gleaned from their similarity or difference from some official, 'accurate' template." (Ashworth & Lucas, 1998, p.424)

In the present research we use individual, in-depth interview with open-ended questions; interview which often had a form of dialogue. This is what we referred to as "phenomenographic interview". Since the interviewing approach is between semi-structured and unstructured interview, the phenomenographic interview is in its nature "loosely" structured. In practice, the interview was conducted as an informal, conversational interview that followed the previously defined interview questions to some extent. An interview outline (see Appendix 3) was not rigorously followed with each participant: the two previously defined overarching themes were the leading topics for conversation, and some of the questions were almost always asked. The main idea of the interview was to be open for participants' thoughts, even if it sometimes lead to some new, previously unplanned topics for conversation. The main task for the researcher was to maintain the conversation in the domain of relevance for the research topic. The result of this "loosely" structured interview is that each conducted interview was different: the topics for conversation, the specific questions, as well as the data collected differ from participant to participant.

The weaknesses of an interview that is between semi-structured and unstructured approach are that it requires a greater amount of time to collect the data and it takes several interviews to recognize the patterns relevant for data analysis. Also, this interviewing approach depends on the interviewer's conversational skills. On the other hand, the strengths of this kind of interview reside in its flexibility, spontaneity and responsiveness to individual participants' differences and situational changes (Patton, 2002, p.343). This interviewing approach allows the interviewer to follow the "flow" of conversation and pose questions that were perhaps not planned beforehand, but are still relevant for the research, especially for the individual interviewee. Interviewer can also personalise the specific questions in order to deepen the communication.

The development of the interview outline (Appendix 3) and the specific interview themes and questions were not established on reviewing the literature and referring to previous research on the topic due to applying the previously described bracketing approach. Without previous in-depth literature review, the interview themes and questions are developed based on: (1) researcher's knowledge gained and literature read during the previous two years of Master's programme in research and innovation in higher education; this knowledge supported the analysis of the research topic and its most important facets; (2) researcher's personal experience of being a student and active participant in student's policy-making processes; and (3) researcher's international experience of studying in four different higher education systems and reflection on their differences.

Following the previously defined research questions the two overarching interview themes are:

1. The idea of higher education
2. The role of students in higher education

The interview questions that cover these two overarching themes are constructed in a very general manner in order to allow for the different perspectives and experiences to surface in the interview. Also, the phrasing of questions that are planned beforehand was often changed and adapted during the interviews in response to interview dynamics.

As previously mentioned, the researcher conducted 8 interviews with 8 students of the University of Tampere. All interviews were recorded and later transcribed and analysed as unified data. The length of the interviews vary: the longest is 54 minutes and the shortest 27 minutes (the average length is 39 minutes). The date, time and place of the interviews was arranged via E-mail. The Consent to participate in research (see Appendix 4) was also sent during this electronic communication. The purpose of the Consent to participate in research is to ensure the informed consent by informing the participants about the purpose of the research, about the procedures of interviewing, and about the issue of the confidentiality, compensation and participants' rights. The interviews took place in the facilities of the University of Tampere in previously booked group work rooms which provided a setting with no distraction. The space where the interview is conducted seemed important since it gives the context for the interviewing situation. Placing the interviewing situation in the university facilities intended to help the participants to identify with their student's role and answer the questions from that perspective.

At the beginning of the interview the interviewer and interviewee usually talked about everyday topics in order to "break the ice". After this initial informal conversation the interviewer briefly described the research topic and the purpose of the interview, specifically stressing the idea of phenomenographic interview as we already described it above. At the same time, a hard copy of the Consent to participate in the research was given to the interviewee for signing and, once more, the anonymity and

information confidentiality was guaranteed. After making sure that the interviewee does not have any further questions or concerns the interviewer turned on the recorder and proceeded with the interview questions. As we already mentioned, the outline of the interview was not strictly followed and not all interview questions were asked during each interview. New topics or questions were sometimes introduced by the interviewer as needed. Also, to ensure that the two overarching themes are fully covered, sometimes the similar questions were asked couple of times throughout the interview, in a different form or with different focus. The interviewer made sure that the participants have time and space to elaborate their experiences and understandings freely, and to develop them while talking. During the interviewing the researcher maintained the bracketing approach and tried to keep an open mind for the various participants' perspectives. At the end of the interview the participants were asked if they have some final remarks regarding their perspective on students' role in higher education. Also, some participants had the need to give feedback on the interview and express their interest on the final results of the research (in fact, three of them asked if they could be notified via E-mail about the research findings).

A pilot interview was conducted with a student from the School of Social Sciences and Humanities on 27.03.2015. The purpose of the pilot interview was to test the adequacy of the interview outline and the appropriateness of the interview questions. It was also helpful in assessing the time needed to cover the planned interview questions. Since the data collected during the pilot interview are rather extensive and relevant, this interview is included in the analysed dataset. The pilot interview followed the interview outline more strictly than the subsequent interviews and also lasted the longest (54 minutes). After conducting the pilot interview several adjustments to the interview outline have been made. Firstly, the initial phase of interview, the informal conversation before the interview seemed of importance to establish a relaxed atmosphere for the interview, thus needed to be slightly longer. Secondly, the purpose and structure of the interview (rather, the loose structure) needed to be elaborated better along with explaining that the idea is to collect the personal perspective of the participants, that there are no wrong answers, and that the participants need to rely on their experiences while giving their answers. Thirdly, the time that was allotted for the pilot interview seemed slightly long because it was noticeable that the topics, as well as some answers started to repeat towards the end of the interview. Therefore, the time that the researcher planned for the subsequent interviews was shorter, between 35 to 40 minutes, which also allowed more time for the initial informal "small talk" phase. Fourth adjustment that was made after the pilot interview was that some of the interview questions were edited in order to focus more on participants' personal experience. Last adjustment is related to the data analysis, namely transcription; the pilot interview was transcribed very thoroughly, but it became clear that this is not necessary as the recordings included a lot of material that was "small talk" and not directly related to the research questions. In general, the pilot interview proved that the phenomenographic approach to the research topic is appropriate and fruitful, and

that the interview themes and specific questions are adequate to collect the data which will answer the research questions.

## **2.6 Data analysis**

The last and crucial stage of this research is the data analysis stage. In the following section we will present the process of transcribing the interviews and phenomenographic data analysis steps.

### **2.6.1 Transcribing**

As we already mentioned, all 8 interviews were recorded and later transcribed. The transcribing is considered to be an integral part of the data analysis – the moment when the formal analysis starts. It is very important and useful for a researcher to be able to listen to the interview recordings repeatedly and notice some similarities as well as contradictions between the individual interviews while doing the transcribing. This gives them a good overview of the dataset and provides a good basis for the deeper data analysis stage.

Transcription of the interviews was done by the researcher usually right after each individual interview. The 8 interviews transcribed resulted with 42 pages of text (22021 words) later analysed as a unified dataset. The transcribing was done thoroughly word-by-word, and, as we previously mentioned, some parts of the conversation that were not directly related to the research questions were occasionally omitted (e.g. small talk). The first pilot interview was transcribed most comprehensively. The researcher tried to keep the participants' answers as close as possible to the original in order to enable their voice to be heard. However, the spoken language is often not entirely precise and does not include the punctuation; therefore, the sentences were formed by the researcher in order to present the participants' perspectives as truly as possible.

### **2.6.2 Data analysis steps**

Phenomenographic literature does not prescribe one single process or technique of doing the data analysis; on the contrary, there is an array of approaches reported in the literature (Åkerlind, 2012, p.116; Yates et al, 2012, p.103). The data analysis reported vary from four stages to even greater number of stages. As we mentioned earlier, the absence of clear, distinct research procedures prescribed in the phenomenographic literature is one of the most criticised points of phenomenographic research. On the other hand, phenomenographers themselves argue that a single model is not possible nor desirable when taking into account the nature of the research (Yates et al, 2012, p.103).

The main goal of the data analysis in phenomenographic studies is to discover variety in ways of experiencing the phenomenon under investigation. Ashworth and Lucas (2000, p.297) emphasize that there is a “need to bracket” in the data analysis phase due to the second-order perspective. Paramount requirement for phenomenography, according to these authors is that “it must be grounded in the lived experience of its

research participants” (Ashworth & Lucas, 2000, p.297). The set of categories of description that result from the analysis are not established in advance, but they “emerge” from the data, in relationship with the researcher (Åkerlind, 2012, p.117).

The researcher aims to recognize a set of different conceptions about the investigated phenomenon in the data by formulating the categories of description. The categories of description mirror a number of qualitatively different meanings or ways of experiencing the phenomenon which are represented in the final outcome space (Åkerlind, 2012, p.116). Therefore, the ultimate aim of the phenomenographic data analysis is to construct an outcome space which depicts the conceptions and the structural relationships among them.

While doing the analysis the researcher needs to be willing to constantly adjust their thinking in the light of new perspectives maintaining the focus on the transcripts and the participants’ collective experience (Åkerlind, 2012, p.117). It is important to note that the collective experience is in the researcher’s focus. This means that the transcribed interviews are considered as a unified dataset and that the analysis does not focus on individual participant’s answer. Specifically, the variety of conceptions that phenomenography seeks for are found within the range of experiences and understandings within the whole sample group – as a group – not in the range of experiences of each individual in the sample. In practice, the process is strongly repetitive and comparative and it includes continuous sorting and comparing the utterances, themes and concepts.

The data analysis approach applied in this research is conducted in the inductive manner and it involves 7 steps of analysis. Inductive data analysis in qualitative research refers to the “bottom-up” approach to the data; the themes and categories are built by organising the data into increasingly more abstract units of information (Creswell, 2007, p.38) Since phenomenography’s second-order perspective requires that the research results need to be grounded in the participants’ experiences and understandings, the researcher was working back and forth between the themes and the database until a comprehensive set of themes was established. Specifically, the following 7 steps were involved in the data analysis:

1. Transcribing the interviews & Selection of relevant utterances
2. Coding of relevant utterances
3. Grouping the utterances according to similarity of themes (Thematic analysis)
4. Building the preliminary set of categories of description and looking for further varieties of conceptions
5. Going back to transcripts and adjusting the categories of description
6. Analysing the categories in terms of their structural and referential aspects (data) and formulating the final set of categories of descriptions (data+literature)
7. Making the outcome space (data+literature)

The above defined data analysis steps are a detailed presentation of the processes that were involved in the analysis of data. In practice, the process was repetitive and

comparative and often the specific steps were merged or repeated when needed. The steps were developed based on literature that presents a range of phenomenographic data analysis procedures (Åkerlind 2012; Ashworth & Lucas, 2000; Marton & Booth, 2007; Yates et al, 2012).

The coding phase (step 2) resulted with over 100 codes that were later grouped in 35 themes. The themes were created based on the similarity of the utterances – the utterances that refer to the same theme were grouped together. The 35 themes were further analysed and grouped in 16 thematic groups which provided the basis to develop the 16 preliminary categories of description – 6 for the theme “The idea of higher education” and 10 for the theme “The role of students in higher education” (see Appendix 5: Preliminary categories of description). The next step involved going back to the transcripts and looking for more possible varieties of conceptions by contrasting the existing set of 16 preliminary categories to the 35 themes and the transcripts themselves. At the same time, the preliminary categories were redefined and adjusted. While defining the categories in terms of their referential and structural aspect based on the data, the researcher was reading the relevant literature and the conceptions were further crystallized – the final set of categories of description emerged. Simultaneously, the last steps also clarified the structural relationships between the categories of descriptions and, finally, the outcome space was built. In the section “Research findings” we will describe in details the final set of categories and the outcome space.

### 3 Research findings

This research has discovered numerous interesting findings that are related to the research topic. Data analysis followed the 7 steps of analysis as described in the previous section. First, the preliminary set of conceptions was recognised during the early data analysis (Appendix 5) and the final steps of analysis resulted with the final set of categories of description which will be discussed here. The following section will present the research findings organized around the two main research questions:

1. How do students understand the idea of higher education?
2. How do students perceive their role in higher education?

First, we will present the students' conceptions regarding the idea of higher education by explaining 10 categories of description (Categories 1-10) related to the idea of higher education and defining their structural and referential aspects. We will do the same with 11 categories of description (Categories 11-21) that are related to the role of students in higher education. Afterwards, we will illustrate the research findings through the outcome space and address the connections between the categories. In the final subsection we will examine other relevant observations made through the research.

#### 3.1 Categories related to the idea of higher education

In response to the first research question – How do students understand the idea of higher education? – the analysis discovered 10 categories of description. These 10 categories denote 10 different conceptions of students about the idea of higher education and they are presented in the Table 1 below.

We need to make an important remark on terminology used. Namely, the research question as well as categories of description use the term “higher education” which integrates the concepts of higher education system, higher education institutions and university as an institution. The reason for such broad understanding of the term “higher education” lies in data: participants use these terms interchangeably as the participants' quotes will demonstrate.

Table 1: Categories related to the idea of higher education

Category 1	Higher education is related to society
Category 2	Higher education is a network
Category 3	Higher education is binary
Category 4	Higher education is related to knowledge

Category 5	Higher education is related to time
Category 6	Higher education is personal growth
Category 7	Higher education is profession provider
Category 8	Higher education is on the top
Category 9	Higher education has changed
Category 10	Higher education is something else than university

We will discuss each of these categories in detail in the following section and illustrate the conceptions with participants' quotes. We will also analyse the referential and structural aspects for each individual category. As we previously explained, referential and structural aspects of the category refer to the specific phenomenographic analysis that is based on the anatomy of experience developed by Marton and Booth (1997, p.88) as presented in Figure 1. These authors operationalized the experience that people have with phenomena by distinguishing two aspects:

1. Referential aspect – what is the meaning, i.e. definition of the experience, and
2. Structural aspect – what is the structure, i.e. content of the experience, how is the phenomenon seen.

Marton and Booth (1997, p.88) also talk about internal and external horizon of the structural aspect of the experience which is not specified in our analysis; rather these two horizons are integrated into the structural aspect.

### **3.1.1 Category 1: Higher education is related to society**

Students-participants in the present research see higher education as closely related to society. Since phenomenography focuses on lived experiences, it is important to note that in Category 1 participants referred to the Finnish society.

This category has two subcategories: (1) positive – higher education contributes to society; and (2) negative – higher education is detached from society.

On the one hand, higher education is seen as an important institution of society that “should raise the quality of the whole society” (IS2) and it is “bringing the society to a more educated level” (IS1). Higher education “should contribute and the society should get benefits from the higher education” (IS2). As one of the participants explains “ideally, universities would have strong presence in the society in that way that they would give input for social processes” (SSH3). Thus, higher education should educate its citizens and “provide the society the kind of knowledge and skills needed to develop the society further, to improve it, to solve problems” (SSH3) and “systematically make arguments about how the society should work” (SSH1).

On the other hand, higher education is detached from society: “Somehow, we still get the image of university being an ivory tower. And students still come here for 5 years and look at the university as an ivory tower, as the place where they don’t really belong.” (SSH4). We see that the negative subcategory speaks of higher education as an entity that is closed and disconnected from societal processes: “It’s a very paradoxical situation where university looks at the rest of the society and analyses it, and it’s yet very very removed from its reality” (SSH4).

Based on the descriptions of Category 1, as well as on the data analysis, we see that the idea expressed in Category 1 (that higher education is related to society) is closely connected to 6 other categories; namely, to Category 2 (Higher education is a network), Category 3 (Higher education is binary), Category 7 (Higher education is profession provider), Category 8 (Higher education is on the top), Category 9 (Higher education has changed), and Category 10 (Higher education is something else than university). These connections become even more visible through descriptions of the mentioned categories and provide the framework for constructing the outcome space of the research which we will address in the next subsection.

As a further phenomenographic analysis and a useful summary of Category 1, the referential and structural aspects are presented in the Table 2 below (similar table will be made for each following category).

Table 2: Referential and structural aspects of Category 1

Category 1: Higher education is related to society	
Referential aspect	Structural aspect
Subcategory 1: Higher education contributes to society.	HE explains the society, develops it and raises the quality of life by educating the citizens and improving the social practices and processes.
Subcategory 2: Higher education is detached from society.	HE is disconnected from societal processes; it is an “ivory tower”.

### 3.1.2 Category 2: Higher education is a network

Seeing higher education as a network emerged several times during the interviews. Participants explained this network perspective upon the higher education as a cooperation and interaction between people and institutions. Higher education network can also involve international aspect: “[Higher education] might be a network of different institutions, and different countries and the whole scientific society.” (IS1). Therefore, networking is seen as a significant characteristic of higher education: “For

me, one reason why I am at the university is to meet people, both for social reasons, but also to build networks, that's as important as studying at the university. So, when you come to the university you become a part of this network and you function as a part of it." (SSH3).

An important feature of this network, as participants see it, is the dynamic interaction between the actors of the network: "Universities are kind of networks, they interact with different people, students, teachers, also administration share ideas and develop new ways of learning and knowing." (SSH3).

Seeing higher education as a network is related to the idea that higher education is related to society (Category 1) as well as to the idea that it is a personal growth (Category 6).

Table 3: Referential and structural aspects of Category 2

Category 2: Higher education is a network	
Referential aspect	Structural aspect
Higher education is a network in sense of dynamic interaction between actors.	Higher education network involves communication, interaction and cooperation between people, institutions and countries.

### 3.1.3 Category 3: Higher education is binary

The Finnish higher education system consists of two complementary sectors: universities and universities of applied sciences. The present research discovered that participants see higher education as being binary and make a distinctive difference between universities and universities of applied sciences: "I see [higher education] in a very dual, binary way, because of the system I grew up in." (SSH3). Participants stress the dualism of higher education and explain it: "They're so different, but at the same time they're both important." (IS1).

This difference between the two higher education sectors is observed by the participants on several levels of functioning: level of purpose, of teaching and learning, as well as level of funding procedures. When they talk about the purpose of higher education participants explain that "the university of applied sciences is more like a provider, I don't see them so much as a changer or explainer of society and different phenomena." (SSH1). University education enables the person "to start conceptualising the world and start understanding why things work the way they work, no matter which perspective you're looking at them. [...] Whereas polytechnic education, I see it more as a career oriented. Like a way to develop certain set of skills,

a bit more specified and advanced skills than what you would learn in vocational school.” (SSH3). The difference is seen also in the teaching and learning process: “The main thing that the applied sciences are doing is that practically all of their work is focused on the students.” (IS3). Last level of difference is in the funding procedures: “The university gets their funding based on the graduated students, while in applied sciences they get the money when the students get in the university.” (IS3).

Due to the fact that binary higher education system is a specificity of the Finnish society Category 3 is related to 2 other categories: Category 1 (Higher education is related to society) and Category 7 (Higher education is profession provider).

Table 4: Referential and structural aspects of Category 3

Category 3: Higher education is binary	
Referential aspect	Structural aspect
Higher education is binary and it differs between universities and universities of applied sciences.	There is a distinctive difference between universities and universities of applied sciences in regards to the purpose of higher education, the teaching and learning process and the funding procedures.

### 3.1.4 Category 4: Higher education is related to knowledge

Higher education is seen as closely related to knowledge. The analysis revealed that this category encompasses three different aspects of knowledge that the participants described: research (searching knowledge), education (transmitting knowledge) and science (organising knowledge). These aspects of knowledge could be viewed as knowledge processes.

During the interviews, when talking about higher education and university, participants were often referring to the concepts that involve research, education and science. Higher education is “focused and concentrated knowledge” (IS2) and “the idea of search for knowledge is in the centre of it all, and objectivity as an ideal” (SSH3). “I refer to higher education as this ideal, as this place of knowledge.” (SSH4).

Specifically, participants see higher education as having the “connection with research” (SSH1): “University is about research, about thought.” (SSH4). “[Researchers] are producing that new knowledge and new research” (IS2) and “promote scientific thinking” (IS3). “I think in higher education you should be able to take something from pre-existing knowledge or practices, and make something new out of it.” (SSH1).

Education, as transmitting knowledge is also seen as relevant: “[Teachers] are teaching as well as transferring the top knowledge and the newest research results to the students.” (IS2). “So you do need to have these different levels of knowledge, different generations of scholars, whether they be students or teachers, you need them to interact and teach each other and learn from each other.” (SSH3).

Research and education are seen as equally important activities of higher education: “[Researchers] need to transfer the knowledge from research to students, it’s very important; actually, it’s essential. [...]There are two main tasks for the university - teaching and researching, and they should be there equally.” (IS2). Higher education is “both educational and research oriented” (SSH3).

Lastly, higher education is seen as an organised body of scientific knowledge: “That general idea of where your area of expertise, where it comes from, what are the basics of it, what are the main directions within your studies, how do they connect in the society or in the educational field or in the scientific field; I think that’s the basis of what is higher education.” (IS4). “In general level, I think [higher education] is abstract, it’s combining things and trying to understand things on a higher level based on research which is objective and reliable and not biased.” (IS2).

Being related to knowledge processes, higher education is also related to personal growth (Category 6) and to the profession providing (Category 7).

Table 5: Referential and structural aspects of Category 4

Category 4: Higher education is related to knowledge	
Referential aspect	Structural aspect
Higher education is related to various knowledge processes.	Higher education involves three aspects of knowledge: research (searching knowledge), education (transmitting knowledge) and science (organising knowledge).

### 3.1.5 Category 5: Higher education is related to time

The time perspective is another way of experiencing higher education and participants talk about higher education in terms of a timeframe. The time perspective that participants observe can be framed in two different continuums: (1) the life continuum, and (2) the education continuum.

The life continuum is related to higher education being a “phase in life” (SSH1). This also means that this phase is a common occurrence in life – “being a student is so typical for young people, and nowadays even for older” (IS2) – or, as one participant

puts it “for me it’s sort of like a, natural path” (SSH1). Besides being “a logical path” (SSH3), higher education is also seen as a timeframe for becoming an adult: “the fixed timeline for when I should graduate [...] and become real adult” (SSH1).

The second continuum is the education one in which higher education is an education phase that comes “after secondary education” (IS1). Thus, higher education is perceived as being “on the top of the secondary education” (IS2) or, more specifically, “it’s the highest form of education” (SSH2). Participants also talk about studying for a long time as a specificity of Finnish higher education: “In Finland, the higher education system has also its particularities, with the eternal students etc.” (SSH4) and “If you’re a student for too long then it’s frowned at. [...] So, when it’s too many years of studying then it’s not so positive anymore.” (SSH2).

The participants’ statements show that understanding of higher education in terms of time relates to Category 6 (Higher education is personal growth).

Table 6: Referential and structural aspects of Category 5

Category 5: Higher education is related to time	
Referential aspect	Structural aspect
Higher education is a timeframe.	Higher education can be a phase in person’s life or another education phase.

### 3.1.6 Category 6: Higher education is personal growth

Seeing higher education as personal growth is the perspective that was mentioned and described in many different ways during the interviews. This point of view indicates that the emphasis is on the individual aspect and the “education” part of higher education. Participants explain that higher education aims “to teach the students to think and solve problems, and maybe to go to different directions in their thinking” (IS1) as well as “to give [to students] the skills and the knowledge they need” (SSH3). So, as we can see, higher education as a personal growth “broadens students’ mind” (IS2) and enables “to learn to think critically, and from many perspectives and objectively” (IS2). The personal growth is also seen as critical thinking: “process of critical thinking actually, is something that you learn at the university” (SSH4).

In addition to development of mind and thinking, participants acknowledge that higher education is also “providing some level of abilities” (IS3). They use terms abilities, skills, capacities and knowledge interchangeably: “It’s combination of general set of skills to more broadly understand how the society function. At the same time it provides the very specific skills in some domain.” (IS3). “For me personally, it has been a way

to get some kind of capacities and abilities to be able to work, to get a career, a profession.” (SSH3). “There are disciplines where you learn technical knowledge that you will need to apply.” (SSH4).

Personal growth in higher education, in sense of development of thinking and acquiring skills and abilities, is closely related to conceptions expressed in 4 other categories: Category 2 (Higher education is a network), Category 4 (Higher education is related to knowledge), Category 5 (Higher education is related to time), and Category 10 (Higher education is something else than university).

Table 7: Referential and structural aspects of Category 6

Category 6: Higher education is personal growth	
Referential aspect	Structural aspect
Higher education involves personal development and growth.	Higher education as personal growth involves development of thinking as well as acquiring skills and capacities.

### 3.1.7 Category 7: Higher education is profession provider

This category talks about higher education as profession provider. Participants distinguish two levels of profession providing: individual and societal level. These two levels are often intertwined in participants’ statements.

When they talk about the purpose of higher education participants state that “the purpose is to produce highly educated workforce” (SSH4). Higher education aims “to prepare people for their lives after university no matter what they do” (SSH3) and “to give the students the qualifications in whatever area they’re studying” (IS1). Clearly, participants recognize the role of higher education in professional development through “educating students preparing them for their jobs” (SSH3). “They come to higher education and educate themselves and go to the working life to many jobs and they can utilize their knowledge there.” (IS2). Moreover, participants see the benefits for society as well; one participant illustrates it by explaining the motivation to study at the university: “Personally, to get a better job, to get a sort of a job that gives me the possibility to influence people and society.” (SSH2). Thus, higher education is seen as a provider of a prospective employment: “It’s a sign that you are developing yourself, you are learning new things, you are heading to a good job” (IS2) by providing the adequate qualifications: “It’s very qualified, at least it should be, high qualification.” (IS2).

Either on societal or individual level, higher education as profession provider is connected to 5 other categories about higher education: Category 1 (Higher education

is related to society), Category 3 (Higher education is binary), Category 4 (Higher education is related to knowledge), Category 8 (Higher education is on the top), Category 9 (Higher education has changed) and Category 20 (Students are employed).

Table 8: Referential and structural aspects of Category 7

Category 7: Higher education is profession provider	
Referential aspect	Structural aspect
Higher education provides various professions.	Higher education provides professional development to individuals and professional cadres to the society.

### 3.1.8 Category 8: Higher education is on the top

During the interviews participants often used terms that imply that the higher education is something that needs to be talked about in superlative – it is highest, the best, on the top. Namely, participants describe higher education as related to the best education, top research and top people and something that “has a high status, it’s something to strive at” (SSH2). When describing higher education as the best education participants say that “it’s the highest form of education” (SSH2) and “it’s the highest education that you can get” (IS2). “[Higher education] is top of the top. It’s the best knowledge that you get from some topic, or subject, science.” (IS2). We can also see that the participants’ perspective is that higher education involves up-to-date research: “[Teachers] are teaching as well as transferring the top knowledge and the newest research results to the students” (IS2); or as another participant names it “research for the sake of research” (SSH3). Lastly, the mission of higher education is to “educate top people, and give to society people with top knowledge and skills and tools” (SSH1).

Describing higher education as related to the best education, top research and top people establishes the connections to 3 other categories: Category 1 (Higher education is related to society), Category 4 (Higher education is related to knowledge), and Category 7 (Higher education is profession provider).

Table 9: Referential and structural aspects of Category 8

Category 8: Higher education is on the top	
Referential aspect	Structural aspect
Higher education is on the top.	Higher education involves top research, the best education and educates top people.

### 3.1.9 Category 9: Higher education has changed

While defining the higher education in their own words, participants implied that there has been several recent changes in how higher education functions in practice. According to participants' statements, the change encompasses several aspects of higher education: the relationship with society, the value of higher education, the Americanisation and marketization of higher education. We will address each of the mentioned aspects separately.

First change is described as strengthening of the relationship between higher education and society: "The relationship is very strong, and it's becoming more stronger, and the reason is that the societies when they're maturing things are becoming more standardised and [...] the requirements are more specific." (IS3). Similarly, another participant observed the responsiveness of higher education to societal needs: "Nowadays it's kind of need for being more practical. [...] It's a requirement that universities should be more concrete when they are teaching students." (IS2).

Second change that participants talk about is related to the value of higher education and the negative change due to which higher education has lost its value in society: "The value of higher education in sense of diplomas and this institutional thing, it has lost its meaning for, I wouldn't say my generation, but it's not necessary so important. It used to be a safer way for the labour markets. [...] It doesn't necessarily provide a job, [...] it doesn't provide the safety it was supposed to." (SSH1). Moreover, the change is perceived as a failure of higher education because it does not provide the necessary support to students: "I've been in the university for a long time and I haven't been able to accomplish those tasks, I mean, my thesis is still pending and I see that as a failure of the higher education system. [...] The students which are studying, they are often studying very long time and there's lots of difficulties in graduating from the university. It's not because the students are poor, it's because the system cannot support them enough." (IS3). Another participant tells the similar story: "The university as a community of scientific knowledge fails in itself because no one lives the university; it's just a day job." (SSH4).

Americanisation of higher education in Finland is the third aspect of change that participants experienced: “I’m little bit worried about this Americanisation of things, this Anglo-Saxon kind of thing that you have to pay 3000 euros - that’s probably even cheap - for certain time.” (IS1). The Americanisation is also seen as the influence of the American higher education model in Europe: “In Europe, the feeling I have is that the American structures have been passed through, because obviously they’re very good and very clear, but it’s a different tradition.” (SSH4).

Lastly, the change in higher education towards being more market-oriented is, according to the participants’ perspective, related to seeing students as customers: “I would not want to see higher education to be tailored too much just to attract many customers.” (IS1). On the other hand, higher education is compared with a company and the term “produce” is often used to describe the higher education: “It’s a way of making the universities into these production institutions or limited companies whose product is the student who has graduated.” (IS1); “The system of higher education focuses on trying to produce formatted educated workforce.” (SSH4); “Higher education practically produces the leaders.” (IS3).

Building upon what has been said about the change that occurred recently in higher education the direct relationships with 3 other categories can be made: with Category 1 (Higher education is related to society), Category 7 (Higher education is profession provider) and Category 10 (Higher education is something else than university).

Table 10: Referential and structural aspects of Category 9

Category 9: Higher education has changed	
Referential aspect	Structural aspect
Higher education has gone through several recent changes.	The changes in higher education are related to the strengthening of relationship with society, to the loss of value of higher education, and to the Americanisation and marketization processes in higher education.

### 3.1.10 Category 10: Higher education is something else than university

The last category of description regarding the idea of higher education is experiencing the higher education as something else than university. This perspective talks about higher education as a non-formal education which is gained outside of the higher education institution (i.e. university) and is mainly described as self-education: “Higher education can be something else than the university. [...] It’s self-improvement, whether it’s done within the university or somewhere else.” (IS3). Similarly, another

participant stated: “You can be highly educated without higher education. [...] The university can provide higher education, but it doesn’t necessarily provides it; and it can do it, and you can get it from somewhere else.” (SSH1). “My own background is that I have my university studies, but then there are some domains that I have to study from the books by myself, without the core structure, without getting any credits for it.” (IS3).

As we can see, the participants talk about higher education as being something else than university; specifically, as being self-education and as such, it is closely related to the idea of higher education being personal growth (Category 6). Also, it is related to the negative subcategory of Category 1 (Higher education is detached from society) as well as with Category 9 (Higher education has changed).

Table 11: Referential and structural aspects of Category 10

Category 10: Higher education is something else than university	
Referential aspect	Structural aspect
Higher education can be obtained outside of formal higher education system.	Higher education obtained outside of formal education system is self-education.

### 3.2 Categories related to the role of student in higher education

The second research question – How do students perceive their role in higher education? – led the analysis towards constructing 11 categories of description that denote the conceptions of participants about the role of students in higher education (Table 12).

Table 12: Categories related to the role of students in higher education

Category 11	Students are members of the wider society
Category 12	Students are members of the student population
Category 13	Students are part of higher education system
Category 14	Students are active
Category 15	Students are resource
Category 16	Students are customers

Category 17	Students are neglected
Category 18	Students are stressed
Category 19	Students are transformed
Category 20	Students are employed
Category 21	Students are free

Similar to the previous subsection, we will discuss each of these categories in details and illustrate the conceptions with participants' quotes. We will also analyse the connections between categories and present the referential and structural aspects for each individual category.

### 3.2.1 Category 11: Students are members of the wider society

One of the roles that participants assign to students is being a member of the wider society. There are two subcategories in Category 11, i.e. two ways in which students are members of the wider society: (1) positive, as contributing to the society, and (2) negative, as not contributing to it.

The positive subcategory denotes the perspective that students are valued and respected members of the society that contribute with their expertise to the society: "From the society point of view it's really respected position." (IS3). "It's an ok, a positive status to be a student. [...] It's a sign of being active and that you're doing something, you're part of the society." (IS2). "I think it's a positive implication that you got into a university." (SSH2). Participants believe that, as a student, one should "be responsible member of the society" (SSH1). Moreover, students are seen as a resource for society: "Students can be a resource for the society because they become professionals." (IS1). There are, however, different opinions on the students' role in society and one participant explains this very well: "So, I don't think you can say that there's one way of seeing what being a student means in Finnish society. I would say, generally it's quite valued and it's seen as something important and a good thing to do. But when you start digging deeper and start specifying what do you mean by being a student and what kind of student is a good student, it gets a bit more fragmented and then you get these extreme opinions." (SSH3).

Therefore, participants in the present research experienced that being a student in Finnish society can be seen in the negative light: "It seems that people think that students don't do anything. They're just students - they just drink and do nothing. [...] We're still studying when we should be contributing as employees instead." (IS1). Furthermore, the students can be seen as a burden to society: "You can also hear comments about students just wasting the money of taxpayers doing things that don't really matter, like for example studying philosophy, or whatever." (SSH3). Thus, we can see that participants experienced very different, even opposite ways of being a

student in Finnish society. In Table 13 we can see the referential and structural aspects of both subcategories.

This category is connected to Category 12 (Students are members of student population), Category 15 (Students are resource) and Category 20 (Students are employed). Also, Category 11 is linked to the idea expressed in Category 1 (Higher education is related to society).

Table 13: Referential and structural aspects of Category 11

Category 11: Students are members of the wider society	
Referential aspect	Structural aspect
Subcategory 1: Students are contributing to the wider society.	Students are valued and respected members of the society and they can be seen as a resource for society.
Subcategory 2: Students are not contributing to the wider society.	Students are not doing anything of importance for the society and they are just wasting the taxpayers' money.

### 3.2.2 Category 12: Students are members of the student population

Another role of student in higher education that is seen as important by the participants is being a member of the student population. Belonging to the student population is mainly seen as a positive thing that is beneficial for the individual student: "While you're studying you're always member of some institution or society - you get your cheap meals, and you get your free newspaper, and free computer rooms and cheaper train tickets." (IS1). Interaction with other students and building a student network is seen as an important part of higher education experience: "When you come to the university you become a part of this network and you function as a part of it. [...] Your relationship to other students is extremely important." (SSH3). Other students are also seen as a relevant aspect of learning: "For example, master's seminar, it's very much about discussions and sharing ideas, you hear about other students, what they are doing, and then they give you feedback and you learn from their ideas. So you need this kind of community." (SSH3).

This category is further connected with Category 11 (Students are members of the wider society), Category 13 (Students are part of higher education system) and Category 2 (Higher education is a network).

Table 14: Referential and structural aspects of Category 12

Category 12: Students are members of the student population	
Referential aspect	Structural aspect
Students belong to the student population.	As members of student population, students get students benefits, build student network and learn by interacting with other students.

### 3.2.3 Category 13: Students are part of higher education system

Category 13 denotes the participants' experience of students being an integral part of higher education system. Students are seen as integrated in the higher education system: "Students are a part of the university community." (SSH4). Moreover, they occupy the central position in the system: "So [teachers] would be in the core of the higher education, I think, with the students. Because there wouldn't be higher education without the students." (IS1); "If you didn't have the students here wanting to learn, the system would collapse." (SSH3). During their studies "the students become part of the higher education system, that they don't just visit [the university] and take something from it but also give something and are living there" (SSH1). As they progress in their studies students become more integrated in higher education and there is a "dialogue between the institution and the students" (SSH1). "Now when I've been here [at the university] for longer and we are just a few people I feel like I'm more like a part of it, I have more possibilities to impact the whole thing, and kind of co-work with the whole system." (SSH2). Therefore, students are inevitably influencing the higher education system: "University is a micro society, and every one of its members even if it's not conscious that it's part of the society, still does things for the society and is part of it, and influences it, in a way, without consciously acknowledging that." (SSH4).

We can observe relationship with Category 12 (Students are members of the student population), Category 14 (Students are active), Category 19 (Students are transformed), and Category 2 (Higher education is a network).

Table 15: Referential and structural aspects of Category 13

Category 13: Students are part of higher education system	
Referential aspect	Structural aspect
Students are an integral part of higher education system.	Students interact with the higher education system and as they progress in their studies they become more integrated in the system.

### 3.2.4 Category 14: Students are active

During the interviews participants referred to students as being active and this perspective is expressed in Category 14. In the participants' statements we can see that they use several different terms to describe what being active as a student means; terms such as independent, responsible, self-driven and enthusiastic.

When asked about the role of students in higher education one participant replied: "Of course, there's a responsibility for the students as well. I think a university student should be active, and independent and he/she has to take responsibility for his/her own studies. Student in higher education can't just sit and wait for somebody to give him/her information. I think university is a place for independent, enthusiastic and active students." (IS2). Other participants replied similarly: "And for me, my path, my duties at the moment is to be self-driven, and produce and use the knowledge I have to produce new knowledge, and also to be responsible member of the society. And I think that's what I should do and that's how I should behave as a student." (SSH1); "As a university student you can actually take the initiative and start constructing your own studies and even develop new ways of teaching and learning." (SSH3). Student being active also involves the student engagement in the campus life: "Few students are very active in shaping the university and making sure that the students are heard." (SSH4).

Connections can be seen with several other categories: Category 13 (Students are part of higher education system), Category 19 (Students are transformed), Category 20 (Students are employed), Category 21 (Students are free), Category 4 (Higher education is related to knowledge), Category 6 (Higher education is personal growth), Category 8 (Higher education is on the top) and Category 10 (Higher education is something else than university).

Table 16: Referential and structural aspects of Category 14

Category 14: Students are active	
Referential aspect	Structural aspect
Students are actively involved in their studies and in campus life.	Students are active, responsible, independent, enthusiastic and self-driven.

### 3.2.5 Category 15: Students are resource

Seeing students as resource is another perspective of the students' role in the higher education. Analysis reveals that participants see students as a resource on two levels: (1) for the society, and (2) for the university.

For the university, students mainly provide public funding: "Obviously as a student I'm given lot of pressure to graduate, for example, to contribute so the university will be able to show results of whatever they do. So that's one of the roles of students, to contribute to what is shown outside to the, for example, the governments, so the administrators when they do their budgeting they can show this and this many people graduated so we should be able to get this and this much money." (SSH3). Another participant explains: "The idea is that people apply here and start studying and the university's concern is how many of them will have their bachelor's and master's theses, and they are the basic population that they have to have in order to have some money." (IS4).

Another way of seeing students as resource for the university is the perspective where the students contribute to the learning and teaching process: "In some points the students can actually bring something new to the professors or teachers." (IS4). "Everybody wants to somehow give back, when you've been to the university for several years already, you kind of feel like you've learned a lot and you want to give back something. For example, when you're working on your thesis, and researching something that hasn't been done yet. So you want to give your input to that research, to that knowledge. [...] Especially when you're a bit advanced in your studies, it's not only that the teachers are teaching you how to think or where to go for the knowledge, but you're also giving something for them. So you're helping them think about their research in new ways from new perspectives." (SSH3).

Students as resource for society is closely related to the perspective that the students as a part of society contribute to it (Category 11). In the words of participants: "Students can be a resource for the society because they become professionals." (IS1). We can also observe relationship with Category 11 (Students are members of the wider society), Category 13 (Students are part of higher education system) and Category 1 (Higher education is related to society).

Table 17: Referential and structural aspects of Category 15

Category 15: Students are resource	
Referential aspect	Structural aspect
Students are resource for the society and for the university.	Students contribute to the society with their gained expertise. For the university, students provide public funding and contribute to the learning and teaching process.

### 3.2.6 Category 16: Students are customers

Participants also identify students with the role of customers in higher education and they usually define this role in a negative light.

“I’m little bit afraid of the concept of students being customers in higher education. In society these days everybody are customer - the drunks are customers of the police, the patients are customers in the hospital, and students aren’t students, but they’re customers. I think it’s going towards that direction. I think that at least to certain level students should be students, as pupils.” (IS1). When asked to specify what being a customer actually means the participant elaborates: “It’s this - customer is always right - thinking, which I don’t agree always with. [...] It’s like the newspapers these days they are tailoring their content to whoever clicks the most links. [...] So that’s what I mean by this - I would not want to see higher education to be tailored too much just to attract many customers. So I get it that you need to be able to give feedback and of course to have the quality of education but not go running after the customers.” (IS1). Another participant also talks about students as customers: “[Students] are clearly customers, but they are that kind of customers which you can treat badly; you don’t have to take care of your students, I mean, if they don’t graduate – they don’t graduate, you don’t have to worry about that.” (IS3). The participant further elaborates: “At the university [...] nobody really pays any attention to you. It’s like, you can really be left out if you cannot figure out on your own the study plan or stuff like that. In my eyes, it’s like a poor customer service.” (IS3).

During the interviews participants also speculate about the customer role of student in higher education: “I would like to say that students are the customers, but it’s not that. Customers in sense that student comes and they should expect that service, that we will have education.” (IS4). At the end, the interviewee concludes that students at the same time are, and are not customers: “Yes and no. We are, and the teachers and administrative side they do see us in a way as customers. Like I already said, only when we get a degree they will get the money, funding, and therefore on the administration side, I think the idea is how many of us study in the determined time and how many will drop out, or change to different subjects.” (IS4). But, the participant

continues: “There are still some ideological side like we are here to study, we are here to improve ourselves and the teaching side definitely has the same ideology.” (IS4). Another participant has the similar perspective, although he uses the term client: “I want to say in a way clients, and I think that there is a little bit of this, looking at the university as providing a service. But then it’s not so as clients because we don’t pay for the education. [...] But they’re passing by, they’re not part of the system in that sense.” (SSH4).

As we can see, Category 16 is clearly connected with Category 9 that sees the higher education as changed towards the marketization. Also, it is closely linked with Category 15 (Students are resource) and Category 17 (Students are neglected).

Table 18: Referential and structural aspects of Category 16

Category 16: Students are customers	
Referential aspect	Structural aspect
Students are customers in higher education.	Students as customers get the service - higher education. At the same time, students are not customers because they do not pay for the education.

### 3.2.7 Category 17: Students are neglected

Category 17 denotes the conception of students as being neglected in higher education. One participant already mentioned this perspective while talking about students being customers, or “customers which you can treat badly” (IS3).

Participants believe that university focuses more on research and neglects, forgets students: “First of all, I think universities are schools, whatever you say, they are schools, so they are for students. And it’s not always thought like that, here at the university. University is a school, it’s for students and I think sometimes this is forgotten. [...] My main point was that universities are for students, not only for society, and as a school it’s for students. So research is very important, it’s the main job for the university. Actually, there are two main tasks for the university - teaching and researching, and they should be there equally. And sometimes the students are a little bit forgotten.” (IS2). Lack of university support is seen as the main reason for students to feel neglected: “And I find that there is this very dichotomic issue about the appearing structure and how it’s very like - classes, and you get your points, etc. - and then the fact that once you’re in [the university], it’s basically, do it yourself and very little support.” (SSH4). “At the university [...] nobody really pays any attention to you. It’s like, you can really be left out if you cannot figure out on your own the study plan or stuff like that. In my eyes, it’s like a poor customer service.” (IS3). Not feeling

integrated in the higher education system is another reason for students to feel neglected: “[Students] have to try to find their own ways. But, of course, not everybody can do that. You can come to university and study there, and you can do practically your whole degree without ever meeting, without ever talking about your profession, you can very well do that. There is no that kind of integration.” (IS3).

Students being neglected perspective is closely related to Category 16 (Students are customers), Category 18 (Students are stressed) and Category 9 (Higher education has changed).

Table 19: Referential and structural aspects of Category 17

Category 17: Students are neglected	
Referential aspect	Structural aspect
Students are neglected, forgotten in higher education.	Students feel neglected in higher education because university focuses more on research and does not provide sufficient support nor integration for students.

### 3.2.8 Category 18: Students are stressed

In a way similar and closely related to the previous Category 17, Category 18 denotes the conception of participants about students being stressed in higher education. The students’ stress is mainly related to the beginning of studying, namely the first and second year of studies. The critical stressful point is the transition from the secondary education and adapting to the university studies and to the responsibilities that come with it: “So, in my opinion, it makes some people very stressed and first when I came here, it made me pretty stressed as well, that I really have to know everything myself and I have to decide everything for myself, and I’m the only person responsible of getting through this whole five-year slot of university education. [...] When you have too many choices it’s only you who is responsible for everything. And you get used to it by the time you get... the longer you are here you get used to it, but it’s quite big difference when you graduate from high school. [...] It’s related to the first years, maybe the first or the two first years.” (SSH2). Another participant talks about the pressure that comes with studying at the university: “So, as I mentioned, you get pressure from different places, obviously you have those kind of more structural pressures that you need to graduate, for example. Also, you give pressure to yourself, you want to develop further, you are in the university to develop yourself and to become better at whatever you are doing, in your own field. [...] You actually have to own your own studies and make them work for you, meaning that you have a lot of freedom to

choose. But you also have the responsibility to follow through and make sure it actually works together.” (SSH3).

We can observe connections with Category 17 (Students are neglected), Category 19 (Students are transformed), Category 21 (Students are free) and Category 5 (Higher education is related to time).

Table 20: Referential and structural aspects of Category 18

Category 18: Students are stressed	
Referential aspect	Structural aspect
Students are stressed and pressured in higher education.	Students feel stressed when they are entering the higher education and are responsible for their own curriculum. They feel pressured to organise their curriculum in the best possible way and to graduate in time.

### 3.2.9 Category 19: Students are transformed

The following category presents another student role in higher education - students are being transformed. Students’ transformation is seen as development and growth: “I think that most students develop and grow [...] when they are at the university. And I think the thinking develops the most. [...] But at least for me, the university has taught me to think. And I think that’s a good lesson - to learn to think critically, and from many perspectives and objectively, you learn to argue, and you learn from so many things - What other people have said, what other gurus have said, what researchers have learned. It broadens people’s mind, broadens students’ mind.” (IS2). “You are in the university to develop yourself and to become better at whatever you are doing, in your own field.” (SSH3).

Also, the transformation of students happens within a certain timeframe spent in the university studies and therefore Category 19 is connected to Category 5 that presents the conception of higher education as related to time. Becoming a student is seen as the initial change: “And also it must change how other people see you. [...] But it does change, and it’s definitely a positive change. And one thing that changes there, I think for the positive is that studying is something you do for yourself.” (IS1). Another participant explains that becoming a student “helped me to perceive myself as worthy, as something that I’m going to become; so it does change person’s identity in that sense” (SSH2). And during the studies, the discipline influences the student as well: “You probably start collecting the main values of your area of expertise, your student group.” (IS4); and “You become like your discipline.” (SSH1).

As the time spent in the university studies increases, the transformation of the individual becomes more visible: “It’s always little bit schooly at the beginning, but when you get to the moment when you start realising that you’re a university student, you realise that your process of critical thinking actually, is something that you learn at the university. You’re not the same person as the one when you came into the university.” (SSH4). “The way of thinking and way of acting changes. Especially once you’ve been at the university for a few years, and you become accustomed to thinking and asking questions in a certain way. [...] And you gain new ways of looking at the world, and sometimes it’s difficult to remember how you were before the university. It’s a very gradual change.” (SSH3).

The conception of students being transformed in higher education is also bringing the students closer to the higher education system in sense that they become more integrated in it: “In the freshman years I think it’s more like there is the higher education in the institutional sense, there is higher education and professors and lecturers, and there are the students that download information, and the stream of knowledge and ideas is only one direction, from university or higher education to the student. I think it changes, or at least it should change more in that way that the students become part of the higher education system, that they don’t just visit it and take something from it but also give something and are living there.” (SSH1). Hence, Category 13 (Students are part of higher education system) is also related to the idea of students’ transformation. This perspective is also closely related to Category 14 (Students are active), Category 18 (Students are stressed), Category 4 (Higher education is related to knowledge), Category 5 (Higher education is related to time), and Category 6 (Higher education is personal growth).

Table 21: Referential and structural aspects of Category 19

Category 19: Students are transformed	
Referential aspect	Structural aspect
During the higher education students change and are being transformed.	The students’ transformation in higher education is related to the initial change that occurs when one becomes a student, and to further growth and development of thinking, as well as becoming more integrated into the higher education system.

### 3.2.10 Category 20: Students are employed

Although it is (only) part-time or temporary employment, being employed is seen as an important aspect of students’ life: “Many students also have to work, and gain the

work experience which is really good. And once you graduate you have some experience already. [...] I went back to work while studying, doing part time job.” (IS1). Moreover, work experiences gained during studies are seen as necessary for finding employment after the studies: “I guess experience is also valued in a way. It’s really hard, as far as I know, in Finland to - if you’ve done everything right, the typical 18 year old, goes straight to the university, has a master’s degree in 5 years, but doesn’t do anything on the side [summer jobs, internships] just studies - it’s really hard for that person to find job.” (SSH4).

Students being employed and wanting to gain work experience is related to Category 11 that denotes the conception that the students are a part of the wider society and contribute to it while studying, and to Category 14 that presents the students as being active, responsible, and independent. It is also related to the idea of higher education being related to society (Category 1) and higher education being profession provider (Category 7).

Table 22: Referential and structural aspects of Category 20

Category 20: Students are employed	
Referential aspect	Structural aspect
Students are working while studying.	Students have part-time and summer jobs and they want to gain work experience while studying.

### 3.2.11 Category 21: Students are free

The last category related to students’ role in higher education denotes the conception about students as being free. During the interviews the participants often talked about the freedom that students have and they mainly talk about freedom of thinking, and freedom to choose and organise the studies.

Participants recognize freedom as one of the characteristics of higher education that directly relates to students: “Higher education gives people more freedom to choose what they study and perspectives they want to have a deeper look into.” (SSH2). Freedom of thinking is seen as a specificity of higher education: “Freedom for students to think, and to argue and do whatever they want to in the sense, to proceed in the direction they find important. I don’t mean to do whatever they want as not completing their courses and assignments, but if they perform well then they have the opportunities to say I want to study philosophy now, and see how I can combine it with this two things, for example, or maybe go abroad for a few years. Freedom of thinking.” (IS1). Furthermore, students’ freedom and responsibility are emphasised as defining

features of higher education: “And we were talking about the definition of higher education, what I didn’t mention, but from my experience has been very important is the concept of academic freedom and responsibility; that you actually have to own your own studies and make them work for you, meaning that you have a lot of freedom to choose. But you also have the responsibility to follow through and make sure it actually works together.” (SSH3). A participant who started studying again after having a full-time job sees the students’ freedom as possibility to organise their studies and personal time: “First, when I got back to studying, I was so happy, I could do anything, I didn’t have to go to work from 8 to 4 anymore. I could do anything, whatever I wanted to, start studying this or study a bit of that, I got freedom.” (IS1).

This category is linked to Category 14 (Students are active), Category 18 (Students are stressed) and Category 6 (Higher education is personal growth).

Table 23: Referential and structural aspects of Category 21

Category 21: Students are free	
Referential aspect	Structural aspect
Students have freedom in higher education.	Students have the freedom to choose and organise their studies, as well as freedom of thinking.

### 3.3 The outcome space – relationships between categories

An outcome space portrays the variety of conceptions which together comprise the phenomenon; it is a useful illustration of the conceptions and relationships between them that visually communicates the research results. Based on the detailed representations of the categories of description that we provided in the previous subsections, the relationships between the categories are made and illustrated in the outcome space. First, we constructed the outcome space of the idea of higher education (Figure 4) followed by the outcome space of the role of student in higher education (Figure 5). Lastly, we constructed the final outcome space by combining the previous two (Figure 6).

Figure 4: The outcome space of the idea of higher education

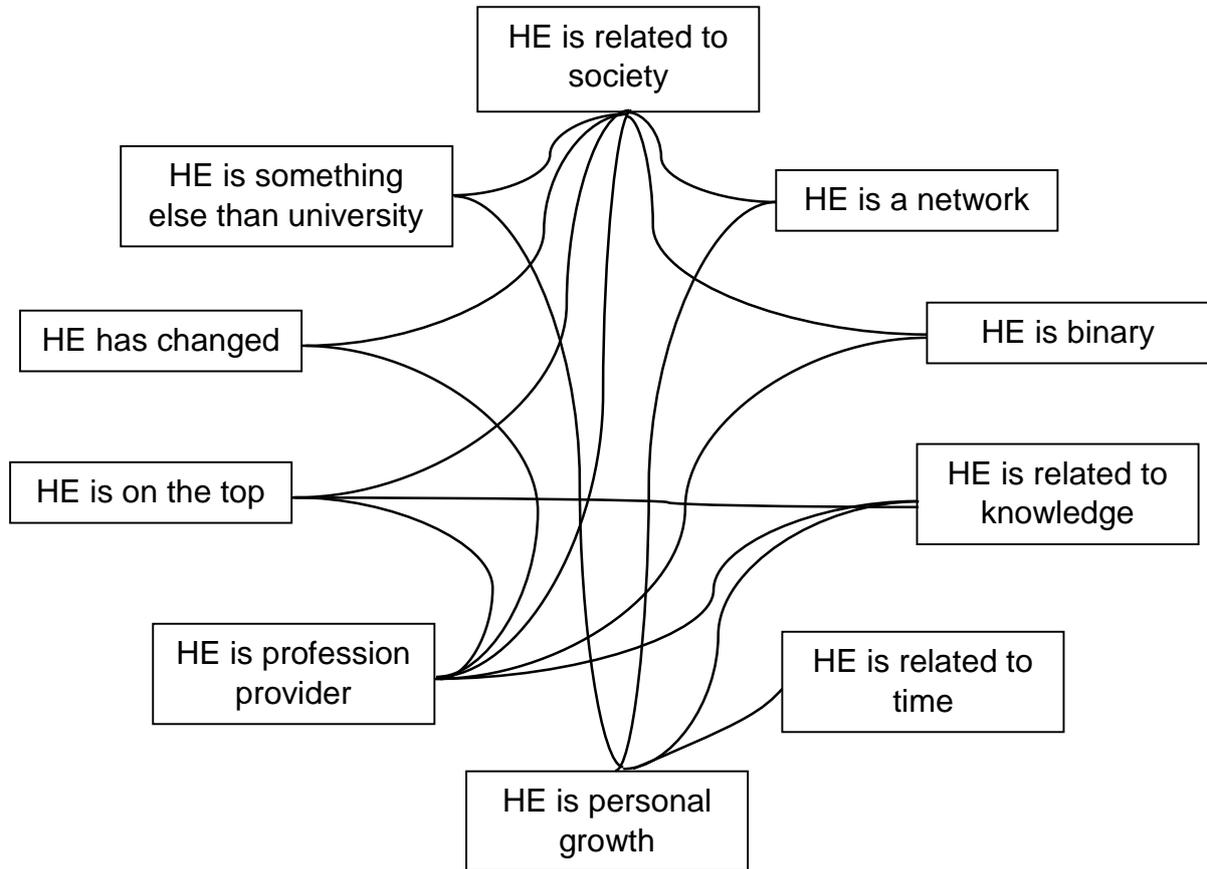


Figure 5: The outcome space of the role of students in higher education

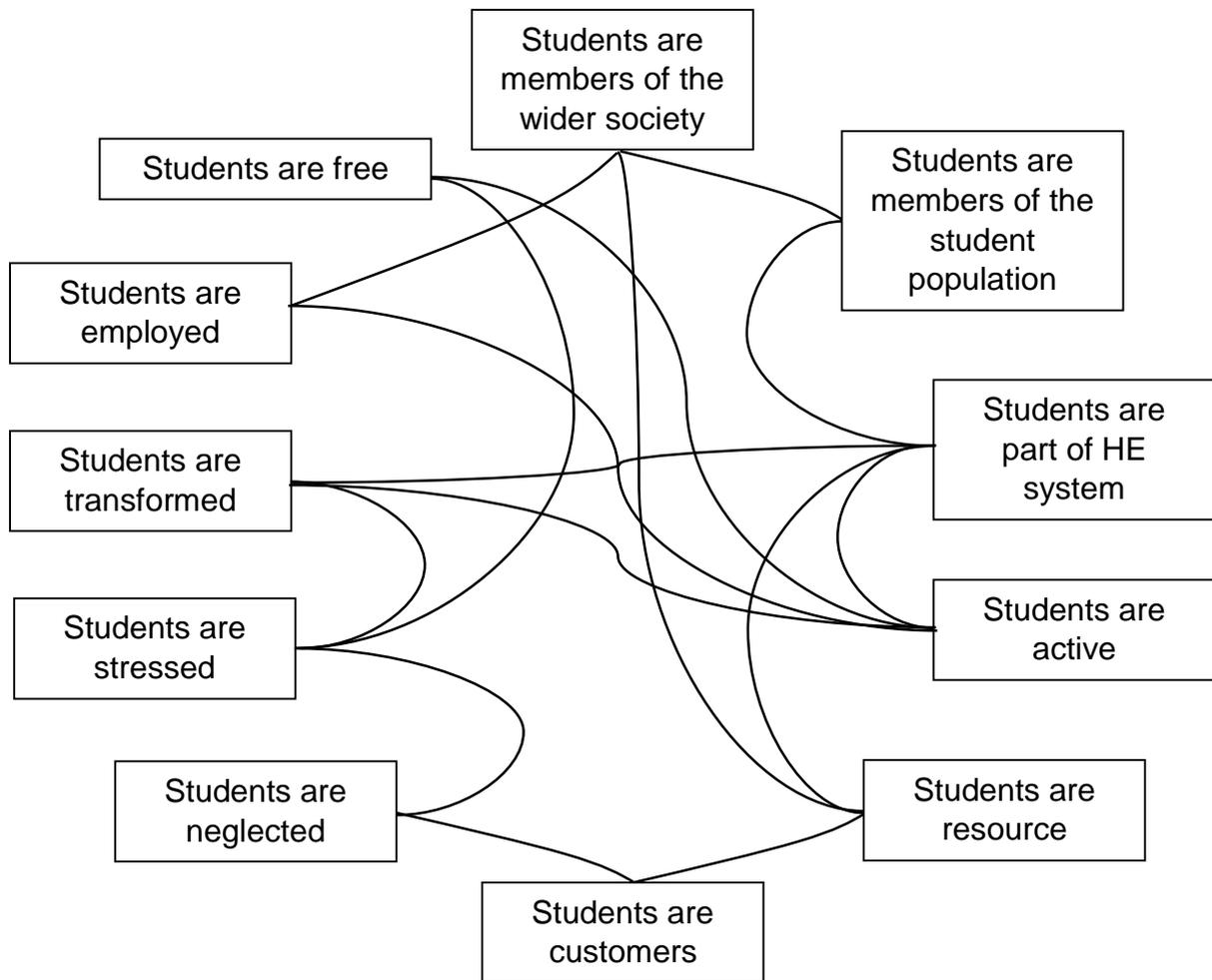
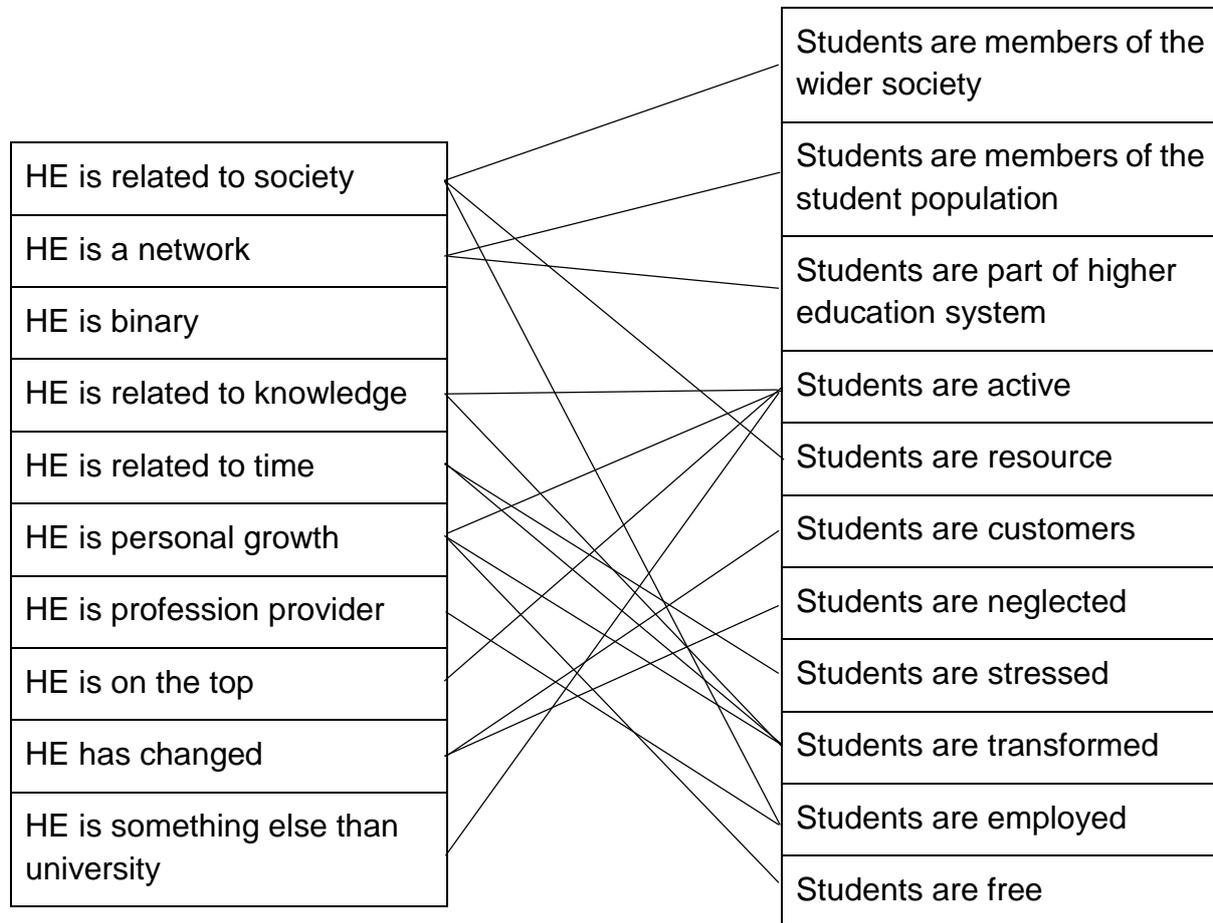


Figure 6: The final outcome space



The outcome space, as we already mentioned, represents a visual summary of the research findings. This summary, though, is not a simplified presentation of the results. Specifically, the variety of conceptions that phenomenography tries to capture results with a variety of categories with multiple connections. Precisely in this variety lies the richness of phenomenographic research results. This richness, however, leads to a rich and complex outcome space – a complex figure with various connections. Thus, the outcome space figures of the present research (Figure 4, 5 and 6) may seem overly complicated and, perhaps, not self-explanatory. The reason for this is the researcher's effort to remain true to the research data as well as to phenomenographic variety. Therefore, the categories and connections between them are presented in the outcome space without oversimplification heavily relying on the previously provided detailed descriptions of each individual category.

### 3.4 Other relevant observations

#### 3.4.1 Variety of conceptions

As previously explained, the main goal of data analysis in phenomenographic studies is to discover variety in ways of experiencing the phenomenon under investigation. In this research, the variety of conceptions is described through 21 categories (10+11) about the researched phenomena. An interesting and illustrative example of this variety, i.e. how differently students experience the same phenomena, is the situation of beginning of studies. Namely, the transition from secondary to tertiary education and the period of beginning of studies was experienced and explained by the participants in two very different (even opposite) ways.

On the one hand, participants saw the beginning of studies as a very stressful period during which they felt that they were left alone and neglected by the university. Insufficient university support in this period was the main reason the students felt stressed. This perspective is represented in Category 18 – Students are stressed. Responsibility that comes with the beginning of studies was seen as the stress trigger: “So, in my opinion, it makes some people very stressed and first when I came here, it made me pretty stressed as well, that I really have to know everything myself and I have to decide everything for myself, and I’m the only person responsible of getting through this whole five-year slot of university education. [...] When you have too many choices it’s only you who is responsible for everything. And you get used to it by the time you get... the longer you are here you get used to it, but it’s quite big difference when you graduate from high school.” (SSH2).

The same situation, beginning of the studies, was, on the other hand, experienced as a very positive period, during which the students are encouraged to develop independence and practice their newly gained academic freedom. This conception is presented in Category 21 – Students are free. Participants explain that due to the freedom of designing their own curriculum, students felt motivated to study and appreciated the independence they gained: “Higher education gives people more freedom to choose what they study and perspectives they want to have a deeper look into.” (SSH2). Another student speaks about the academic freedom: “From my experience [what] has been very important is the concept of academic freedom and responsibility; that you actually have to own your own studies and make them work for you, meaning that you have a lot of freedom to choose. But you also have the responsibility to follow through and make sure it actually works together.” (SSH3). The independence is also seen as an important part of higher education: “I feel that I should become independent when I graduate from here.” (SSH1). After having a full-time job, one participant started studying again and explains the students’ freedom as possibility to organise their studies and personal time: “First, when I got back to studying, I was so happy, I could do anything, I didn’t have to go to work from 8 to 4 anymore. I could do anything, whatever I wanted to, start studying this or study a bit of that, I got freedom.” (IS1).

Another example of the variety of conception are the two, again, opposite categories: Category 13 (Students are part of higher education system) and Category 17 (Students are neglected). In the case of the first category, participants express that they feel like an integral part of higher education system and influential actors of the university community. Category 17, on the other hand, denotes the conception about students being neglected, forgotten in higher education due to the insufficient integration and university support. Furthermore, the variety of experiencing the same phenomenon can be seen even within one conception, just like in Category 16 (Students are customers) – at the same time students *are* and *are not* customers.

In some other kind of research approach, this variety might be seen as an inconsistency, but phenomenography focuses on discovering the variety of experiences and in that way tries to describe the phenomenon from different perspectives: “The purpose is not to provide a full picture of understandings in this environment, but rather to provide categories that explain the variety of those understandings” (Moisio, 2014, p.138).

### **3.4.2 Variety introduced by stratified sample**

Stratified sampling was used in the present research (along with the purposive and criteria sampling) with an aim to introduce variety in the sample, which will in turn introduce the variety in the experiences and conceptions regarding the research object. We have two groups of students – students from the School of Social sciences and Humanities, and from the School of Information Sciences. Interestingly, the data analysis has not revealed any regularity along the soft-hard disciplinary dimensions. Qualitative analysis of the participants from the both sample strata show that the interview answers coming from the pure-soft discipline students (social sciences and humanities) on the one hand, and the other, the hard-applied discipline (information sciences) cannot be disciplinary grouped.

The stratified sampling was applied because of the assumption that the difference between the soft and hard disciplines students will be more visible, especially due to the fact that the interview was so loosely structured and it gave the participants space and time to express themselves. The assumptions on the soft-hard differences is founded on the disciplinary grouping of knowledge proposed by Becher and Trowler (2001, p.36):

1. In hard pure sciences (like physics) knowledge is cumulative, atomistic, and value-free concerned with universals and quantities.
2. In soft pure disciplines (like history and anthropology) knowledge is reiterative, holistic and value-laden aiming to discover particulars and qualities.
3. Hard applied sciences (like mechanical engineering and clinical medicine) deal with knowledge that is purposive and pragmatic concerned with mastery of physical environment.
4. In soft applied disciplines (like education and law) knowledge is functional and utilitarian and deals with enhancement of professional practice.

Taking into considerations the significance of the social factors and temporal changes in the construction of the disciplinary knowledge, one needs to be careful not to oversimplify these categories (Becher & Trowler, 2001, p.37). There is, however, a foundation to assume that this disciplinary knowledge grouping will extend its influence on the members' understandings of the major phenomena in which they are involved – such as the idea of the higher education and the role of students in higher education. Still, the analysis of the data could not recognise similar patterns in the participants' statements.

These patterns were not detected, in our opinion, due to several possible reasons:

- Sample size: It is possible that the sample (8) was too small for these patterns to appear.
- Contrast between the disciplines: The information sciences are not pure hard sciences (rather hard applied) while social sciences and humanities are pure soft disciplines. Perhaps a greater contrast, such as pure soft versus pure hard would discover the above mentioned patterns.
- Possibility to take elective courses: Majority of the participants mentioned the fact that they are free to choose a certain amount of elective courses. Perhaps these elective courses (which can be chosen from any discipline in the university, both soft and hard) introduce both knowledge groups and blur the difference between the soft and hard disciplinary knowledge and its influence.

Although the present research did not detect the patterns related to the soft/hard disciplinary knowledge, the issues of the idea of higher education and the role of students in higher education could be further scrutinised in this regard. Perhaps, some future studies will be able to shed more light on these aspects of inquiry in higher education research.

### **3.4.3 Interview feedback from participants**

Feedback from the interviewed participants about the interviewing process can provide an important signal to the researcher about their interviewing skills, as well as about the feelings and observations of the interviewees about the topic of the research. In the present research, participants expressed very positive feedback about the interviewing situation; they felt that they were well informed about the interview and the research, and they felt relaxed and motivated to participate: “It was interesting. I’ve been in different kind of, usually, master thesis studies, I’ve had interviews before, and this was well done. I like that you explained very well what will happen. [...] And the Consent was good, it explains what will happen in the interview. [...] I was relaxed.” (IS4).

Also, the participants agreed to participate in the research mainly due to the topic which they found different and interesting: “I think you have very interesting topic here.” (IS2). Another issue that the participants expressed is that, in their opinion, the research raises questions about concepts that are usually taken for granted. Asked to

define higher education in their own words, one participants replied with a smile: “I actually have never thought of it. [...] I haven’t given that much time [before] to think about these things.” (SSH1). The participants admitted that they feel that some of the interview questions were not easy, and they needed some time to think about them because they felt that the issues that the research investigates are self-evident: “These are difficult questions, because normally you don’t think about these issues...” (SSH3). One participant explains it: “I think this is a phenomenon that is self-evident. Something like, everyday practice doesn’t deserve to be studied.” (SSH1). “When you asked these questions as an outsider it brings out the issues that we take as self-evident, taken for granted. [...] It really makes you think about the whole thing differently.” (SSH2).

In general, both participants and the researcher felt that the interviewing process went well, and that it was an interesting and positive experience.

## **4 Discussion of the research findings**

In order to better understand the findings of the present research we now turn to analysis of the relevant literature that deals with the phenomena that are in our focus – the idea of higher education and the role of student in higher education. Discussion of the research findings aims to provide an insight into the predominant conceptions of the investigated phenomena by reviewing the relevant literature. Furthermore, the literature review will give us a bigger picture of the ideas surrounding the investigated phenomena and a framework for the research findings. The literature review will focus on several sources that are relevant for our research: higher education literature, policy documents (national and international), research reports, official announcements and relevant websites.

The first subsection will focus on predominant ideas of higher education as the framework for analysing the research findings. The second subsection will analyse the roles of students in higher education as presented in the literature and policy documents and relate them to the research findings.

### **4.1 Reflecting on the research findings through predominant ideas of higher education**

Questions concerning the purpose and the nature of higher education have been contested over time. These questions were usually integrated under the phrase “the idea of higher education” (Rothblatt, 2009, p.178). Historically, there have been various conceptualisations of the idea of higher education; this discussion continues today and remains inconclusive (Rothblatt, 2009, p.178; Barnett, 1990, p.16). According to Barnett (1990, p.4-5) higher education, its philosophy and nature are missing serious reflection, not only in the public discourse, but also in the academic circles; the public debate over higher education usually involves mainly the topics such as size or the cost of higher education system. Analysing the history of the debate about “the idea of university”, Rothblatt (2009) provides a good illustration of the questions posed:

“For the sake of argument we might say that the idea of a university is education, but what kind should it be? Liberal, vocational, technical, research-related? Is the object culture, citizenship, leadership or career? Are the recipients young men, young men and women, ‘mature’ students, postgraduates? Do they attend full or part time? The idea of a university can be negative. A university is not the place for this or that purpose because it is the place for something else.” (Rothblatt, 2009, p.179)

Although inconclusive, discussion about the idea of higher education is useful because it provides a method to organise thoughts about essential purpose, as well as the models of higher education (Rothblatt, 2009, p.180). Thus, the higher education literature discerns 4 main models of higher education that can be found in modern university history: German Humboldtian model, British liberal-arts tradition,

occupationally oriented French system, and the fourth, American model developed under influence of German and British systems (Jonsson, 2006, p.56; Rothblatt, 2009, p.198).

One of the first authors who addressed specifically the “idea” of university education is evangelical Oxford academic John Henry Newman. In his work “The idea of a University: Defined and illustrated” that was first published in 1852, Newman describes his idea of higher education and defines it as liberal education. Being one of the pioneers in academic discussion on the idea of higher education, Newman’s importance in theory of higher education is immense, even though his works have had the greatest influence on British education (Rothblatt, 2009, p.183). Most of northern, central and eastern Europe, including Finland, was on the other hand largely influenced by the German ideas of higher education developed in 19<sup>th</sup> century. German model sees the universities as the home of the highest and best form of scholarship and science (Rothblatt, 2009, p.195). Expressed through the work of Wilhelm von Humboldt, a Prussian philosopher and founder of University of Berlin, the German higher education model was characterised by a holistic combination of teaching and research. Specifically, the research became the primary duty of professors who were to communicate the results of their research to their students: “Above all, they [professors] should by word and deed make clear to them [students] that scientific and scholarly work is a never-ending activity, is ruled by nothing else than the reason of man, the fruits of which should be available to everyone.” (Jonsson, 2006, p.56). The main purpose was to give the students a personal formation, i.e. “Bildung” in German. Another important feature of Humboldt’s model was academic freedom – it should be without restriction regarding the content of both, teaching and research for professors, as well as to provide students freedom to study what they want (Jonsson, 2006, p.56). As Krull (2006, p.145) summarizes it, Humboldt’s concept of a modern university rested on four principals:

1. The integration of teaching and research;
2. The complementary principles of freedom to teach and freedom to study;
3. The demand for solitude and freedom in the autonomous pursuit of truth; and
4. The introduction of the seminar system as the backbone of a community of lecturers and students.

Over time, every education system changes influenced by fluctuations in society. Moreover, “the inner logic of universities is under pressure from governments, the public, the students themselves” (Ashby, 2009, p.251). Thus, Humboldt’s model, i.e. the idea of a modern research university has undergone many changes since 19<sup>th</sup> century. Nybom (2006, p.4) claims that higher education institutions “are no longer considered to be responsible and invaluable academic and national cultural centres”. The ultimate mission of higher education institutions is being questioned and redefined, and universities are, due to the high level of politicization of higher education and research, today seen as “instrumental means to hide unemployment among young people” (Nybom, 2006, p.4). Barnett (1990, p.23-24) asserts that the

various conceptions of higher education are closely related to societal interests, i.e. shifting ideologies shift the idea of higher education in a particular time and place. Some authors claim that modern university is changing too slowly for the contemporary, i.e. postmodern society (Bauman, 1997, p.24; Kerr, 2009a, p.299) and that “postmodern troubles cannot be adequately handled by modern means” (Bauman, 1997, p.24). Barnett (2000, p.6) identifies the current time as “the age of supercomplexity” – when the fundamental frameworks for understanding the world are endlessly multiplying and are often in conflict. Kerr (2009a, p.286) states that the historical tendency has been for university functions to expand and become more complex leading to competing visions of true purpose of university. Characterised by complexity, today’s modern university is a “Multiversity”: “The university is so many things to so many different people that it must, of necessity, be partially at war with itself.” (Kerr, 2009b, p.309). Due to these complexities, as well as external and internal differences that “Multiversity” is constantly being exposed to, Jonsson (2006, p.59) questions whether it is possible to talk about universities as coherent bodies with an identity of their own, or about “the idea of a university”. Smith and Webster (1997a, p.3) express the same doubt by stating that today’s universities are so diverse, fractured and differentiated that it may have become absurd to seek for any common organising principle, a common “idea” of higher education. Paradoxically, the common feature of the university in postmodern moment, namely a “postmodern university” is the “multiplicity of differences” as Smith and Webster (1997b, p.104) name it. These authors imply, and we would agree, that we cannot talk about a single “idea” of a university; rather we must consider the plurality of thinking about the higher education and try to detect the variety of “ideas” of higher education which is exactly what this research aims to accomplish.

Higher education system in Finland has undergone many changes and developments since the establishment of the first Royal Academy in Turku in 1640 (Välilmaa, 2012, p.29). Nevertheless, the influence of Humboldt’s model of higher education can be clearly seen even today. The Humboldtian unity of teaching and research has been deeply incorporated into Finnish higher education (Hölttä, 1988, p.91). The discourse used by the Universities Act from 2009 reveals the Humboldtian influence on the national higher education system:

“The mission of the universities is to promote free research and academic and artistic education, to provide higher education based on research, and to educate students to serve their country and humanity. In carrying out their mission, the universities must promote lifelong learning, interact with the surrounding society and promote the impact of research findings and artistic activities on society.” (Universities Act, 2009, Section 2).

Specifically, the unity of research and teaching, the academic freedom and the seminar approach to teaching are the principles on which Finnish higher education resides and which correlate with Humboldt’s idea of higher education.

On the other hand, the second stream of influence on Finnish higher education, especially in the last decade, are the international and global pressures; specifically, OECD, Bologna process and higher education policies coming from European Commission (Moisio, 2014, p.21; Välimaa, 2012, p.40). These international forces are mostly influential in the field of higher education policy-making in Finland – OECD by using its “soft power”, and Bologna process, increasingly intertwined with European Commission’s activities in the field of higher education (e.g. Modernisation agenda), is one of the most important sources of changes in European and Finnish higher education (Välimaa, 2012, p.40). These international and global initiatives mainly affect the higher education policy-making, as well as administrative, structural and financial aspects of Finnish higher education and they are very visible in the everyday functioning of higher education institutions. Thus, by shaping the outlines of the Finnish higher education system, they certainly (somewhat) shape the students’ conceptions about the idea of higher education.

These two streams of influences – Humboldt’s model and international forces – are also clearly seen in the results of this research. The 10 categories related to the idea of higher education that were discovered can be understood better when analysed in the light of these influences. One also needs to take into consideration the abovementioned authors and their claims about the recent changes in higher education globally. Analysing the individual categories, we can connect and compare the ideas about higher education that the interviewed students have with the above described major streams of influences on the higher education system.

Category 1 (see Table 2) represents the idea of higher education being closely related to the society and it has two subcategories: (1) positive – higher education contributes to society; and (2) negative – higher education is detached from society. The positive subcategory is clearly recognized in the discourse used by the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture: “universities must interact with the surrounding society and strengthen the impact of research findings and artistic activities on society.” (Ministry, n.d.1). Higher education has always been “saturated on various levels by society” (Barnett, 1990, p.68); since their beginning, universities provided cadres for the professions that society needed and adjusted to various societal changes. Moreover, the strengthening of the relationship between higher education institutions and society is seen as a global tendency; due to the increasing role of scientific research in economic and technological development universities are brought into the very centre of society (Kumar, 1997, p.33). On the contrary, the negative aspect of Category 1 speaks of higher education being disconnected from societal processes; participants use the term “ivory tower”. This term is usually defined pejoratively and refers to the tension that exists between “the service to the public and more contemplative scholarship” (Rosovsky, 2002, p.14). Even the Cambridge Dictionary defines the term “ivory tower” as not knowing about or wanting to avoid the ordinary and unpleasant things that happen in people's lives; the following sentence is provided as an example: “Academics sitting in ivory towers have no understanding of what is important for ordinary people.” (Cambridge Dictionaries Online, n.d.). The picture of academics

being detached from the society is also related to Humboldt's principle of academic freedom and pursuit for truth that must be safeguarded from external political influences. The quest for knowledge demanded academic freedom and isolation, which in turn meant that the university as an institution needed to delimitate from society and any individual or group political interests (Wittrock, 2006, p.112). Since the negative aspect of Category 1 is closely connected to Category 9 (Table 10) that presents the idea of higher education as being changed, perhaps the source of these conceptions can also be related to the situation in which the modern university is not well adjusted to the postmodern society and does not provide what society needs, as some scholars identified it (Bauman, 1997, p.24; Kerr, 2009a, p.299). Also related is the diagnosis that the "universities no longer have a monopoly (if ever they had) of the skills and knowledge to be passed on to the new generation" (Kumar, 1997, p.27). Due to the unpredictable nature of the labour market, a university degree does not guarantee a job; thus, today's university graduates are likely to experience radical changes, even unemployment during their working lives (Brown & Scase, 1997, p.85; Smith & Webster, 1997a, p.10). Smith and Webster (1997b, p.106) summarize the arguments about current changes, decline, even death of university as an institution: (1) emergence of alternative sources of knowledge (e.g. internet and communication technologies) which undermine university's monopolistic position; (2) the way of teaching and learning has considerably changed (e.g. distance learning); and (3) greater influence of the alternative research providers (e.g. think tanks, corporate research etc.) weakens the privileged position of university in research provision.

Correlated with the negative subcategory of Category 1 (Higher education is detached from society) and Category 9 (Higher education has changed) is Category 10 (Higher education is something else than university, Table 11). Consequently, for the conception that higher education is something else than university we can find similar explanations – university's loss of monopoly over knowledge paired with technological and communication advancements opens the possibilities of learning, even gaining higher education without university (Bauman, 1997, p.22; Brown & Scase, 1997, p.96). Today, university is (only) an accrediting institution (Smith & Webster, 1997a, p.10; Kumar, 1997, p.29).

Whether outside of the institution of higher education or within it, one of the conceptions that is described by the participants in the research is that higher education is personal growth (Category 6, Table 7). Through higher education students develop their minds and bodies and gain a transformative experience which shapes identities and builds networks (Smith & Webster, 1997a, p.8). This category is closely related to the Humboldtian idea of *Bildung* which holds out an ideal of personal development and vision of educated people as fully developed and therefore in harmony with themselves (Rothblatt, 2006, p.44). Hence, this personal growth happens through networks (Category 2) and through time (Category 5).

Defining higher education as a network is represented in Category 2 (Table 3). In this network perspective we can again see the influence of the Humboldt's model, namely,

the seminar system that develops community of lecturers and students. Network is also developed on an institutional level, as the goals defined by the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture illustrate: "In their operations, the higher education institutions aim at relevant cooperation and division of duties. Structural development will be continued with the aim of creating a more closely knit higher education network" (Ministry, 2009, p.16).

An interesting perspective on higher education is the time relatedness, as expressed in Category 5 (Table 6). Participants see higher education as a phase in a person's life or another education phase. This corresponds with the findings of Antikainen and colleagues (1995, p.67) that the timing of education in Finland follows a cultural script typical of the particular generation, gender and social class; due to standardisation of the modern life higher education is seen as a normal, expected phase in life.

Although the concept of time has recently become increasingly influential in higher education, it has not been much studied (Gibbs et al., 2015, p.1). There are several factors that prompt a sense of time to be discussed in the context of higher education: financial transformation that led to a global market and consumerism which affect the work patterns and conditions, and related, implementation of the neoliberal policies; lesser presence of the state in higher education and diminishing of the welfare state; advancement of the communication technologies; as well as the global demographic and geopolitical changes (Gibbs et al., 2015, p.3). As Gibbs (2015, p.54) argues: "time becomes accelerated and fragmented, leaving academics privileged not for scholastic but entrepreneurial worth, shaped not by considerations of social justice but by revenue". In other words, time became an instrument for assessing productivity, for judging quantitative output, performance and achievement (Neave, 2006, p.72). The apparent speeding up of the academic time (Barnett, 2015, p.122) takes place on individual, collective, as well as on the institutional level (Gibbs et al., 2015, p.4). In this sense, we can better understand the conception of the students that participated in this research who see higher education as related to time (Category 5). Moreover, time defines students through university degree duration, number of credit hours, assignment deadlines, study/lectures/leisure time management (Gibbs, 2015, p.54).

The idea of higher education as being on the top is expressed in Category 8 (Table 9). This conception denotes a picture of higher education that involves the top research, the best education and educates top people. Perhaps the source for this perspective can be traced to the image of university having a monopoly over knowledge production in general (Bauman, 1997, p.22; Kumar, 1997, p.27). The status and prestige of university as an institution lies in "once unquestioned right of deciding the canons of professional skill and competence" and the "authority of teachers [that] used to rest on their collective monopoly of the sources of knowledge" (Bauman, 1997, p.22). Today, however, we are witnessing the decline of academic authority and loss of the monopoly over knowledge (Bauman, 1997, p.22). Nevertheless, universities' distinctiveness resides in the fact that they were, and are, a unique concentration of various talents and an environment in which these talents can develop and flourish

(Kumar, 1997, p.28). Category 8 can also be visually and conceptually connected to the idea of higher education being an “ivory tower”, as well as with Humboldt’s principle of academic freedom and pursuit for truth that must be safeguarded from external political influences: “For Humboldt, since scientific institutions represented the highest institutionalized body in the social hierarchy for cultivating ‘spiritual life’, they were elevated above all other state and social institutions.” (Henningesen, 2006, p.99). Another aspect for understanding Category 8 is through Finnish history and culture. Namely, higher education has a high social status in Finland; higher education institutions are seen as an essential part of the national innovation system, socio-economic and regional development, as well as the development of national-identity (Välilmaa, 2001, p.47).

Since its foundation, university as an institution, has always been involved in providing cadres for the professions that society needed. Hence, seeing the university as a profession provider, as expressed in Category 7 (Table 8) is a common idea of a university. According to the participants, higher education provides professional development to individuals and professional cadres to the society. This function is seen as one of the basic tasks of higher education. Discourse about higher education being at the forefront of economic development, on European level, was reinforced by recent European Union (EU) policies. Moreover, in the context of increasingly globalised and knowledge-based economy, European Commission sees education and training as crucial for both economic and social progress; there is a need of a well-skilled workforce to compete in terms of productivity, quality, and innovation and higher education is essential in this process (European Commission, 2011).

Lastly, there are two more categories about the idea of higher education that were somewhat expected – Category 3 (Higher education is binary, Table 4) and Category 4 (Higher education is related to knowledge, Table 5). There is no surprise that the participants see higher education as binary, since Finnish higher education system consists of two complementary sectors: universities and universities of applied sciences (also called polytechnics). The system of universities of applied sciences was developed between years 1991 and 2000 (Ministry, n.d.2).

The perspective expressed in Category 4, that higher education is related to knowledge, is again, an expected result. Even dictionaries define higher education as being about gaining knowledge on an advanced level. The conservation of knowledge through science, the transmission of knowledge through education, as well as the interpretation and advancement of knowledge through research have “always been recognized as the business of universities” (Flexner, 2009, p.88). Building upon Newman’s notions of higher education, Flexner (2009) analyses the idea of a modern university and states that there are 4 major concerns of scholars and scientists regarding university education: the conservation of knowledge and ideas; the interpretation of knowledge and ideas; the search for truth; and the training of students who will practise and continue their work (Flexner, 2009, p.88).

This research has discovered the above described 10 categories related to the idea of higher education, but it is not uncommon to have greater number of different ideas of higher education potent at the same time in one society. Therefore, some future research on a larger scale would surely detect some new conceptions about the idea of higher education in Finland.

## **4.2 Understanding the roles of students through relevant literature**

Previous section shows us that the idea of higher education is a contested topic within the higher education area, and that the questions concerning the purpose and the nature of higher education are answered differently in different times and places. Moreover, it is not uncommon to have several influential ideas of higher education at the same time. Within these different ideas of higher education the position of various actors in higher education also changes; thus, the idea of higher education also defines the idea of a student. It is important to note that the way in which students are seen – characteristics, functions and behaviours assigned to them – is greatly influenced by the broader understanding of higher education and its processes. Moreover, the roles that are assigned to students by the public and scientific communities, as well as the roles that students assign to themselves change through time. As Bienefeld and Almqvist (2004, p.431-2) claim, the concept of students has changed and bears some potentially conflicting characteristics which affects the students themselves, but also has consequences for higher education policy as a whole.

Following the analysis from the previous section, the main factors influencing Finnish higher education today are twofold: Humboldt's model of university, and international forces such as Bologna process and higher education policies coming from European Commission (Moisio, 2014, p.21; Välimaa, 2012, p.40). Firstly, we will explore what are the roles that are being assigned to students by these two influential perspectives; we will name them "prevailing conceptions". Secondly, we will relate these prevailing conceptions to the results of this research in order to better understand the roles that Finnish students assign to themselves.

Humboldt defined higher education as a community of scholars and students in common pursuit of the truth (Wittrock, 2006, p.112). One of the four leading principals of Humboldt's model of research university, besides (1) the integration of teaching and research, (2) the academic principles of freedom to teach and freedom to study and (3) the demand for solitude and freedom in the autonomous pursuit of truth, is the (4) introduction of the seminar system which aims to strengthen the community of lecturers and students (Krull, 2006, p.145). Higher education is a process that is built on "equal partnership in learning" within the community of teachers and students (Henningsen, 2006, p.98). Therefore, the role of a student in Humboldt's idea of higher education is the one of a junior researcher, or a younger colleague (Bienefeld & Almqvist, 2004, p.431).

In Bologna process, students are seen as partners. At the first ministerial meeting in Prague in May 2001 the ministers recognized active student participation as a very important factor in the success of Bologna process. Significant is the statement that “students are full members of the higher education community” and the recognition of students as “competent, active and constructive partners” in the establishment and shaping of the European Higher Education Area (Towards the EHEA, 2001, p.2-3). Ministers acknowledged the active role of students in defining the organization and content of higher education and identified them as partners. More recently, in 2015 in Yerevan ministers acknowledged that students are “full partners in the governance of autonomous higher education institutions” and as full members of the academic community they should be actively involved “in curriculum design and in quality assurance” (Yerevan Communiqué, p.2).

Bologna process is also supported by the higher education policies coming from European Commission; similarly, these policies also assign to students the role of partners. Commission’s Europe 2020 strategy, focuses on creating a knowledge-based Europe; within this strategy, higher education plays a crucial role in individual and societal advancement, as well as in providing highly skilled human capital (European Commission, 2011). The Higher Education Modernisation Agenda sees the students as partners in “achieving smart, sustainable and inclusive growth” (European Commission, 2011). This partnership approach is promoted on the EU level and is integrated in the policy approach ensuring the involvement of student bodies (European Commission, 2012, p.13). One of the guiding principles of the work of EU high level group on modernisation of higher education, states: “active student involvement is essential in governance, curricular design, development and review, quality assurance and review procedures” (High Level Group, 2013, p.15).

In Scandinavian countries (which share many similarities with Finland), according to Bienefeld and Almqvist (2004, p.432), students are seen as young adults with a high degree of legal independence. Referring specifically to Finnish students, the Education and Research development plan 2011–2016 (Ministry, 2012) mainly refers to students in terms of their rights and responsibilities; the same situation is in the Universities Act (Universities act, 2009), as well as in the English version of the Ministry’s website (Ministry, n.d.1). Although not explicitly, it can be inferred from the text of these documents that students are considered to be active citizens of the Finnish society: “young people’s inclusion and influence in matters concerning them promotes growth into active citizens by developing knowledge and skills for operating in a democratic, egalitarian society” (Ministry, 2012, p.18). Through democratic approach, education should include practices that “foster participation, influence and the development of political and societal literacy” (Ministry, 2012, p.18). The active citizenship of students needs to guarantee their participation and influence in higher education practice: “Pupils, students and teachers will be included in all development of education” and “students will be empowered to exert real influence through the associations” (Ministry, 2012, p.18).

As we can see, the above described prevailing conceptions assign to students an inclusive, participatory role – a role of a younger colleague, partner and active citizen. The results of this research which illustrate the roles that Finnish students assign to themselves, show a similar idea of being a student in Finnish higher education. Namely, Category 11 (Students are members of the wider society, Table 13), Category 13 (Students are part of higher education system, Table 15) and Category 14 (Students are active, Table 16) depict the conceptions similar to the above described prevailing perspectives (i.e. Humboldt's model and international forces).

The conception that students are members of the wider society expressed in Category 11 has two subcategories – positive and negative. The positive subcategory refers to students being valued and respected members of society that contribute with their expertise to the society. Participants believe that, as a student, one should be a responsible member of the society, or an active citizen, using the discourse of the Ministry of Education and Culture (Ministry, 2012, p.18). Students being a societal burden is the negative subcategory of this conception. In this view, students are not doing anything of importance for the society and they are just wasting the taxpayers' money. Explaining this position, students referred to a much discussed issue in public recently regarding higher education – long study periods in Finland. Namely, the OECD published its annual indicators on education in 2014, *Education at a Glance*, and found that students in Finland graduate later than their counterparts in other countries and enter the labour market at an older age (Kyrö, 2014; OECD, 2014). According to participants, this finding reinforced a public discourse about students being a burden to society; they study too long and do not access the labour market fast enough. Extended studies may be related to the matriculation backlog, combination of work and study, inadequate career and study advisory services, and inflexible teaching arrangements (Melin et al., 2015, p.7).

There are three more categories that are closely related to the prevailing conceptions about student role in higher education (i.e. Humboldt's model and international forces) – Category 13 (Students are part of higher education system, Table 15), Category 12 (Students are members of student population, Table 14) and Category 14 (Students are active, Table 16). Category 13 expresses the idea of students being an integral part of higher education, meaning that they are in the core of the higher education processes. From this perspective, the students interact with the higher education system and as they progress in their studies they become more integrated in the system. Similar to Humboldt's model, students are seen as a part of a university community. This idea of a university community is again expressed in Category 12 (Students are members of student population, Table 14). As members of student population, students get students benefits, build student networks and learn by interacting with other students. In that sense, Humboldtian idea of university community involves interaction between teachers and students, as well as between students themselves. Closely related is the conception about students being active (Category 14). Complementary to the prevailing conceptions, students are assigned the role of active participant in higher education, and a responsible member of Finnish

society. Students give “pedagogical offerings” – they are offering their activity in the classes, the products (essays, report etc.) as well as themselves in form of their commitment and effort (Barnett, 2007, p.82-83).

Along the same lines with the above described categories, as well as with the prevailing conceptions is the perspective in which students are seen as a resource for society and for the university (Category 15, Table 17). Students contribute to the society with their gained expertise, similarly as in the positive subcategory of Category 11. In regards to the university community, students actively participate and contribute to the learning and teaching process. Participants also recognise that students are university’s resource in the sense that they provide public funding for the university. Although independent legal entities, universities are publicly funded by the government (almost two thirds of university budgets); therefore, their primary mission is to provide research and educational services to general public (Universities Act, 2009, Section 2). More specifically, public funds are allocated based on formula funding, and Category 15 shows us that the students are aware that they are part of that formula.

Again, consistent with the prevailing conceptions, students are seen as free (Category 21, Table 23); students have the freedom to choose and organise their studies, as well as freedom of thinking. Directly related to the Humboldtian principle of intellectual freedom, i.e. “freedom to learn”, students have the right to study what they want and to freely develop their thinking (Henningsen, 2006, p.97). The principle of academic freedom is highly valued in democratic societies today; it is protected by institutional rules and regulations and nurtured in academic culture.

Student being transformed in higher education is a conception presented in Category 19 (Table 21). According to our participants, students’ transformation in higher education begins when one becomes a student, and continues through growth and development of thinking, as well as becoming more integrated into the higher education system. As Barnett (2007, p.62) sees it, in genuine higher education, students experience a transformation of being; they are not merely undergoing a developmental process, but a continuing process of becoming themselves. In the prevailing conceptions, the Humboldtian idea of *Bildung* upholds the idea of personal development (similar to Category 6: Higher education is personal growth). As an ideal, *Bildung* became a key component of academic self-understanding in Continental Europe and in Scandinavia (Wittrock, 2006, p.112).

Students being employed (Category 20, Table 22) has shown to be one of the relevant roles of the students. Having a part-time and/or summer job and gaining work experience while studying is seen as valuable and beneficial for the student, as well as for the society in general. As we mentioned previously, it is common in Finland for higher education students to work while studying: in 2013, 58% of university students, and 56% of polytechnic students have had an employment contract while studying (Statistics Finland, 2015b). Thus, Category 20 is connected to Category 11 that denotes the conception that the students are a part of the wider society and contribute

to it while studying, and to Category 14 that presents students as being active, responsible, and independent.

In the research results, there is a set of conceptions that the participants talked of in a negative light: Category 16 (Students are customers, Table 18), Category 17 (Students are neglected, Table 19), and Category 18 (Students are stressed, Table 20). Namely, these categories differ significantly from the prevailing conceptions which is why they demand further scrutiny.

While describing the students as customers, the participants were speculating the term customer (some of them used the term client), but also suggesting that students at the same time are and are not customers. As customers, students get the service – higher education. On the other hand, students do not pay for the education and they are not customers. In general, they talked about the customer position in a negative light, explaining that there is a tendency among universities to tailor their study programmes in order to cater their customers – students. This tendency has also been in focus of the higher education scientific community that analyses the marketization of higher education. The student-customer metaphor rose to prominence especially after the World Trade Organisation recognised education as one of the services that can be freely traded under the General Agreement on Trade in Services in the last round of negotiations, which began in January 2000 (Maringe, 2011, p.142). Marketization as a “market-driven ideology” commodifies academic education and alters the relationship between academics and students along the model of a service provider and customer (Furedi, 2011, p.2).

“The various rituals of commodification, such as quality control, auditing and ranking performance, quantifying the experience of students and constructing league tables, are essentially performative accomplishments. [...] As customer, the student is expected to serve as the personification of market pressures on an otherwise archaic and unresponsive university.” (Furedi, 2011, p.2-3)

Similar kind of criticism and resistance to neoliberalism is found throughout the higher education literature (e.g. Molesworth et al., 2011); neoliberalism erodes the idea of a public university and undermines the case for public funding of universities (Scott, 2006, p.131). There are also publications that are analysing the nature and meaning of a marketised higher education sector and trying to understand the manifestations and consequences of marketization in higher education practice, among which is the student-costumer perspective (Scullion et al., 2011, p.228-229). Just like our participants observed it, “there is a growing tendency to represent students acting in their role as customers as providing a positive contribution to academic pedagogy” in form of a satisfaction survey which encourages universities to provide what customers want rather than what they need to become truly educated (Furedi, 2011, p.3-4). Moreover, when the students begin to regard themselves as customers of higher education, their intellectual development is likely to be compromised because “degrees can be bought; understanding of a discipline cannot” (Furedi, 2011, p.5). Scott (1997, p.46) summarizes these perspectives by concluding that students as

customers are both empowered, because their immediate demands are more likely to be satisfied, and diminished, because their longer-term needs may be ignored and their participation in transcendental experience will be denied.

It is important to note that there is a difference between the terms customer, consumer and client, although the use of these metaphors in education tends to be interchangeable (Maringe, 2011, p.145). A consumer simply consumes the service extended to them, while customer extends their custom to the provider and has a greater influence in a market relationship (Barnett, 2011, p.43). Customer relationship is usually short term, which is why the metaphor is so widely criticised in education; the client relationship tends to be long term, developmental and incremental (Maringe, 2011, p.146).

Addressing specifically the Nordic countries, Brown (2011, p.19) states that the marketization process in education has been limited in these countries. Furthermore, talking about the geography of neoliberalisation Ball (2012, p.137) asserts that Finland is blocking and opposing neoliberal policies. There is, however, a lot of contradictions in the neoliberal framework of students' roles globally; they are customers, managers and commodity at the same time (Nordensvärd, 2011, p.163). These contradictions indicate that there is a need for further research on marketization of higher education and, specifically, the conception about the customer role of student in higher education.

Category 17 (Table 19) denotes the conception about students being neglected in higher education. Participants believe that students are neglected in higher education because university focuses more on research and does not provide sufficient support nor integration for students. Mann (2001) observed similar process to the one described by our participants and she defined it as "alienation" from higher education. Exploring the feeling of estrangement, or isolation from the process of learning in higher education, Mann (2001) describes seven different theoretical perspectives on experience of alienation. These perspectives examine the conditions under which alienation might arise, such as current sociological condition, entry into pre-existing discourse of alienation, position of an outsider/non-traditional student, estrangement of the individual student from their own creative and autonomous self, the impact of unequal distribution of power within the teaching and learning relationship, the role of assessment practices in the construction of the self; and a perspective on alienation as a strategy for self-preservation (Mann, 2001, p.17). Our interview does not provide sufficient data to define if either of the abovementioned perspectives are influential in the case of students in Finland; that can, however be a fertile ground for some future research.

Closely related to the conception of students as being neglected is Category 18 (Table 20) that presents the students as being stressed in higher education. Participants explain that students feel stressed during the beginning of the studies; the responsibility and the pressure to organise their curriculum in the best possible way and to graduate in time causes the feeling of anxiety. Barnett (2007, p.32-36) located

multiple sources of students' anxiety: examinations and assessments processes, uncertainty and unpredictability of the assessment procedures, self-doubts over one's abilities, workload and time management, complexity of tasks, etc. "Being a student is to be in a state of anxiety" Barnett (2007, p.32) claims and, as our research findings show, the Finnish students agree.

Just like in the case of the categories related to the idea of higher education, this research has discovered a limited number of conceptions about the role of students in higher education. Some of these conceptions are somewhat expected, and in correlation with the prevailing conceptions. There are, however, few categories (like Category 16, Category 17, and Category 18) that do not correspond to the prevailing conceptions which makes them thought-provoking and potentially fertile ground for some future research.

## 5 Conclusion

This last section of the study we will devote to conclusions. First subsection will provide a reflection on the research process and validity and reliability analysis. In the second subsection we will summarize the main findings and discuss the practical implications of the research as well as its limitations. Last subsection provides recommendations for further research.

### 5.1 Reflection on the research process and validity and reliability checks

In several occasions throughout the research process, the chosen methodology – phenomenography – has proven to be the right choice for the research on students' perception of the idea of higher education and the role of students in higher education. First of all, opting for discursive phenomenography (Figure 2) and for the research structure that was developed partially based on it (Figure 3) provided the research framework for this research. This framework equipped us with tools adequate for answering the research questions and enabled the use of bracketing (especially during the data collection phase). Furthermore, the pilot interview was important in assessing the appropriateness of phenomenographic methodology in practice. Due to success of the pilot interview the researcher felt confident that phenomenography is a fruitful approach to the investigated phenomena. The interview also helped the researcher to refine her interviewing skills. The interview design, i.e. interview themes and specific questions, has proven to be adequate to collect relevant data. Variety of conceptions that the present research found, which are denoted through 21 categories of description, again proves the adequacy of the research methodology for the research questions. Also, the positive feedback that the participants expressed, that they felt well informed about the research, and they felt relaxed and motivated to participate, adds up to the researcher's overall positive experience of researching.

In addition, validity and reliability checks are an important part of reflection process; they ensure that the research process maintain its authenticity and credibility. Validity and reliability are important components of the research because they “intersect with audience and intended inquiry purposes” (Patton, 2002, p.542) and provide criteria for assessing the qualitative research (Patton, 2002, p.543). Procedures used for validity and reliability checks raise the overall quality of the research.

Validity in qualitative research is related to the accuracy of the findings that are ensured by employing certain validity check procedures (Creswell, 2014, p.201). Specifically, validity refers to the extent to which the research findings actually reflect the phenomenon being studied (Åkerlind, 2012, p.123). Qualitative researchers sometimes use different terms to address validity, such as trustworthiness, authenticity, and credibility (Creswell, 2014, p.201).

Reliability of qualitative research is related to the use of appropriate methodological procedures for ensuring the quality and consistency in data interpretations (Åkerlind,

2012, p.125); it is an indicator of methodological consistency across different researches and different authors (Creswell, 2014, p.201).

Patton (2002, p.542-3) asserts that the quality of research in each paradigm should be judged by its own paradigm's criteria because each research approach is underpinned by a certain theoretical orientation and particular philosophical assumptions. Therefore, in this research we need to address the matters of validity and reliability using the phenomenographic framework.

The issues of validity and reliability framed in phenomenography and its specific ontological and epistemological positions bear slightly different considerations. Establishing the validity and reliability of the phenomenographic research cannot rely on criteria based on objectivistic epistemology; rather, we must acknowledge the constructivistic approach and the epistemological assumptions underlying phenomenography (Sandberg, 1996, p.136). As previously explained, phenomenography's non-dualistic ontology and relational epistemology describe the reality as relation between subjective and objective which constitutes a variety of experiences; these experiences combined represent the phenomenon as a whole (Yates et al., 2012, p.98).

Therefore, validity in phenomenography is not concerned with the extent to which the research findings correspond to the phenomenon as it exists objectively but rather as it is subjectively experienced by the participants (Åkerlind, 2012, p.123). According to Åkerlind (2012, p.123) there are two types of validity checks that are commonly practised within phenomenographic research: (1) communicative and (2) pragmatic validity.

(1) Communicative validity check refers to the persuasiveness of the argumentation for the interpretation that the researcher proposes (Åkerlind, 2012, p.123). In the research at hand this component is demonstrated by the detailed descriptions of the participants' experiences through the illustrative quotes. Different quotes coming from different participants supporting the similar idea makes the proposed interpretation stronger. Another important element of the communicative validity check is ensuring that the research methods and final interpretation are regarded as appropriate by the relevant research community (Åkerlind, 2012, p.123). During the development of the research design the researcher of the research has had regular master's thesis seminars which provided fruitful discussions about the direction of the research. The input and approval of the colleagues-researchers indicated that the research methodology (phenomenography) as well as the research method (interview) are appropriate for answering the research questions. Moreover, the master's thesis supervisor provided valuable guidance in doing the research analysis and phrasing the research findings.

(2) Pragmatic validity check is related to the usefulness of the research outcomes and their meaningfulness for the intended audience (Åkerlind, 2012, p.124). We have already discussed the usefulness of the present research and its significance in higher

education policy-making in Finland. Higher education researchers need to examine closely the current changes in the educational context and provide tools and input for evidence based policy-making. This research aims to help researchers, practitioners, policy-makers, and students, to better understand and take into account the students' perspective while practicing, researching or deciding on higher education.

Acknowledging the ontological and epistemological assumptions in phenomenography, the matter of reliability refers to the transparency of the data analysis process. Specifically, the researcher should make their interpretive steps clear to readers by detailing them and illustrating them by appropriate examples (Åkerlind, 2012, p.125). Similarly, Sandberg (1996, p.137) suggests that in order to be faithful to participants' conceptions the researcher needs to demonstrate the interpretation process in all phases of the research: formulating the research question, selecting the participants, data collection, data analysis, and reporting of the findings. We believe that we provided a detailed description of each step of the research process.

Åkerlind (2012, p.125) states that there are no uniformly used reliability checks within phenomenographic research. It is common, however, to use the procedures which involve more researchers whose consensus about the interpretation provides reliability to the research (Åkerlind, 2012, p.125). Since this research is conducted individually, we applied the alternative reliability checks which refer to transparency of the interpretation process. Sandberg (1996, p.137) defines reliability in phenomenography as "interpretative awareness" which can be maintained by applying bracketing, or as Sandberg (1996, p.138) names it – "phenomenological reduction". According to Sandberg (1996, p.138), there are 5 steps of bracketing which function as reliability checks:

(1) Firstly, the researcher must orientate towards the phenomenon as it appears throughout the research process by formulating appropriate research question(s). This research has clearly demonstrated the process of defining the research questions by analysing the research topic, research purpose and research gap.

(2) The second step of bracketing requires that the process of data analysis and interpretation is focused on describing *what* constitutes the phenomenon, instead of attempting to explain *why* the phenomenon appears as it does. By doing the thorough literature review *after* the data analysis and interpretation (see Figure 3: Research structure) this research is primarily focused on presenting how the investigated phenomena (i.e. the idea of higher education and the role of student in higher education) are seen by the participants.

(3) Third step is called "horizontalization" which means that the researcher must treat all aspects of the lived experience and all participants as equally important for the research process. As we already explained in the previous subsection, the data analysis involved a unified dataset which contains collective experiences of the participants. All these experiences, i.e. all the transcripts were treated equally. Their

importance and contribution to the process of making the categories of description are illustrated by the variety of the participants' quotes used to describe the research findings.

(4) The fourth step refers to the search for stable structures in the participants' experiences and defining the conceptions by careful confirmation in the research data. In this research, the data analysis process was highly repetitive and in its nature inductive. The researcher was constantly adjusting her thinking, simultaneously adjusting the categories of description in the light of new perspectives maintaining the focus on the transcripts and the participants' collective experience. Furthermore, describing the conceptions by using the participants' quotes proves that the findings are firmly grounded in the research data.

(5) The last step of bracketing, i.e. the last reliability check, involves identifying the participants' conceptions by connecting their perspectives of reality to their experiences. This procedure is carried out through the analysis of the referential and structural aspects of the each individual category in the section "Research findings".

To summarize, the validity and reliability of the present research was proven by establishing the research explicitly on the research data, by the approval of the researcher's academic community, and by the high level of transparency of the entire research process – from data collection, through data analysis, preliminary and final categories of description, to the interpretation of the data. In addition, the adjustments made in the research method after the pilot interview contributes to the internal consistency of data collection process.

However, looking back, there are two points of research that could have been done differently from this perspective. First, the process of sampling could have been designed differently. Namely, the combination of purposive, criteria and stratified sampling has produced a sample that was manageable and specific enough for maintaining a focused research. The stratified sample, however, did not introduce the expected variety in the conceptions along the soft-hard disciplinary dimensions regarding the research object. Stratified sampling technique was applied based of the assumption that the difference between the soft and hard disciplines students will be more visible, especially in the interviewing situation which was so loosely structured and enabled the participants to express themselves. Since the data analysis has not revealed any regularity along the soft-hard disciplinary dimensions, stratified sampling could have been omitted without consequences for the research results.

The second point that could have been done differently from this perspective is searching for the research participants. Specifically, this was the most challenging moment of the research process because it required more time than expected. We needed to reach a great number of students among which the interested and, more importantly, motivated students would come forward. Also, it turned out to be very difficult to reach the aimed student population and disseminate the invitation for participation in research (Appendix 1). This process of searching for participants has

significantly slowed down the entire research process, and, from this perspective, it required more allocated time in the initial research plan. Nevertheless, due to the valuable help from people responsible for study affairs in respective schools, as well as from several professors and lecturers, we were able to find motivated participants for the research after all.

## **5.2 Implications of the research findings**

The main findings of the research at hand are described through 21 categories of description which represent 21 different conceptions – 10 about the idea of higher education and 11 about the role of students in higher education in Finland.

10 different conceptions about the idea of higher education, meaning 10 different ways in which Finnish students experience the higher education were discovered:

1. Higher education is related to society
2. Higher education is a network
3. Higher education is binary
4. Higher education is related to knowledge
5. Higher education is related to time
6. Higher education is personal growth
7. Higher education is profession provider
8. Higher education is on the top
9. Higher education has changed
10. Higher education is something else than university

There are 11 additional conceptions related to the role of students in higher education in Finland that this research determined:

11. Students are members of the wider society
12. Students are members of the student population
13. Students are part of higher education system
14. Students are active
15. Students are resource
16. Students are customers
17. Students are neglected
18. Students are stressed
19. Students are transformed
20. Students are employed
21. Students are free

Each category was further analysed in terms of its referential and structural aspect (Figure 1). Lastly, the relations between the categories are visually presented through the outcome space (Figure 4, 5 and 6).

The aim of this research, as we already mentioned, is to develop understanding of the students' perspectives on higher education in Finland by investigating their conceptions about the idea of higher education on one hand, and on the other discover

the roles that students assign to themselves within higher education. Focusing on one university, and the fact that 8 interviewed students cannot represent the entire student population, do not allow us to generalise the research findings to all Finnish students. Still, these research results give us a valuable preliminary insight into student's higher education experiences in Finland.

There are several implications that can be drawn based on the present research. First of all, we can see that there is a range of ideas of higher education that are simultaneously potent in Finnish society, at least from the students' perspective. Furthermore, some of these ideas are in conflict; for example, higher education is on the top versus higher education has changed and lost its value; or, that higher education is, at the same time, connected and detached from society. More importantly, students experience the transformations that occur in higher education recently which we identified in the first section. They speak about marketization (Category 9), emergence of new teaching and learning methods (Category 10), greater responsiveness of higher education to societal needs (Category 9), as well as the loss of university's monopoly over knowledge (Category 9 and Category 10). It can be implied that the participants recognize the higher education's recent challenges in these postmodern times (Bauman, 1997) that are transforming university into multiversity (Kerr, 2009b).

Consequently, there is a variety of roles that students ascribe to themselves and this research has managed to detect 11 of them. Some of the roles are a direct response to a specific idea of higher education, e.g. students being customers (Category 16) within the higher education marketization trend (Category 9); or seeing the students as free (Category 21) and as integrated into the higher education system (Category 13) is clearly connected to the Humboldtian perspective. Some of the roles are in conflict, as experienced by our participants, which adds to the complexity of the findings – students feel empowered and disempowered at the same time. These complexities portray the current situation of the higher education sector in Finland. More importantly, they can provide an important input for future student related policy-making. For example, tuition fees is one of the recently debated matters in Finland. We wonder, does this debate make students feel like customers; or does the fact that they feel like customers support the arguments in favour of tuition fees?

Another conclusion that can be drawn from the findings is that the concept of time is becoming increasingly important in the context of higher education. Students feel that they should be more efficient and shorten their periods of studies (Category 5, Category 1). The question arise, will this feeling make them more efficient or even more stressed (Category 18)?

A very clear practical implication of the research findings is that students need more support from higher education institutions, especially at the beginning of their studies. This might alleviate the stress that entering higher education brings (Category 18) and make students feel more integrated and appreciated (Category 17).

There are two limitations of this research that need to be noted. First is the language barrier that influenced the literature review and the interviewing process. Namely, we had to limit the process of literature review only to the resources that are published in English, while the Finnish relevant literature remained unexplored. Furthermore, interview was conducted in English, which means that participation was limited only to those who are proficient in English. Additionally, interview in English with Finnish native speakers certainly resulted in some level of misunderstanding or incomplete information. Conveying thoughts in a foreign language was easier for some participants than others.

Second limitation is the scope of the research. Although the topic (i.e. the idea of higher education) is quite broad, we decided to focus only on student perspective. Also, the research sample includes students from one university (University of Tampere) excluding universities of applied sciences. It was not feasible to expand the pool of participants in this particular study since the primary goal of the research is to provide a preliminary understanding of the student experience in higher education. Above described limitations, however, provide a good input for developing further research within these topics.

### **5.3 Recommendations for further research**

The variety of conceptions that this research found combined with some of the questions we posed in the previous subsection proves that the topic of the idea of higher education and the roles of students in higher education has plenty of potential for further research. We already mentioned some of the aspects that would be interesting to pursue in future research, including the ones mentioned in the limitations of the research.

It would be interesting to further investigate the perspectives of the students from the universities of applied sciences, but also the perspectives of other higher education actors, such as academics and administrators. Although this research did not detect the patterns related to the soft/hard disciplinary knowledge, the issues of the idea of higher education and the role of students in higher education could be further scrutinised in this regard. Looking into the similarities and differences of experiences between students at the beginning and at the end of their studies could also be a fruitful research topic. Ultimately, an international comparative (qualitative) approach to experiencing higher education, its nature and roles of its actors, could give us even better understanding of the recent transformations in higher education globally.

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# Appendices

## Appendix 1: The invitation for participation in research

Dear student,

**I'm looking for students-interviewees for my master thesis research!**

Research topic: **Role of students in higher education.**

The research explores how do students understand the idea of higher education and how do they perceive their role in higher education system.

The students-participants need to meet the following criteria:

- are Finnish degree students,
- study in the School of Information Sciences OR the School of Social Sciences and Humanities,
- have at least 120 ECTS credits, or more,
- speak English.

The place of the interview will be negotiated (perhaps at the university). The interview is confidential, it will last around 45 minutes, and it will be recorded. It is loosely structured, and it doesn't require any preparation since it aims to capture your personal perspective. So, basically, it will be a conversation on two topics:

- understanding of higher education (idea and mission), and
- the role of student in the higher education system.

My name is Vesna Holubek and I am a master student in the Master in Research and Innovation in Higher Education programme (MaRIHE) organized by the Higher Education Group (HEG) within the School of Management, University of Tampere.

If you're willing to devote an hour of your time and help me out in doing my research, please contact me on [xxxxx@gmail.com](mailto:xxxxx@gmail.com) or [xxxxx@student.uta.fi](mailto:xxxxx@student.uta.fi).

Best regards,

Vesna

## Appendix 2: Participants in the research

Number of a participant	School	Code
Student 1	School of Social Sciences and Humanities	SSH1
Student 2	School of Social Sciences and Humanities	SSH2
Student 3	School of Social Sciences and Humanities	SSH3
Student 4	School of Social Sciences and Humanities	SSH4
Student 5	School of Information Sciences	IS1
Student 6	School of Information Sciences	IS2
Student 7	School of Information Sciences	IS3
Student 8	School of Information Sciences	IS4

## **Appendix 3: Interview outline**

### **Theme 1: The idea of HE**

- 1) How would you describe/define higher education in your own words?
  - its idea
  - purpose & mission
  - as a system
- 2) How does the HE differ from primary and secondary? What makes it specific?
- 3) If you would have to name couple of main, defining characteristics of HE system/university, what would they be?
- 4) How do you see the relationship between HE system/university and the wider society?

### **Theme 2: The role of students in HE system**

- 5) What is the relationship between student and HE system?
- 6) How do you see the role of students in HE system?
- 7) How do you see the role of students in comparison to roles of teachers or administration in HE?
- 8) What does it mean to be a student today in Finland? How is “being a student” seen today in Finnish society?
- 9) What do you think, does becoming a student changes a person (changes in behaviour, values, and identity)?
- 10) Are there any differences between students in different countries? Why and what differences?

## **Appendix 4: Consent to Participate in Research**

Research title: **The role of students in higher education**

Researcher: **Vesna Holubek**

### **Introduction and Purpose**

My name is Vesna Holubek. I am a master student in the Erasmus Mundus programme – Master in Research and Innovation in Higher Education (MaRIHE) – co-organized by the Higher Education Group (HEG) within the School of Management, University of Tampere. I would like to invite you to take part in my master thesis research, which concerns the role of students in higher education. The purpose of this research is to explore how students understand the idea of higher education and how they perceive their role in higher education system.

### **Procedures**

If you agree to participate in my research, I will conduct an interview with you at a time and location of your choice. The interview aims to capture your personal perspective and it will involve questions about understanding of higher education (idea and mission), and the role of student in the higher education system. The interview should last about 50-60 minutes. With your permission, I will audiotape and take notes during the interview. The recording is to accurately record the information you provide, and will be used for transcription purposes only.

### **Confidentiality**

The collected data will be kept confidential. All responses will be coded and analysed as codes. Your name will be stored separately from your responses to the interview questions. Your name and/or information that would identify you will not be used in any publications or presentations.

### **Compensation**

You will not receive any compensation for participating in this research.

## **Rights**

The participation in the research is completely voluntary. It is your choice whether or not to participate in this research. You can decline to answer any questions and you are free to stop taking part in the research at any time.

## **Questions**

If you have any questions, concerns or complaints regarding this research, please feel free to contact the researcher, Vesna Holubek at +358xxxxxxxx or emails [xxxxx@gmail.com](mailto:xxxxx@gmail.com) or [xxxxx@student.uta.fi](mailto:xxxxx@student.uta.fi).

You will be provided with a copy of this consent form.

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## **Statement of Consent**

I have read the information in this consent form and I want to participate in this research. All my questions about the research have been answered to my satisfaction.

---

Participant's Name (please print)

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Participant's Signature

---

Date

## Appendix 5: Preliminary categories of description

### The idea of HE

1. Definition of HE + Main characteristics of HE + HE as an idea and as a system + HE in Finland
2. Purpose of HE + Developing scientific mind + Difference between universities and universities of applied sciences
3. Americanisation + Change in how universities function + Internationalisation
4. University failure + HE lost its value
5. HE without university
6. HE and society

### The role of student in HE

1. Role of students + Roles of students, teachers and administration + HE and students
2. Being a student in Finnish society + Students and society + Being student in different countries
3. Students as resource + Students bringing something new to teachers
4. Students left alone + Students stress + University support for students
5. Becoming a student change + Students developing through studies
6. Students - customers
7. Member of student group
8. Freedom
9. Working while studying
10. Long time to graduate