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Abstract

Teacher support is an important factor affecting academic and social integration into the university. However, studies have been very scarce concerning both students' and teachers' experiences of their relationship in higher education. The purpose of this study is to examine students' and teachers' experiences of communality and interaction as well as the support given by teachers in the academic community. A total of 68 teachers and 104 students participated in this study by answering both Likert-scale and open-ended questions. The results show wide variation in both students' and teachers' experiences. The experiences varied from descriptions of a good and functional communality to a gap between teachers and students or even hostile behaviour towards students. Five main categories emerged from the data: 1) *functioning interaction and communality*, 2) *good quality contacts between students and teachers*, 3) *variable experiences of interaction and communality*, 4) *low quality interaction and communality* and 5) *dysfunctional contacts between students and teachers*. The results indicate that teachers experience the support given to students more positively than the students. In addition, the results concerning the open-ended questions also indicated that teachers experience the communality and interaction between teachers and students more positively than the students. More attention should be given to the teacher–student relationship at the higher education level. In addition, general skills such as interaction skills and social behaviour should be emphasised more when recruiting staff.

Key words: academic community, higher education, students' experiences, student integration, teachers' perceptions, teacher-student relationship

Introduction

Universities are facing the increasingly difficult challenge of proving their effectiveness to government and society. Hence, the number of degrees awarded and the study pace of students have become important factors measuring the efficiency of academic organisations. In order to graduate, students need to follow the curriculum, pass exams and study efficiently, and the institution should be able to support this efficiently. However, study attrition, protracted study times and delays in graduation have become growing concerns internationally (OECD, 2009; KOTA database). Consequently, student integration into the university has become increasingly important.

Studies on student retention and attrition concerned with student integration, show unifying themes among the reasons for student drop-out. These include student motivation (Allen, Robbins, Casillas, & Oh, 2008; Bennett, 2003), satisfaction and self-esteem (Bennett, 2003), academic performance (Allen & Robbins, 2008; Allen et al., 2008; Bennett, 2003), personal reasons (Davidson & Beck, 2006; Rayle, Robinson Kurpius, & Arredondo, 2006; Wintre, Bowers, Gordner, & Lange, 2006), age and age-related reasons (Murtaugh, Burns, & Schuster, 1999; Scott, 2005; Wintre et al., 2006), clarity of career direction (Christie, Munro, & Fisher, 2004; Sandler, 2000), and financial reasons (Bennett, 2003; Lähteenoja & Pirttilä-Backman, 2005). Laing and Robinson (2003) showed the importance of the quality of teaching and the learning environment in relation to possible student drop-out, especially for non-traditional students. Furthermore, many other aspects of student integration into the university and support for students' studies have been explored. These include academic integration, especially academic performance and progress, self-perceptions and students' beliefs about staff commitment to teaching and student support as well as social integration, which encompasses self-esteem and the quality of relationships with teachers and peers within the academic environment (Lähteenoja & Pirttilä-Backman, 2005; Nevill & Rhodes, 2004; Tinto, 1993). From the

various perspectives emerging from the research, we will focus on students' and teachers' experiences of communality and interaction as well as the support given by teachers in the academic community.

As society changes, the sense of community and interaction between people have become increasingly important. Social connectedness and integration have also been found to be important factors affecting studies (Allen & Robbins, 2008; Allen et al., 2008; Christie et al., 2004; Rayle et al., 2006; Sandler, 2000). Although the teacher–student relationship has been acknowledged as important in most of the research conducted in primary schools (Davis, 2006; Spilt & Koomen, 2009), research concerning the relationship in higher education is still relatively scarce. Particularly, studies concerning the teachers' perspective on this relationship are missing. Lähteenoja and Pirttilä-Backmann (2005) offer one of the few examples in this area by exploring university teachers' views on student integration in three different faculties. According to their study, teachers' views on integration varied widely: some teachers viewed students as future colleagues and saw students' social and academic integration as beneficial and even as a self-evident part of their jobs. On the other hand, some teachers viewed students' integration as unnecessary or even harmful to students (Lähteenoja & Pirttilä-Backman, 2005). Therefore, it seems that teachers' views are far from unanimous on how well students should be integrated into the academic community.

Students' integration into their studies has been widely studied (Borglum & Kubala, 2000; Chapman & Pascarella, 1983; Deil-Amen, 2011; Karp, Hughes, & O'Gara, 2010-2011; Pascarella, Smart, & Ethington, 1986; Tinto, 1975; Tinto, 1993). Most of the research is based on Tinto's (1975) theoretical model on dropout in higher education. According to Tinto (1975), the most important factor explaining students' persistence in studies is their integration into the academic and social systems of the organisation. An insufficient integration into college, both socially and academically, will make student commitment to the college more difficult, and the students are more likely to drop out (Tinto, 1975).

A large-scale study of over 200 colleges and universities in the United States showed already in 1993 that student–faculty interaction is a crucial factor affecting many aspects; it is related to students’ overall satisfaction, which comprises satisfaction with the faculty and overall college experience, degree attainment, learning outcomes and graduation with honours (Astin, 1993). Similarly, a study combining results from various studies on students’ persistence in higher education studies showed that the support of faculty staff outside and within teaching situations has a great impact on student persistence and graduation rates (Pascarella & Terenzini, cop. 2005). Despite the importance of the student–teacher relationship, teachers have been shown to not necessarily be aware of their role in tutoring (Stephen, O’Connell, & Hall, 2008).

In addition to being an important factor predicting relationships within the academic community, student integration is also related to students’ learning. In Finland, Mäkinen, Olkinuora and Lonka (2004) explored university students’ learning profiles from several faculties and studied how the profiles were related to student willingness to continue their studies and student absence rates. According to their study, students who were not committed to studying were most likely not willing to continue studying and were also the most frequently absent. In their study, Braxton, Millem, and Sullivan (2000) used a longitudinal design and found that active learning was associated with students’ social integration; class discussions and interactive, higher order thinking methods between students and the staff were related to a better social integration of students (Braxton et al., 2000). Students’ experiences of positive relations with teachers are related to a deep approach to learning and satisfaction with studying (Trigwell, 2005). Social integration into a faculty is also related to the personal and academic development of students (Halawah, 2006).

Thus, student integration into the academic community and good interaction between academic staff and students can be regarded as a factor of quality in higher education, belonging to the modern strategic institutional approaches in any academic community (Astin, 1993; Halawah, 2006; Pascarella & Terenzini, cop. 2005). Student integration is an institutional mission, and further, quality

staff are those who are committed to the mission of the institution and are competent in their professional role in meeting that mission, as defined by Pellegrino et al. (2015).

The aim of this study is to explore teachers' and students' experiences of integration into academic community by focusing on the relationship between students and teachers. We explore this by examining students' and teachers' experiences of communality and interaction as well as students' experiences and teachers' perceptions of the support given by teachers in the academic community. Another aim of the study is to provide research-based evidence concerning the quality of student integration as well as the relationship between students and teachers to support the development of teaching and learning.

Methods

Participants

This study was carried out in the field of Biological and Environmental Sciences, University of Helsinki, Finland. The field is highly diverse, with a wide variety of disciplines in the Natural Sciences. The participants in this study were students and teachers from several training programmes: Biology (includes six majors: Ecology and Evolutionary Biology, Physiology and Neurosciences, Plant Biology, Genetics, Microbiology, Biochemistry and Biotechnology), Molecular Biosciences, Environmental Ecology, Environmental Change and Policy as well as Aquatic Sciences, all of which are highly research-oriented and train experts for universities, research institutions, public administration, schools, business and industry.

Altogether 104 students participated in this study; 35 studied in the Biology training programme, 25 in Environmental Ecology, 18 in Environmental Change and Policy, 18 in Molecular Biosciences and 5 in Aquatic Sciences. Of the participants, 81% were female and 19% male, while the gender

distribution of the whole student population is 67% female and 33% male. Two students did not define their gender. The starting year of the students varied between 2002 and 2013: 22% of the students were first-year students, 17% second-year students, 17% third-year students, 14% fourth-year students, 14% fifth-year students and the rest of the students (16%) had started their studies in 2008 or earlier. Of these students, 93 answered the open-ended question.

The total number of academics in the field of Biological and Environmental Sciences, University of Helsinki, is 220, of which 68 participated in this study. Of the participants, 26 were from the Biology training programme, 14 from Environmental Sciences, 6 from Aquatic Sciences and 4 from Molecular Biosciences. Eighteen participants did not define their major. The participants included 11 professors, 26 assistant professors/university lecturers, 8 researchers, 10 doctoral students and 9 other academic staff. Four participants defined themselves as university teachers, which could be any of the first three groups. Of the participants, 46% were male and 40% female. The gender distribution (male=46%, female=40%) was quite representative of the academic staff population (49 % male, 51% female). Ten participants did not define their gender.

Data

The data consisted, firstly, of the students' and teachers' responses to Likert-scale items concerning students' experiences and teachers' perceptions of the faculty support and, secondly, of an open question related to students' and teachers' experiences of the interaction and communality. The Likert-scale items concerning student integration were adapted from a questionnaire (Pascarella & Terenzini, cop. 2005), based on Tinto's (1975) theoretical model, and were translated into Finnish and modified for the Finnish context by Lähteenoja (2010). The questions used in the students' questionnaire were 7-point Likert-scale items, and the items in the teachers' questionnaire were 5-point Likert-scale items. To compare the students' and teachers' answers, the students' answers were

transformed into a 5-point Likert scale by combining values 2 and 3 and values 5 and 6. The items used in this study were adapted from scales measuring faculty concern for students, and all the questions concerned teachers and their support. The items were also asked from the teaching staff by modifying the questions to reflect the teachers' perceptions on giving support to students (Table 1). In addition, the students and teachers were asked an open-ended question on their experience of the interaction and communality between teachers and students. The question was introduced with the following excerpt from The Ethical Principles of Teaching and Studies at the University of Helsinki:

The university is a shared working place for students, teachers, researchers and supporting staff. One of the objectives at the university is to develop the community so that also students would commit to the university and feel themselves as members of the academic community, as the following excerpt from The Ethical Principles of Teaching and Studies shows: Students become members of the academic community primarily by studying and attending lectures, but they also have a key role in linking teaching and research. In research-based teaching, students are given responsibility and expected to make an active contribution. Inquiry-based teaching offers teachers the opportunity to produce and develop research ideas, test the results with students, and familiarise students with academic thought.

How have you experienced communality and interaction between teachers and students in the faculty?

For both the students and teachers, the open question on their experiences of interaction and communality was identical. The questionnaires were distributed via internal e-mail lists, and the answers were collected anonymously using an online electronic form.

From the 104 students who responded to the questionnaire, 97 answered the open-ended question concerning their experience of communality and interaction between teachers and students in the faculty. From the 68 participating teachers, 45 answered the open question.

Analysis

Both qualitative and quantitative analyses were used in this study. To obtain a broader picture of how teachers and students experience teachers' support, quantitative analyses were done by comparing the teachers' and students' means and the standard deviations of their answers to the Likert-scale items concerning their experiences of faculty support (Table 1). The differences between the teachers' and students' answers were compared using ~~one-way ANOVA~~ Kruskal Wallis because of the ordinal nature of the variables measuring the students' answers.

The open question data was analysed using qualitative content analysis, more specifically *inductive category development* (Flick, 2002; Mayring, 2000). In inductive category development the categories result from the interpretation of the content of the responses without *a priori* categorisation (Mayring, 2000). Hence, in this study the analytical procedure included data-grounded analysis phases (Harry et al., 2005; Mills et al., 2006). The data was analysed in the following six steps:

1) All three authors read the answers independently several times to obtain a general idea of the range of variation in the data. In this first phase of the analysis, the key points being made by the respondents are identified to develop codes from the data; consequently, a set of open codes is labelled (Harry, Sturges, & Klingner, 2005; Mills, Bonner, & Francis, 2006). 2) After the first round of readings, the authors searched for common features among the codes in order to cluster them into conceptual categories (Astin, 1993; Harry et al., 2005). In this phase, we categorised the answers into clusters that we called preliminary categories. 3) The preliminary categories were next discussed together with all the authors to test the codes and categories for clarification and reliability, which is an essential phase in the qualitative analysis process (Harry et al., 2005). At this phase, it became clear that the answers were not only about the respondents' experiences of communality and interaction in the faculty context, as the respondents also talked about their experiences in other contexts, such as their department, major or courses. Thus, the next step was to develop the themes by pointing out, as suggested by Harry et al. (2005), the themes embedded in the categories. 4) Therefore, to develop the

themes (Harry et al., 2005), the answers were re-analysed, taking into account the different levels and the wide variation within answers. Each author drafted a categorisation independently using the different contexts with which the respondent had presented his/her answer: *faculty*, *department*, *course* and *personal*. 5) In the next phase, the themes were tested (Harry et al., 2005) in a process where the categories and contexts were then discussed with the other authors, modified and finalised. This rereading and redefining continued until all the authors agreed on the categories and levels. 6) Finally, representative quotes were selected for each category, both for the students and teachers.

The students' experiences were coded to the quantitative data by using dummy variables of the five categories described below. For example, if a student's comment comprised experiences of functional communality as well as variable experiences, value 1 was coded for these experiences and 0 for those that the student did not mention. The students' experiences in different fields were compared using cross tabulation. In addition, the Quality of experience variable was coded so that 1 = positive experiences, 2 = negative experiences and 3 = variable experiences. The students' achievement was measured by the accumulation of credits in the ongoing academic year, their grade point average for those courses and their own experience of how their studies have advanced. The relationship between experiences of the teacher–student relationship and achievement was measured with Oneway Anova using the Quality of experience variable and the dummy variables one at a time as independent factors.

Results

We first report the students' experiences and teachers' perceptions of the faculty support by presenting the means and standard deviations of the items answered by the teachers and students. The items show how the students experienced the support teachers give them as well as demonstrate the teachers' perceptions about the support they give to students. Second, we report the results of the inductive content analysis of the open-ended question on the students' and teachers' experiences of

communality and interaction. Third, we compare the students' experiences in the different fields and how these experiences are related to their achievement.

Support given by teachers

The students' views on the teacher support were relatively varied. The means were very close to the average value of 3, and the answers were distributed relatively evenly between negative and positive answers. The teachers' perceptions about the support they gave to students were more positive than the students' experience of it: three of the four items had an average above 4.5 (Table 1). The ~~one-way ANOVA~~ Kruskal Wallis analysis ~~analyses~~ comparing students' and teachers experiences ~~the averages of the items~~ showed that in all items, the teachers' views were much more positive than the students' views ($p < 0.001$) (Table 1).

[Table 1 near here]

Experiences of interaction and communality

From the answers of the open-ended question, we recognised high variation in the interaction and communality experienced by the students and teachers. Five categories emerged: 1) *functioning interaction and communality*, 2) *good quality contacts between students and teachers*, 3) *variable experiences of Interaction and communality*, 4) *low quality interaction and communality* and 5) *dysfunctional contacts between students and teachers*. All five categories were present in the answers of both the students and teachers. In addition, the experiences were described in relation to a particular context. Four contexts were recognised in the answers: *faculty*, *department*, *course* and *personal*. The faculty context means that the answers the participant gave concerned communality and interaction in the faculty as a whole. When the descriptions were in the department context, the participant talked about interaction and communality in his or her department or another department. In the course context, the participants discussed specific courses and the communality and interaction in them. At

the personal level, the participants talked about specific teachers or students or about themselves as students/teachers.

Category 1) Functioning interaction and communality

Positive experiences of interaction and communality were typical for both the teachers and the students' descriptions in this category. In general, the participants' responses showed that they felt that communality was functioning well and that there was a good working/studying atmosphere. Some participants used the word *communality* and described both students and teachers as part of a joint academic community. Examples of positive experiences are given in the following excerpts:

Good. The teacher has been nice and friendly and easily approachable, communication and interaction has worked out well. Communality has been experienced and shown in positive ways. (Student 101)

Within a small major, the teachers and students have learned to know each other well, which increases communality. (Teacher 36)

Alternatively, the participants simply described a good or fairly good studying/working atmosphere or emphasised the good interaction between students and teachers, but did not describe the feeling of communality, as the following examples show:

I've found it to work fine. (Teacher 6)

I think the interaction works well. (Student 51)

Category 2) Good quality contacts between students and teachers

The comments were also positive in this category, but did not directly discuss interaction or communality as in Category 1. In the answers of this category, the roles of students and teachers were emphasised. The students described teachers as easily approachable or student centred, and the

students felt that they were being heard and allowed to be part of decision making or the planning of teaching:

...Many of our teachers are nice and easily approachable... (Student 57)

Some teachers have been really friendly towards students and clearly on the same wavelength... (Student 4)

...I have experienced that students have on some occasions been heard by being involved in student organisations or working groups... (Student 26)

Some of the students and teachers mentioned active or motivated teachers/students, acknowledging that the good atmosphere and communality stems from motivated and enthusiastic students/teachers:

It works well if the teacher is motivated (Teacher 15)

...It is unfortunate that some of the staff does not understand how much enthusiasm and energy the students have. I have noticed that on my courses and because of this I have started developing learning methods based on it ... students are interested in the subject they have enrolled to study (at last we have mainly really motivated students ... (Teacher 67)

Category 3) Variable experiences of interaction and communality

This category was the most common in the answers of both the teachers and students. The distinctive theme was the variation in experiences: the participants had partly good experiences of communality, atmosphere and interaction, and partly bad. In some cases the experiences were extremely different, as the following excerpt demonstrates:

It completely depends on the teacher. Many teachers are friendly and easy to approach, and you may get to know them even during one course. On the contrary, it feels like some others are trying to avoid the eyes of students even after a long course together... (Student 57)

Mainly positive. Of course, in a big group you also find students with whom the collaboration does not work as well as with others (Teacher 64)

This category also contained varied experiences of the quality of interaction and communality, not only due to personality but also depending on whether the teaching or studying took place in big or small groups, as a lecture or in a laboratory, or in interaction with undergraduate or postgraduate students, teachers, technical staff or administration. The following excerpts show some examples of this type of variation:

There is a good connection between students and teachers, but the higher up in decision-making you go, the worse the connection gets (Teacher 4)

In lectures you don't get a connection to teachers. In the laboratory courses you get to know each other already a bit (Student 17)

In first-year studies the interaction between students and teachers was practically non-existent. In mass lectures teachers remain completely distant. Now during my second year of studies (the group sizes have reduced there starts to be more interaction between students and teachers, and the teachers are not only distant authorities. (Student 33)

Category 4) Low quality interaction and communality

Within this category, the respondents described their experiences in a negative way, but did not specify the problems in detail. They described bad or fairly bad experiences or had no experience or awareness of interaction or communality in general. Many felt that the relationship between teachers and students was not very interactive, but did not describe the teacher–student relationship in detail. The comments in this category were often short and general, as the following examples show:

I have not especially noticed communality (Student 84)

...Unfortunately, generally speaking weak... (Teacher 59)

Category 5) Dysfunctional contacts between students and teachers

Within this category, the respondents reported several problems they had encountered and, in general, described their experiences in a negative way. Compared to the negative experiences of communality and interaction described in Category 4, the answers within this category were longer, and the respondents described their experiences in more detail.

Students raised specific problems, such as the absence of research-based teaching and the poor flow of information which resulted in being left out of decision making processes and the academic community. In addition, the students felt that they were not acknowledged by some teachers or that some teachers completely ignored them and their attempts at contact. One student also felt that students' feedback on courses is ignored and that students are treated in courses as faceless numbers rather than as true persons with possible timetable restrictions. Examples of these difficulties are shown in the following excerpts:

Otherwise good, but informing does not always work from teachers to students. (Student20)

With a few exceptions, teachers are generally not interested in students (Student 79)

...With some teachers you get really fed up when they never respond to your emails. (Student 16)

Students are ignored. In decision making students are not taken into account, students are not always even informed of decisions, not even in cases dealing with compulsory courses(!) ... Students are being heard through various routes (student representatives etc.), but it feels like only when all parties feel that it is worthwhile. (Student 34)

The most common experience within this category was the feeling of teachers and students being separate from each other. This feeling was described by both the students and teachers. The participants had experienced a feeling of separation due to age, large class sizes or the form of teaching (lectures vs. courses). Further, the students' answers showed that some students viewed teachers as authorities, which is likely to deepen the gap between the two groups. At least one student also described this view, as the first excerpt below shows:

...Part of the problem is in the students', too much belief in authority... (Student 91)

Teachers (researchers) profile themselves as a separate group on purpose and in a goal-oriented way, and they do not want close communication with students.. (Student 7)

Communality should definitely be developed. There is still a gap between the students and the teaching staff. This gap could be narrowed by changing teachers' and students' attitudes, and by adding cooperative gatherings... (Teacher 61)

Besides the feeling of apartness, some students also described a feeling of inequality due to the behaviour of certain teachers. However, in their answers the students stated that this was not true for all teachers, but only for some. A few teachers had also noticed that some colleagues had the attitude that students were worth less than teachers.

...Some teachers don't seem to think of students as equals, which is insulting. Also some other members of staff have treated students in derogatory ways... (Student 4)

...Many colleagues do not at all want to remember, that students exist, let alone that teachers would want to ask students' opinions even in situations that concern them... (Teacher 59)

Within this category extremely negative experiences and attitudes were mentioned by both the students and teachers. The students described rude or even hostile encounters with certain teachers, and the teachers felt that the reason for failing or missing communication in class or with certain students was due to students' passive or negative attitudes towards them and learning in general.

...I have watched fellow students being called "asses" and "dumb idiots" when they have just asked normal questions... (Student 74)

...They [students] are considered lazy and the type to take the easy way out. They are also talked about in a derisive way which is very unfortunate... (Teacher 59)

...In some large basic courses I have sensed a negative attitude from frustrated students or students not succeeding in their studies. (Teacher 5)

[TABLES 2 and 3 near here]

Comparison of the students' experiences in different fields and their achievement

The cross-tabulation analysis of the different fields of study showed that the students' experiences varied between different departments (see Table 4). Students in Environmental Ecology and Aquatic Sciences seemed to experience more functional interaction and communality and fewer experiences of variability and dysfunctional contacts than in the other departments ($p < .031$). In Environmental Change and Policy, there were relatively more experiences of dysfunctional contacts between students and teachers than in the other fields.

No statistically significant differences were found between the students' experiences and achievement in studies measured with the accumulation of credits or grade point average.

Distribution of categories

Both the students' and teachers' experiences varied greatly (see Tables 2 and 3). Of the students, 22% reported only positive experiences of interaction and communality, 22% reported only negative experiences, and 56% of the responses included both positive and negative experiences. Almost half of the teachers (47%) reported only positive experiences of the interaction and communality in the faculty, 20% reported only negative experiences, and 33% reported both positive and negative experiences.

The variation of positive and negative experiences, or the awareness of this variation, was present in the students' and teachers' answers in several contexts: faculty, department, course and personal. The faculty- and personal-level experiences of both students and teachers ranged from very positive to very negative and were distributed evenly in all categories. In the department- and course contexts,

most of the experiences were positive or very positive, with the exception of many students having a feeling of apartness in the context of courses.

The students' positive experiences emphasised that the interaction and communality functioned well overall at the faculty, in the departments, in courses and with particular teachers. Good quality contacts between students and teachers, especially easily approachable teachers, were also emphasised in the students' positive comments. In contrast, the negative experiences of the students demonstrated no experience of communality and interaction in the faculty. The students' experiences of dysfunctional contacts between students and teachers emphasised a gap between teachers and students as well as showed some negative attitudes towards students both on faculty and personal levels. Furthermore, the teachers' positive experiences showed good experiences of communality and interaction in all contexts. The negative experiences reported by the teachers emphasised the poor quality of communality and interaction at the faculty level and poor quality contacts between students and teachers at the personal level.

Discussion

In the present study, our aim was to examine students' and teachers' experiences of their relationship and their integration into the academic community. Our study showed that the teachers' experiences of the support they give to students are far more positive than the students' experiences of it. That is to say, the teachers scored higher on faculty support and felt that they encouraged and supported students, were interested in their issues and talked with them even outside lectures far more than the students felt that this took place. In our study, the students also felt that teachers were not as interested in teaching as the teachers themselves experienced. The results of the open-ended questions showed that almost one-half of the teachers and only one-fifth of the students had only positive experiences of communality and interaction in the academic environment. Similar results were found by Stephen

et al. (2008), who stated that the rise in student numbers in higher education has led teachers who tutor to feel that they spend an extensive amount of time helping students. However, at the same time, students feel that tutors do not have enough time for them and would need more tutoring (Stephen et al., 2008). Another possible reason for the differences between teachers' and students' experiences may originate from the requirements of the learning environment. If students' self-regulation skills are not aligned with the support that the learning environment offers, bad experiences of teaching may result (Lindblom-Ylänne & Lonka, 2001). This is called destructive friction, meaning that the way students go about learning and teachers' teaching strategies are incompatible (Vermunt & Verloop, 1999). For example, if a teacher gives more responsibility to students in their learning, a student with poor self-regulation skills who prefers teacher-led learning may feel that the teacher is not helping him or her to learn. A study by Parpala et al. (2010) found that a many of students in a similar, highly research-oriented academic environment apply a deep approach to learning but lack organisational and regulatory skills in their studying (Parpala et al., 2010). Thus, students who do not have the required study skills may need more support and guidance from teachers. Support like this would be important as it has been shown that organised studying is related to better learning outcomes and study progression in biosciences (Asikainen, Parpala, Virtanen, & Lindblom-Ylänne, 2013).

Much variation was found in the students' and teachers' experiences of communality and interaction. The experiences in the faculty context varied greatly, and the distribution ranged from functioning experiences of communality to experiences of very bad or even hostile behaviour towards students. Almost half of the students felt that the quality of communality and interaction varied with different teachers, courses and departments. These varied experiences were also frequent among teachers: about one-third of the respondents reported both negative and positive experiences. One reason for this can be the size of the faculty, as it comprises several departments and dozens of majors. An

individual teacher or student may know only some parts of the extensive organisation, in which some majors or departments probably have a better working and learning atmosphere than some others. These results are partly parallel to those of Lähteenoja and Pirttilä-Backman (2005), who found that teachers' views about student integration varied widely. In their study, some teachers viewed the integration of students as beneficial, but others viewed it as unnecessary or even harmful (Lähteenoja & Pirttilä-Backman, 2005). These results suggest that both students' and teachers' experiences vary greatly and a consensus on the interaction and communality in a large organisation may be hard to achieve.

Contacts of poor quality were experienced fairly often by both the teachers and students. The students especially experienced poor quality interaction at the faculty and personal levels. That is to say, the students have experienced poor-quality interaction both in general and with certain teachers. In addition, the students' experiences of teachers' and students' apartness or separation from each other was emphasised throughout the academic environment; either the students described the interaction among students and teachers in courses, or their experiences emerged from the environment as a whole.

One reason for this could be the traditional learning culture, which can be seen as more traditional in science learning (Biglan, 1973). In traditional learning cultures, the teaching often emphasises knowledge transmission, and students are commonly quite passive (Nystrand, Wu, Gamoran, Zeiser, & Long, 2003). Science teachers often use a teacher-focused strategy in which the teachers are viewed as giving information instead of promoting students' understanding or conceptual change (Trigwell & Prosser, 1996; Trigwell, 2002). This could well increase the gap between students and teachers in an academic community.

In our study, both the teachers and students also had extremely negative experiences of the interaction between students and teachers: both had experienced negative attitudes towards each other, and the

students had even experienced hostile behaviour towards them or fellow students. These negative experiences were mostly seen on the personal level, but some students also reported these at the faculty level. Previous research on the student–teacher relationship in the higher education context has been very scarce (Hagenauera & Voletb, 2014). Instead, students and staff have been shown to desire an open, nonthreatening and respectful relationships (Anderson & Carta-Falsa, 2002). However, our results share similarities with those of a study by Lähteenoja and Pirttilä-Backmann (2005), which showed some teachers’ strongly negative attitudes towards the integration of students. In addition, at the elementary level it has been found that teachers’ poor self-efficacy and stress can lead to bad behaviour towards students (Yoon, 2002). Nevertheless, this kind of relationship is very unfortunate, and should not appear at any level as bad experiences with teachers influence students more than positive ones (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001). More research is clearly needed on the teacher–student relationship and its dynamics in the higher-education context.

Significant differences were also found in the students’ experiences in different fields of study. Students in the fields of Environmental Ecology and Aquatic Sciences mentioned the functioning communality more than the others. They also experienced a narrower range of experiences than the others. Environmental Ecology is located in a smaller city and is a smaller unit. This can be one reason for why they experience a more functioning communality and less variation. In addition, it seems that in the field of Environmental Policy and Change, the students experienced relatively more dysfunctional contacts between students and teachers than elsewhere. This may be due to its multidisciplinary nature. The unit has been formed by combining hard sciences, humanities and social sciences, and thus, it can be that the unit has not integrated together well. Furthermore, our study showed that study success was not related to the occurrence of the categories. Thus, in this sample, the students who reported positive experiences did not differ from the students who expressed negative or variable experiences about the communality and interaction. One reason for this could be that the students’ experiences of social interaction do not necessarily correspond to their success in

their studies. Students who integrate socially into an academic environment can still do poorly in their studies and vice versa (Tinto, 1975). Another reason for this could be the range of experiences that students had in a different field of study. Our sample size was relatively small, and a statistically significant relationship can be hard to achieve with so many variables.

A limitation of the present study is the small sample size of both students and teachers. Especially when conducting quantitative analyses, a small sample size can lead to problems in generalising and interpreting the results (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007). The comparison of the different fields of study was done with very few participants, and thus, it only gives us guidelines about the differences. Nevertheless, Biological and Environmental Sciences comprise multidisciplinary subjects ranging from neurobiology to plant sciences and to environmental policies. Biology alone is the most diverse science comprising, for example, mathematics, engineering and science and is seen as a group of sub-disciplines instead of being just one discipline (Brownell, Freeman, Wenderoth, & Crowe, 2014). In addition, the aim of our study was to understand students' and teachers' different experiences of the interaction in the academic community. Despite the small sample size, the variation that we obtained was wide and revealed several aspects of the participants' experiences from different fields of study. The differences that occurred gave us guidelines and a starting point from which to develop the communality in a different field of study.

Another consideration of the study is that many teachers did not answer the open-ended question. Only 48 (i.e. 70%) of the 68 teaching staff members answered this question, while from the students, about 90 % answered this question. According to the background variables (e.g. department, position, age, pedagogical training), the teachers who did not answer the open-ended question did not differ from those who did, suggesting that the reason for this could be that the teachers in general did not view the question as important. According to Lääteenoja and Pirttilä-Backmann (2005), some

teachers experience the integration of students as unnecessary or even unwanted. Thus, it could be assumed that some teachers do not see the relevance of this question as much as students do. In addition, the teachers who answered the question did not clearly specify their field of study. For example, some teachers just reported being in Environmental Sciences. Due to this and the low percentage of respondents who answered the open-ended questions, it was not possible to compare students and teachers experiences in different fields of study. Furthermore, in our study, the open-ended question about the student-teacher relationship could have affected the way the respondents answered the question. This is because we presented an example or a principle of the University of Helsinki on students' involvement in the university and in research practices. This can be explained with a decision-making heuristic called *anchoring bias*, which means that people make decisions and estimates based on initial values, which affect these estimates (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974). Thus, in this case, the example surely affected the way the participants answered. However, our aim was not to collect different conceptions of interaction and communality per se, but to explore students' and teachers' experiences of the interaction and communality at the Faculty of Biological and Environmental Sciences. We wanted to demonstrate to them what the ethical principles for students' involvement are and how they should appear in teaching and learning, and we wanted them to think about their experiences in that light. Nevertheless, we acknowledge that the answers could have been influenced by the example.

Practical implications

Our study clearly shows that teachers and students do not have a shared understanding of the interaction and communality in their academic community. In addition, teachers' experiences of their relationship tend to be more positive than students' experiences. That is to say, students' need for interaction and support also outside the classroom is bigger than teachers may realise. Teachers' and students' interaction during contact teaching and outside classes is an important aspect affecting studying (Allen & Robbins, 2008; Pascarella & Terenzini, cop. 2005) and should be arranged

regularly. Activities taking place outside the classroom to bring teachers and students together should be arranged more often. One example of this could be joint coffee breaks in each major at which both students and teachers are welcome to chat and drink coffee.

In addition, the teachers' role in supporting students should be more openly discussed. As a study by Stephen et al. (2008) demonstrates, teachers are not always aware of their role in supporting students. Moreover, the view of some teachers that student integration is unnecessary (Lähteenoja & Pirttilä-Backman, 2005) supports the need to openly discuss the roles that teachers are expected to take in supporting students and interacting with them. In higher education, one objective is to involve students in research and teaching and to make them a part of the academic community. It should be openly discussed and verified that teachers are aware of this objective. Furthermore, the hostile and negative attitude described in the open-ended questions is something that should not be present in the university context at all. In Finnish universities, all researchers teach and all teachers carry out research. However, staff recruitment is mainly based on scientific merits, although nowadays, scholarship in teaching (Nicholls, 2004) is becoming more and more important. In addition to scientific and pedagogical expertise, the importance of developing and learning generic skills is emphasised greatly in higher education context (Dunne, 2014). For example, interaction and communication skills are considered as crucial for graduates in the working life, and the importance of promoting these skills during studies is greatly emphasised (Devece, Peris-Ortiz, Merigó, & Fuster, 2015). Thus, when recruiting staff, attention should be given also to generic skills such as communication skills and interaction skills in order to prevent hostile interaction between teachers and students.

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Table 1. Means and standard deviations of the Likert-scale items concerning faculty support.

Items		Students (N=104)		Teachers (N=68)		Kruskal-Wallis	
Student	Teacher	Mean	s	Mean	s	Chi-Square	p
The teachers I have met are interested in students.	I am interested in how the students manage.	3.27	0.966	4.76	0.525	103.6	<0.001
The teachers I have met are ready to spend time outside lectures with students to discuss topics that are important and interest students.	I spend time outside lectures discussing topics with students	2.92	0.878	3.85	1.048	32.8	<0.001
Most teachers I have met are genuinely interested in teaching	I am genuinely interested in teaching.	3.11	0.900	4.54	0.703	78.8	<0.001
Teachers support and encourage me in my studies.	I support and encourage students in their studies.	2.97	0.906	4.54	0.532	89.7	<0.001

Table 2. The distribution of the students' experiences shown in five qualitative categories in various contexts (faculty, department, course, personal), which were extracted the participants' answers. Themes recognised within the categories are listed under each category.

	Faculty	Department	Course	Personal
1. Functioning interaction and communality				
Functioning communality	5	2	4	2
Functioning interaction	6	5	3	7
Good or fairly good experiences	20	9	4	4
2. Good quality contacts between students and teachers				
Teachers easily approachable	7	3		4
Teachers student centered	1		1	6
Students being heard	1		1	
Active and motivated students/teachers				
3.Variable experiences of interaction and communality	44			2
4. Low quality interaction and communality				
No experience of communality	15			
Bad or fairly bad experiences	6		3	3
5. Dysfunctional contacts between students and teachers				
No research-based teaching	4			
Poor flow of information	2	1		3
Teachers and students separate	11	2	7	4
Inequality	2			2
Students not taken into account	5			5
Passive students				
Hostile behaviour or a negative attitude	2	1		7

Table 3. The distribution of the teachers' experiences shown in qualitative categories (1-17) at various contexts (Faculty, Department, Course, Personal), which were designed from the answers by participants. Themes recognized within categories are listed under each category.

	Faculty	Department	Course	Personal
1. Functioning interaction and communality				
Functioning communality		1	2	
Functioning interaction	2	1	4	
Good or fairly good experiences	10	2	1	6
2. Good quality contacts between students and teachers				
Teachers easily approachable				
Teachers student-centred				
Students are being heard	2			
Active and motivated students/teachers	1			1
3. Variable experiences of Interaction and communality 9				
4. Low quality interaction and communality				
No experience on communality	5			1
Bad or fairly bad experiences	6		1	3
5. Dysfunctional contacts between students and teachers.				
No research-based teaching				
Poor flow of information				2
Teachers and students apart	4		1	2
Inequality				1
Students are not taken into account	3			
Passive students				2
Hostile behavior or negative attitude				3

Table 4. Comparison of the frequency of categories mentioned in different fields.

(BIO=Biology, MO=Molecular biology, EE= Environmental ecology, ECP= Environmental change and policy and AQ=Aquatic sciences.)

	dummy	BIO	MO	EE	ECP	AQ	p	chi square
1.Functioning communality	1	10	5	14	7	4		
	0	24	12	9	8	0	.016	12.22
2.Good quality contacts	1	5	1	4	0	0		
	0	29	16	19	15	4	.365	4.31
3.Variable experiences	1	17	5	5	9	0		
	0	17	12	18	6	4	.031	10.63
4. Low quality interaction	1	9	5	3	3	1		
	0	25	12	20	12	3	.733	2.02
5. Dysfunctional contacts	1	11	6	6	11	0		
	0	23	11	17	4	4	.015	12.41