



JYVÄSKYLÄN YLIOPISTO
UNIVERSITY OF JYVÄSKYLÄ

Key Findings of the KAPPAS2 Research Project

Jani Ursin

Final Seminar of the KAPPAS2 Project

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Helsinki



Korkeakouluopiskelijoiden oppimistulosten arviointi Suomessa (KAPPAS2) project aims to

1. Identify the level of generic skills among Finnish HE students.
2. Investigate the factors associated with the level of generic skills.
3. Examine the extent to which these skills develop during HE studies.

Project management and coordination (KAPPAS2)



Steering Committee

The national project coordination.

Representatives from all participating HEIs and the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture (Chair: Counsellor for Education **Maarit Palonen**).



JYU: Finnish Institute for Educational Research (FIER)

Responsible for the management of the project, translation of the tests and test environment, selection of students, scoring, data analysis and reporting.

Project Manager **Jani Ursin**, Lead Scorer and Data Manager **Kari Nissinen** and Project Researcher **Kaisa Silvennoinen**.



UEF: School of Educational Sciences and Psychology, Philosophical Faculty

UEF is involved in the translation and adaptation of the tests, cognitive labs, scoring, data analysis and reporting.

Deputy Project Manager **Heidi Hyytinen**, Doctoral Researcher **Lotta Väänänen** and Research Trainee **Martta Jämsä**.



Council for Aid to Education (CAE)

The international coordinator and developer of the CLA+ International test. Contact person: Chief Academic Officer **Doris Zahner**.





Institutional Coordinators

Responsible for organizing test sessions at HEIs.

Participating HEIs in KAPPAS2



UASs (# of students)

1. Arcada UAS (2730) 
2. Haaga-Helia UAS (10 023)
3. Häme UAS (8955)
4. Jamk UAS (8652)
5. Kajaani UAS (3402)
6. Lapland UAS (6012)
7. Metropolia UAS (17 106)
8. Novia UAS (4746) 
9. Police University College (N/A)
10. Savonia UAS (8073)
11. Tampere UAS (10 941)
12. Turku UAS (12 051)
13. Vaasa UAS (3516)

Universities (# of students)

1. University of Helsinki (26 130)  
 2. University of Eastern Finland (14 376)
 3. University of Lapland (4275)
 4. Lappeenranta-Lahti University of Technology LUT (6630)
 5. University of Vaasa (5091)
- Overall, **5 of the 14 universities** and **13 of the 24 UASs** participated in the KAPPAS2 study.

Generic skills investigated in the KAPPAS2 project



- The adopted **performance-based** Collegiate Learning Assessment (**CLA+**) International test consists of two main sections:
 1. an essay-based performance task (PT, 60 mins), which measures:
 - **Analysis and problem solving** (recognizing a problem situation and providing a well-reasoned solution).
 - **Writing effectiveness** (producing a persuasive text and maintaining coherence in argumentation).
 - **Writing mechanics** (mastery of established conventions in written language).
 2. selected-response questions (SRQs, 30 mins), which measure:
 - **Critical reading and evaluation** (critically evaluating arguments by analyzing logic, assumptions, reliability, and connections or conflicts in information)
 - **Data literacy** (involves making inferences, evaluating methods and assumptions, using evidence to support conclusions, and recognizing when further research is needed)
 - **Critique an argument** (critically evaluate the logic, evidence, and reasoning of a written argument)
- These skills reflect students' proficiency in **critical thinking, problem solving** and **written communication**.
- Through **real-world scenarios**, the CLA+ requires students to analyze information, weigh evidence, and craft reasoned arguments.
- The student completes a **90-minute supervised computer-based test** and then fills out a **background questionnaire**.

Data and methods



- Data
 - A total of **3,379** students participated in the study, including:
 - **2,450** ($n_{\text{UNI}}=336$; $n_{\text{UAS}}=2114$) entering Bachelor's students (1st year)
 - **882** ($n_{\text{UNI}}=78$; $n_{\text{UAS}}=804$) exiting Bachelor's (3rd year)
 - **47** ($n_{\text{UNI}}=35$; $n_{\text{UAS}}=12$) Master's students (5th year)
 - **382** ($n_{\text{UNI}}=26$; $n_{\text{UAS}}=356$) students in the longitudinal study
 - Participation rate **28%**.
 - **Register data:** students' ECTS credits, grades, study start date, and duration of enrollment.
- Methods
 - The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and regression models.
 - Survey weights were computed to adjust for sample bias.
 - To enable comparison between the KAPPAS1 and KAPPAS2 datasets, the equipercntile equating method was applied.



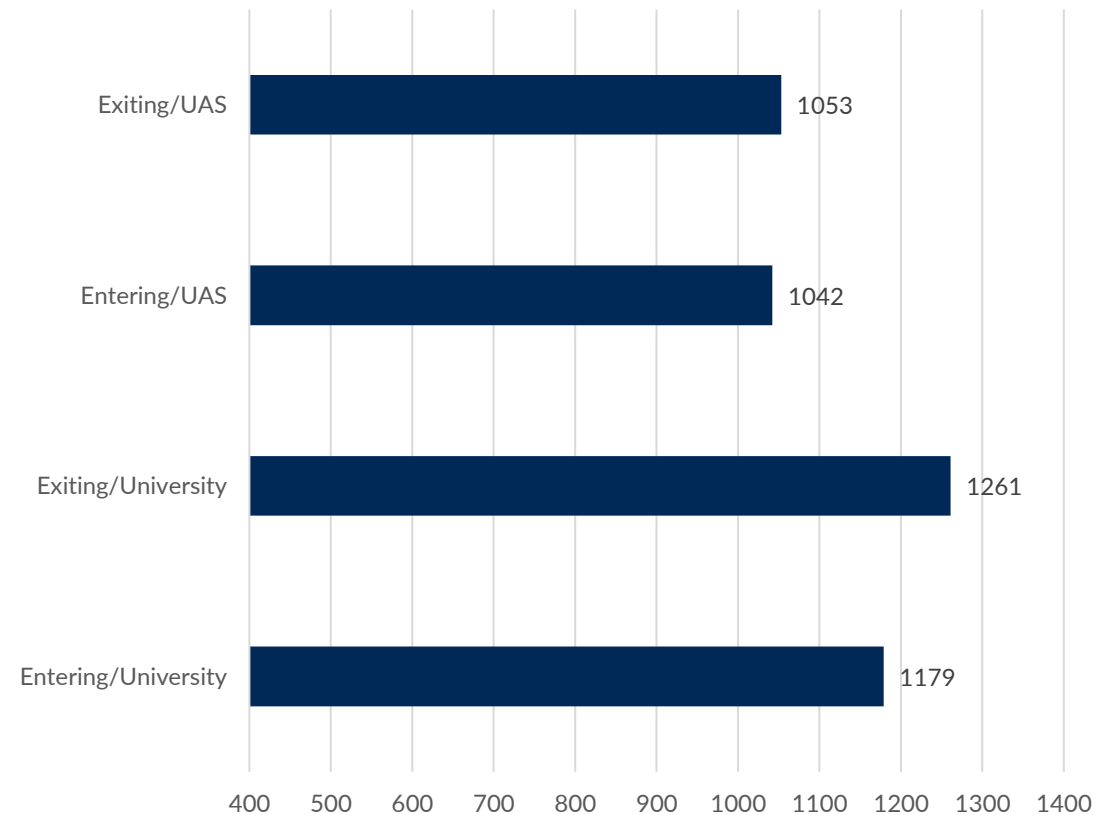
Key findings



CLA+ mean scores by type of HEI and study stage



- **University participants scored significantly higher than their UAS counterparts.**
- The difference was **137 points** in favor of entering university students and **208 points** in favor of exiting university students.
- **Among university students, the results of those at the final stage of their undergraduate studies were statistically significantly higher than those of entering students. No similar difference was observed among UAS students.**



Participants' mastery levels by type of HEI and study stage (%)



	Advanced	Accomplished	Proficient	Developing	Emerging
In total	6	18	32	26	18
Entering/UNI	9	26	41	19	6
Exiting/UNI	18	35	40	5	1
Entering/UAS	1	9	27	37	27
Exiting/UAS	1	13	26	31	28

- For 44% of the participants, generic skills were assessed at a developing or lower level, while the remaining participants demonstrated proficiency or higher-level performance.
- 25% of entering university students were at a developing level or below, but by the end of the undergraduate studies, only 6% remained at the lowest levels, and over 50% achieved the top two mastery levels.
- At entry, 64% of UAS students were at a developing level or below, and by the end of their undergraduate studies, 59% remained at these two lowest mastery levels.

Mastery levels in Finnish: emerging = **heikko**, developing = **tyydyttävä**, proficient = **hyvä**, accomplished = **kiitettävä**, advanced = **erinomainen**.

Comparison of Finnish and U.S. student performance



- When comparing Finnish students' generic skills with a U.S. reference sample, it was found that
 - **university students** at both the beginning and end of their bachelor's studies **performed clearly better than their U.S. counterparts at the same stage.**
 - among **UAS students**, **initial performance was at a similar level to U.S. students**, but by the **final stage their performance fell clearly below that of the U.S. reference group.**

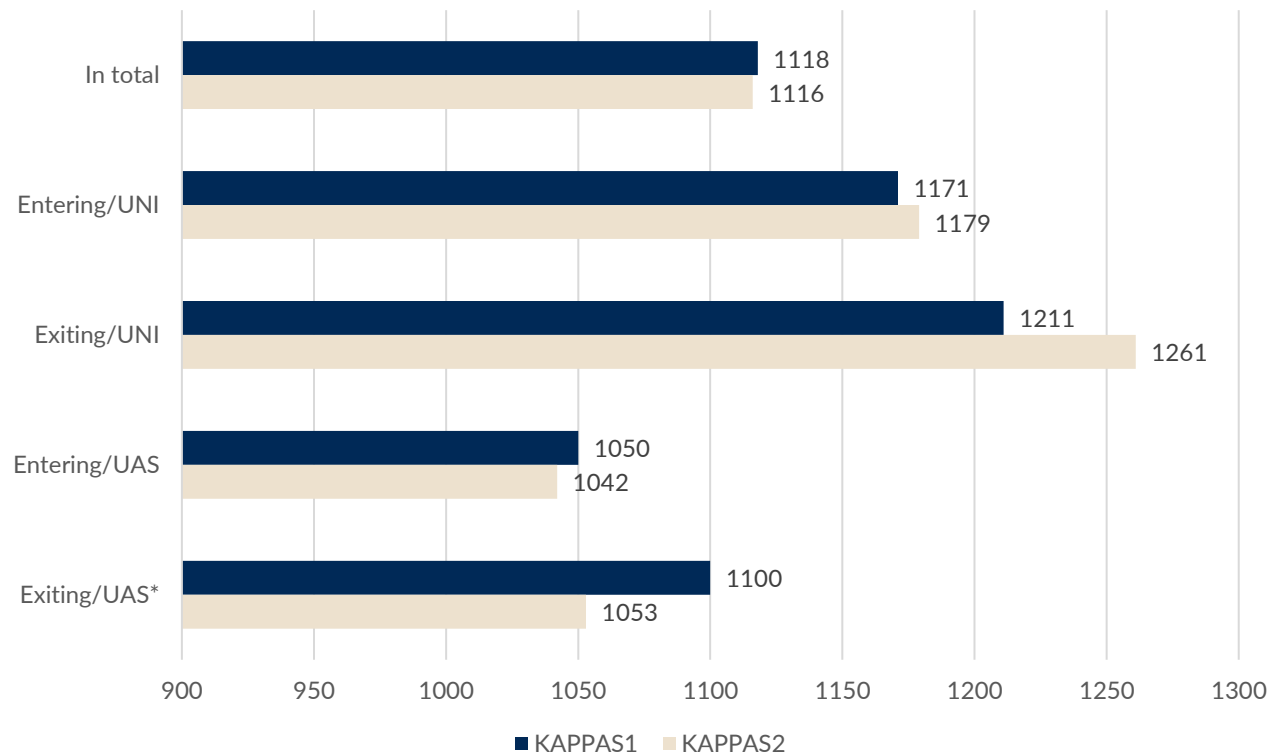
CLA+ mean scores by KAPPAS1 and KAPPAS2



Overall, there has been no change in the level of generic skills among higher education students in Finland between the KAPPAS studies.

No significant changes were observed in the generic skills of the initial-stage students in either higher education sector.

By contrast, the performance of the final-stage UAS students had declined, whereas the mean score of the final-stage university students showed a slight but non-significant increase.



*Statistically significant difference



Background variables and generic skills

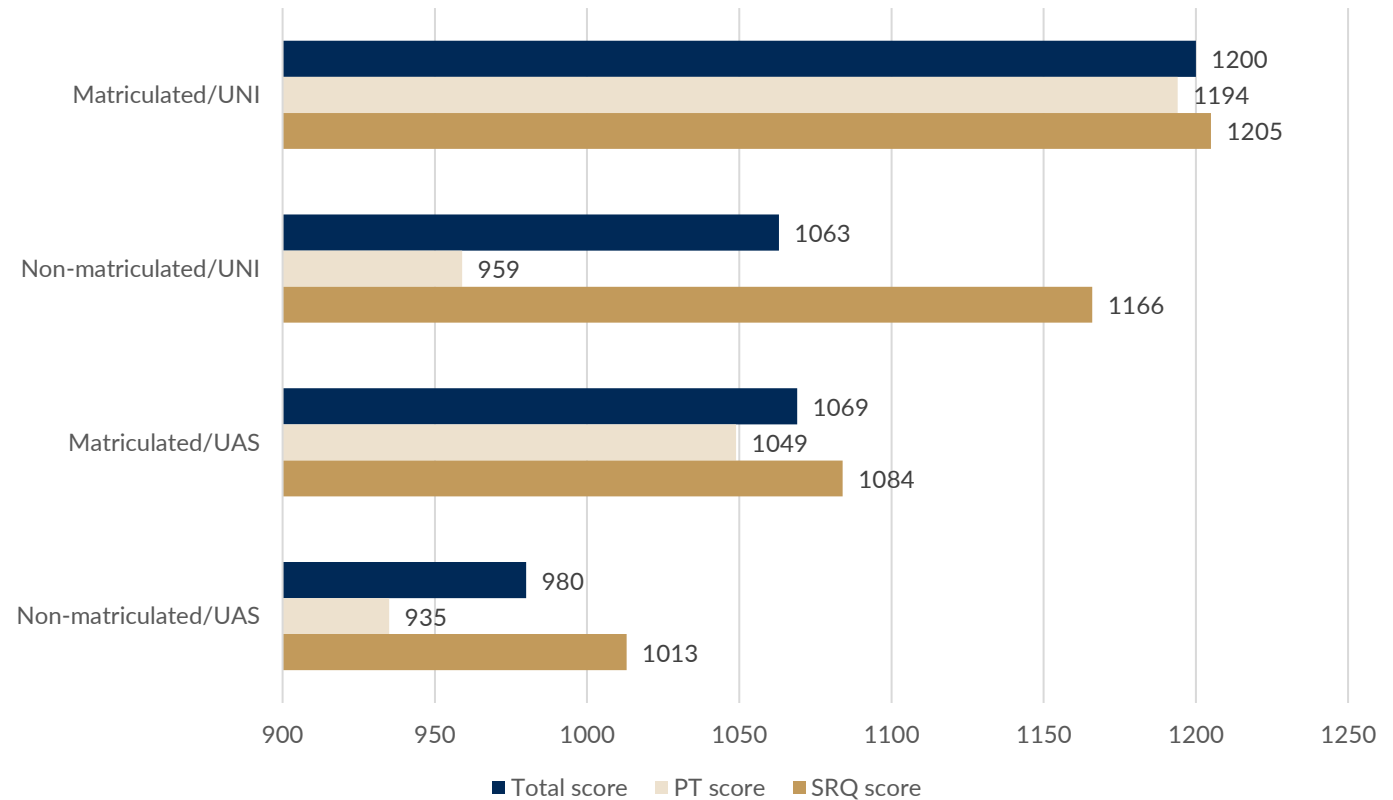
- The study examined, among other factors, how generic skills relate to field of study, gender, age, educational and socioeconomic background, test attitudes, mental well-being, sense of belonging, academic achievement, and study progression.



Matriculation examination and CLA+ mean scores



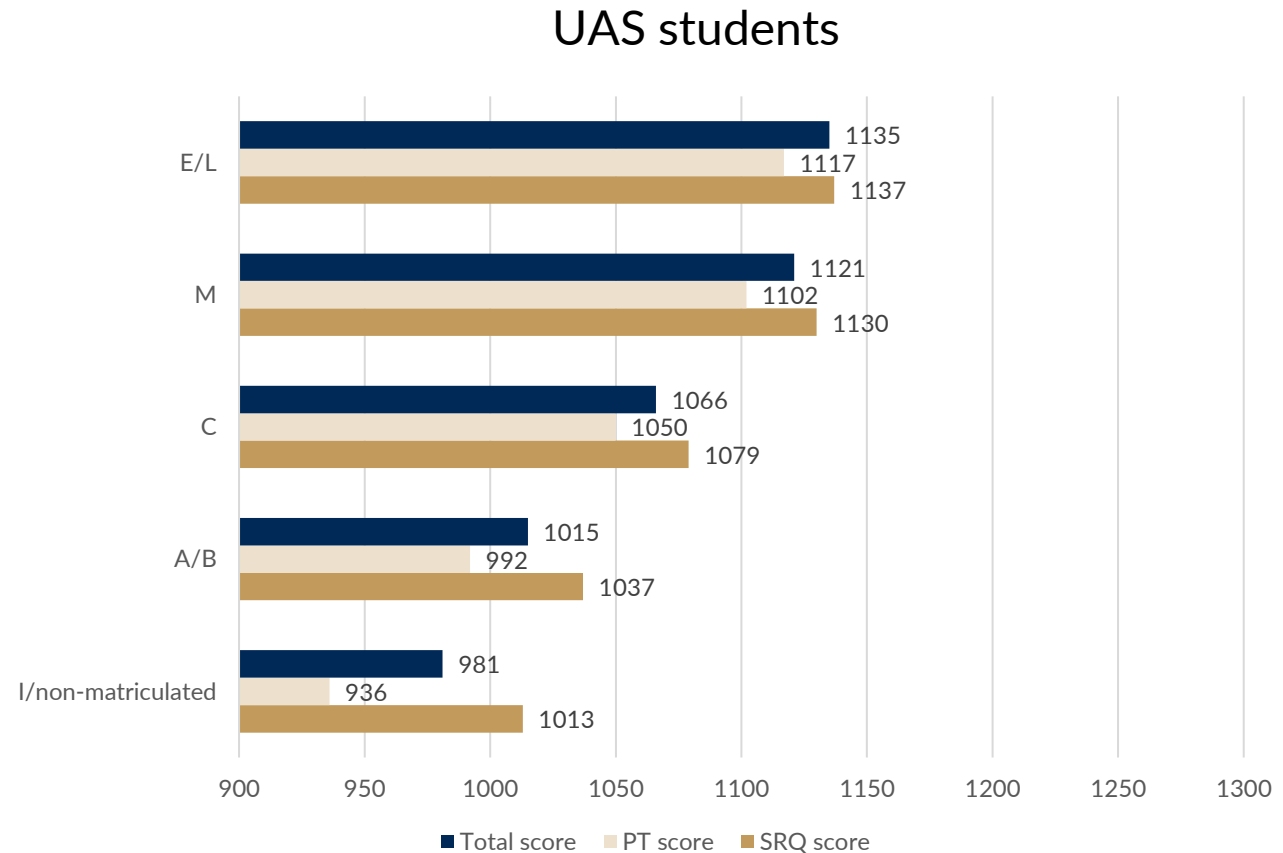
- Completing the matriculation examination was strongly associated with generic skills proficiency in both higher education sectors.
- In both sectors, students who had completed the matriculation examination scored higher than those who had not.
- Matriculation examination explained 5–8% of the variation in total scores.



Native language grade in matriculation examination and CLA+ mean scores



- CLA+ mean scores increase almost linearly with native language grades.
- University participants with the highest native language grade (L) score 108 points higher than those with the lowest grade (I).
- Among UAS participants, this difference is even larger: 154 points.
- The grade in the native language matriculation exam explained **15–18%** of the variation in total scores.

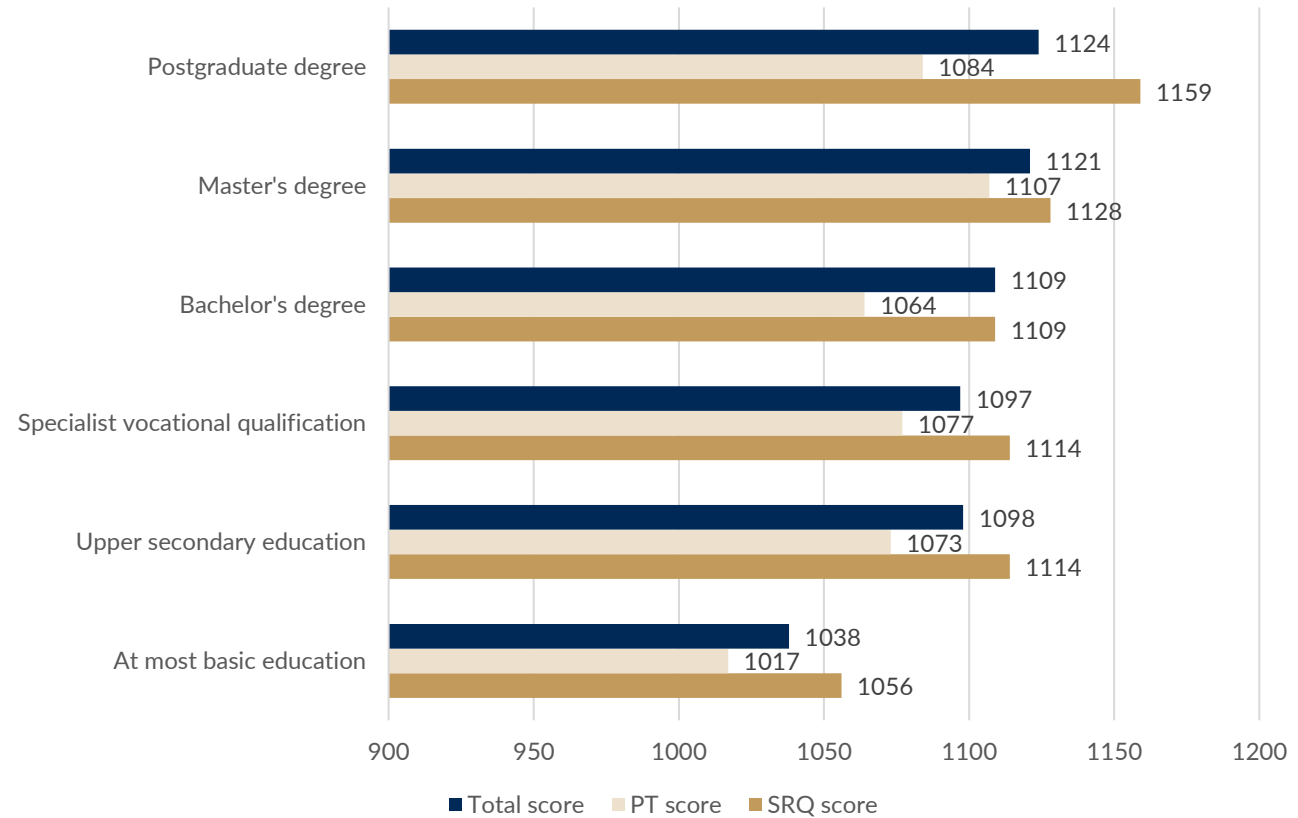


The **grades** in matriculation examination are (from highest to lowest): *laudatur* (L), *eximia cum laude approbatur* (E), *magna cum laude approbatur* (M), *cum laude approbatur* (C), *lubenter approbatur* (B), *approbatur* (A) and *improbatur* (I, failed test).

Parental education and CLA+ mean scores



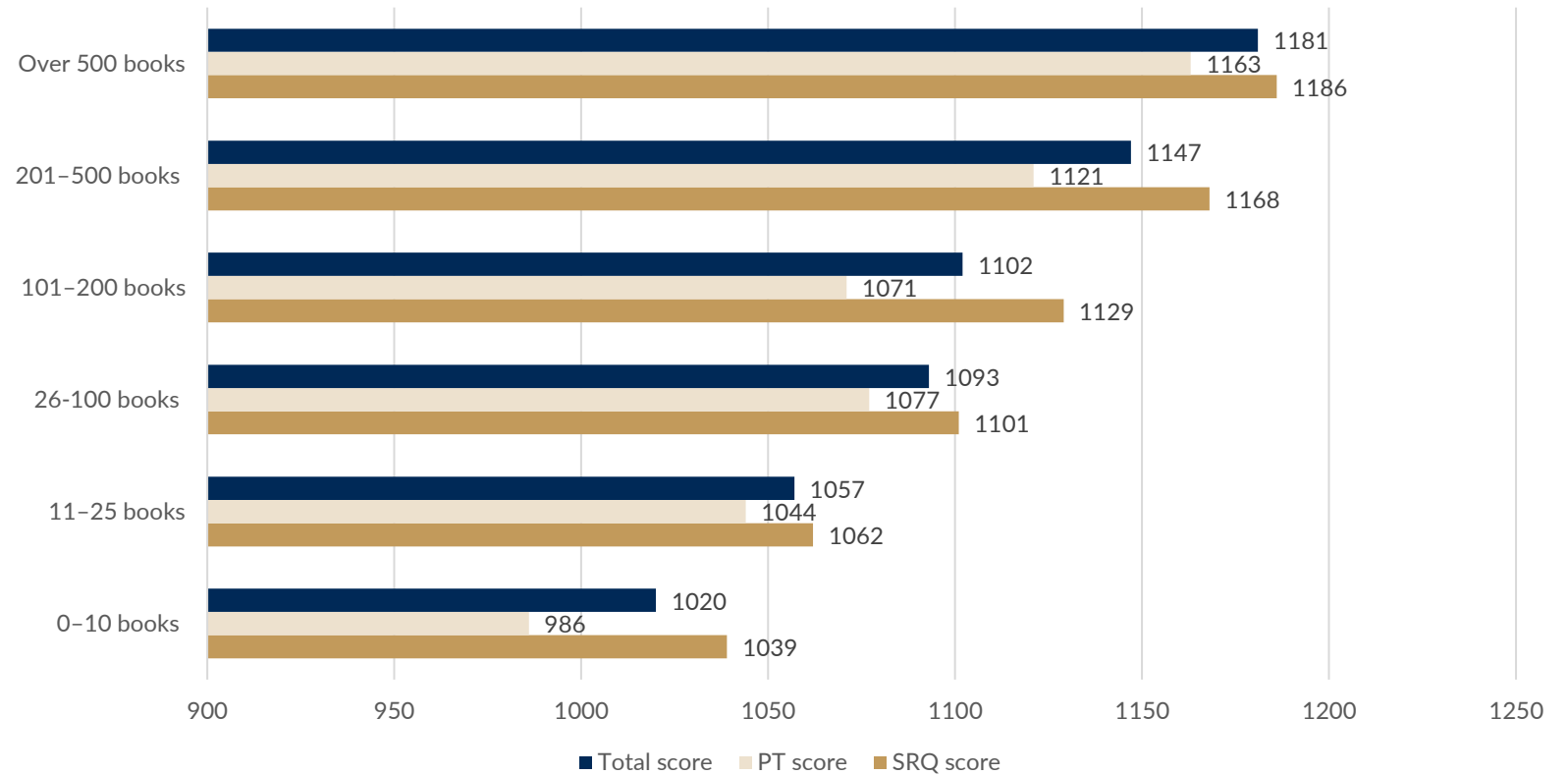
- Differences in total scores based on parental education were modest.
- Participants whose parents had completed only basic education scored lower than the other groups, although none of the differences were statistically significant.
- Parental education explained 2% of the variation in total scores.



Number of books at childhood home and CLA+ mean scores



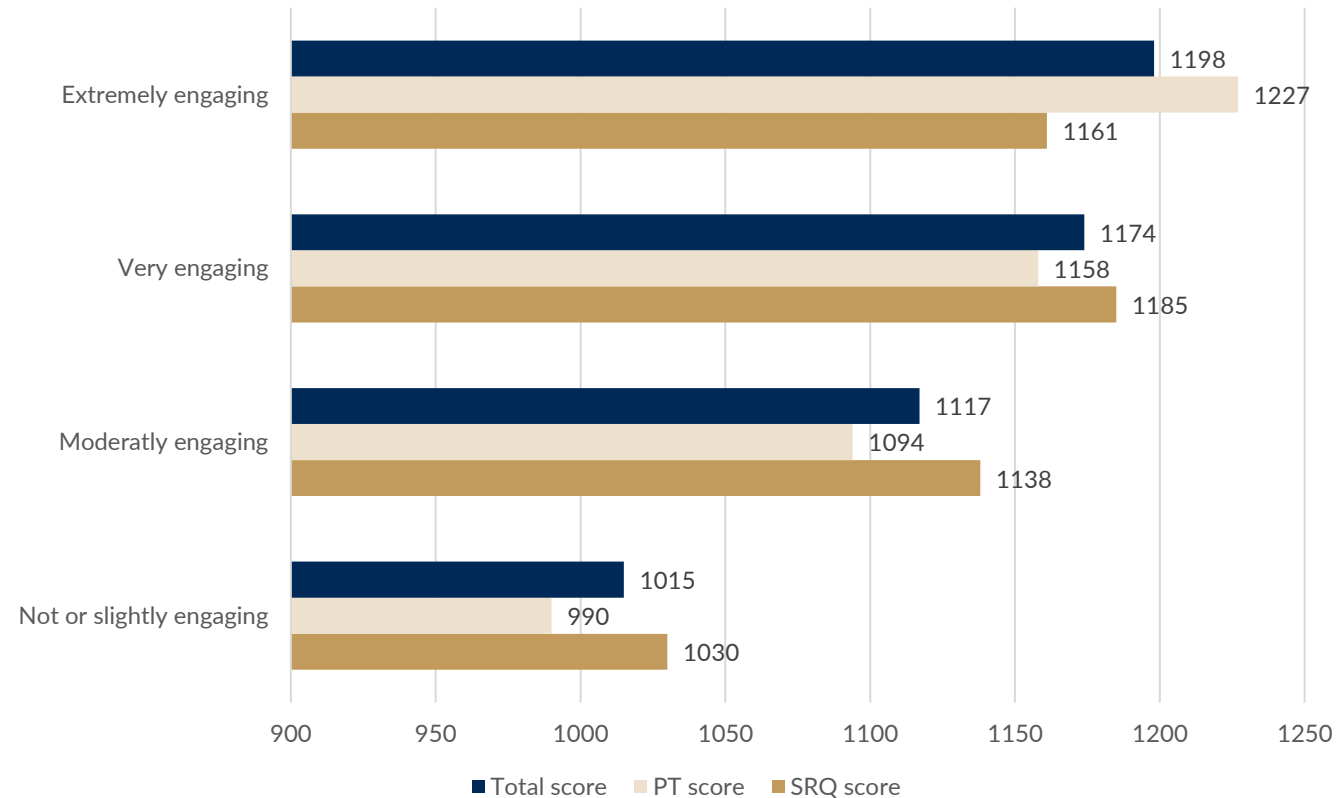
- Number of books at home serves as a proxy for childhood cultural capital.
- CLA+ mean scores increase linearly with number of books at childhood home.
- The difference between the two extremes—those who had the most books at home during childhood and those who had the fewest—was 161 points in total score.
- Number of books at childhood home explained 6% of the variation in total scores.



Engagement and CLA+ mean scores



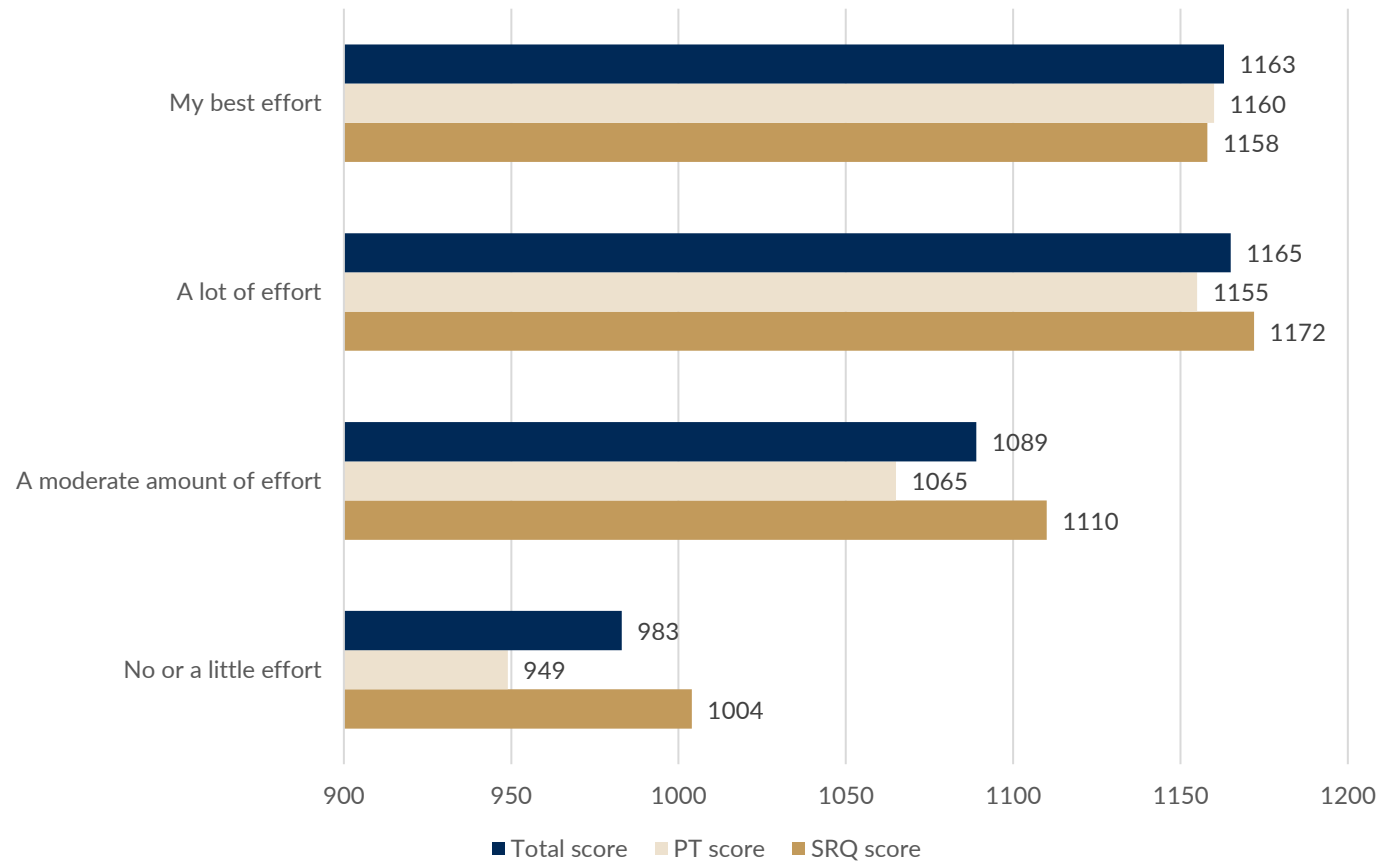
- The more engaging the test tasks were perceived to be, the higher the scores participants achieved.
- Participants who found the test extremely engaging scored **183 points** higher than those who found it not or slightly engaging.
- Engagement explained **14%** of the variation in total scores.



Effort and CLA+ mean scores



- **Effort** also had a strong and statistically significant association with the results, although the relationship was not entirely straightforward.
- Effort explained **12%** of the variation in total scores.
- **Note:** Among the participants who invested a high level of effort, 34% reached at least the “Accomplished” level in the CLA+ test, while only 9% remained at the “Emerging” level, compared with 24% and 18% in the full sample. **This suggests the full sample may somewhat overstate the weaknesses in Finnish HE students’ generic skills.**



Association between generic skills, academic performance, and study progress



- Academic performance (i.e., grades) and study progress (i.e., ECTS credit accumulation) were analyzed using partial correlations.
- **Generic skills were associated with higher grades**, although the relationship was weak ($r = -0.26$ to 0.28). Students who performed best on the CLA+ test tended to have slightly higher grades.
- **The association between study progress and generic skills was even weaker and often negative** ($r = -0.12$ to 0.03). Especially university students with strong generic skills had, on average, completed fewer ECTS credits.

Predictors of higher education students' generic skills



- Multiple regression analysis was conducted to examine the relationships between CLA+ scores of undergraduate students and background variables.
- The strongest explanatory factors, in order of importance, were:
 1. **Higher education sector (UNI vs. UAS)** ($p < 0,001$)
 2. **Effort in taking the test** ($p < 0,001$)
 3. **Native language grade in the matriculation examination** ($p < 0,001$)
 4. Matriculation examination ($p < 0,001$)
 5. Field of education ($p < 0,001$)
 6. Number of books at childhood home ($p < 0,01$)
 7. Engagement when taking the text ($p < 0,01$)
 8. Study stage ($p < 0,05$)
- These variables explained 50% of the variation in total scores, with the **first three accounting for 43%**.

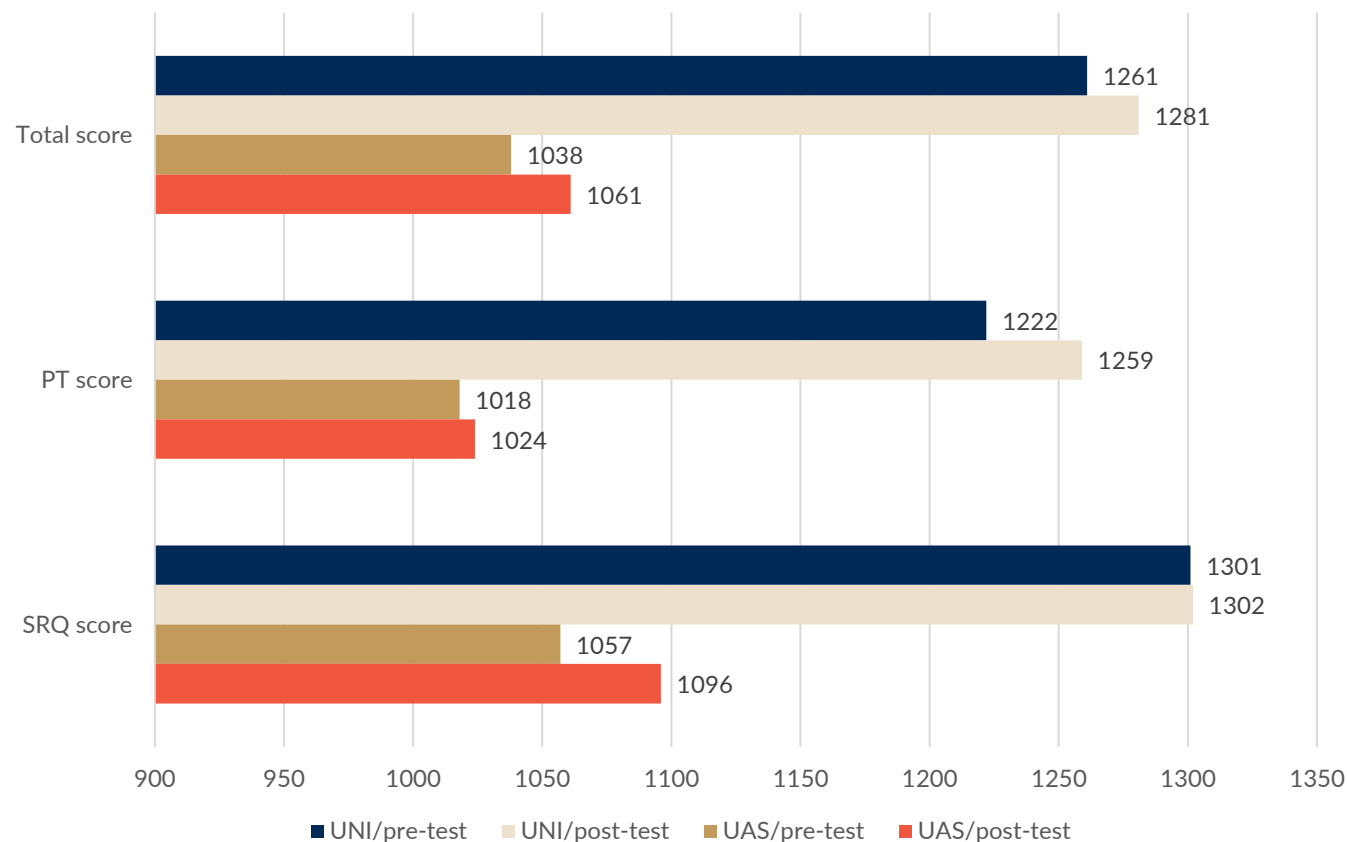
Development of generic skills during HE studies



Mean CLA+ scores of the participants in the longitudinal study by HE sector



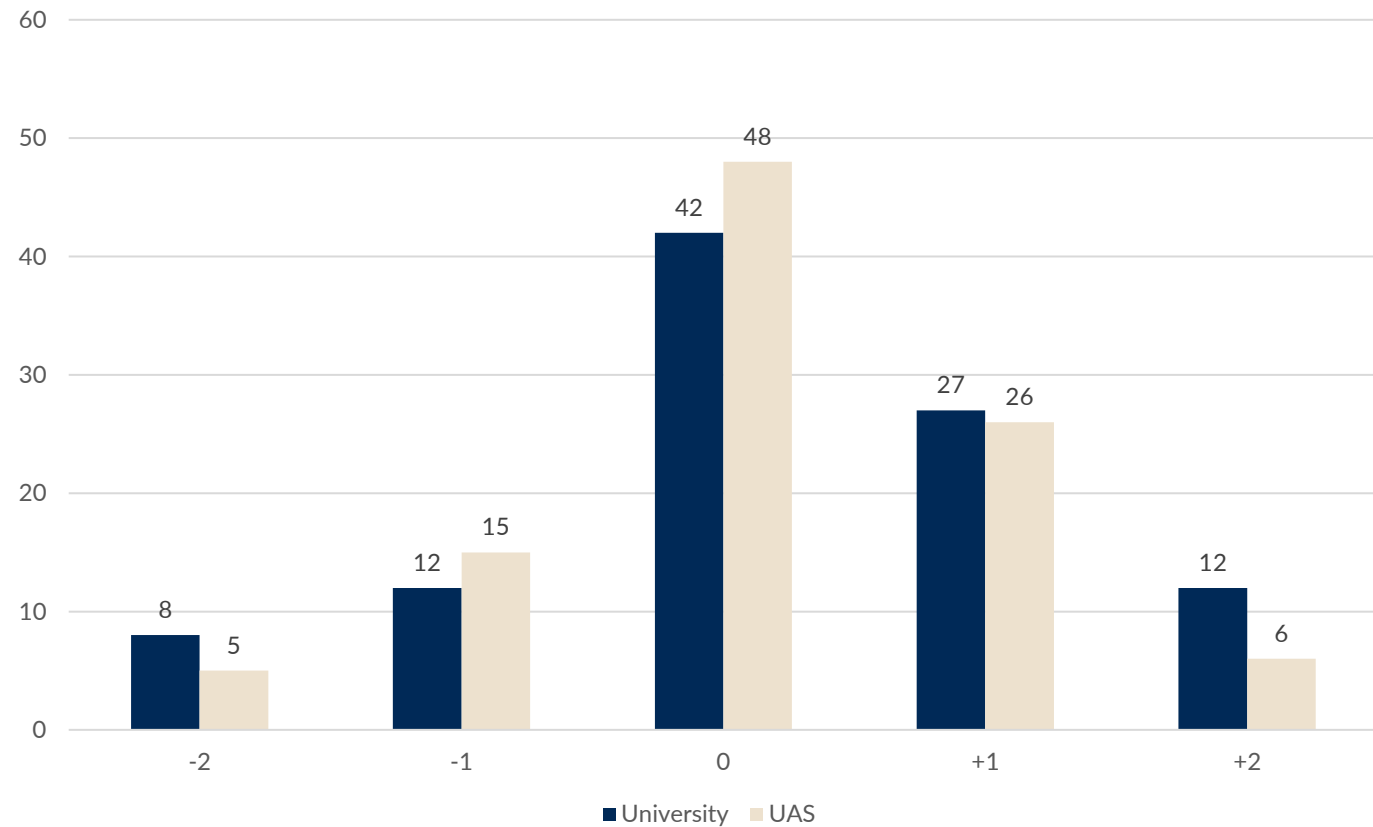
- The post-test results were generally higher than the pre-test results, **suggesting development of generic skills during the course of studies.**
- **Longitudinal study participants from universities performed clearly better than those who did not take part in the follow-up.** Lower-performing or less motivated students may have dropped out of the follow-up, biasing the sample toward those with stronger initial skills. This may explain the high-performance levels, but more modest development compared to the cross-sectional data.
- In the cross-sectional analysis, no statistically significant differences were found in generic skills between beginning and final-year **UASs students.** However, **the longitudinal data indicated a positive development in these skills over a two-year period.**



Changes in mastery levels among the participants in the longitudinal study by HE sector



- Although the longitudinal data indicate an average improvement in students' generic skills over the course of their studies, **the development varies across individuals.**
- Approximately **40% of students improved** their overall CLA+ score by at least 50 points, while **28% experienced a decline** of at least the same magnitude. For the remaining 31%, the change between pre- and post-measurements was less than 50 points.
- Overall, **20% of both university and UAS students showed a decline in performance** from the pre-test. In contrast, **performance improved for 39% of university students and 32% of UAS students.**



Recommendations

- Both KAPPAS projects have shown that four out of ten higher education students clearly need to improve their level of generic skills.
- While many demonstrate solid skills, the **overall proficiency gap remains significant** even at the end of undergraduate studies.
- Recommendations are:
 1. Generic skills should be strengthened throughout the entire educational trajectory, especially in upper secondary vocational education.
 2. The balance between learning quality and graduation speed should be reconsidered.
 3. Higher education institutions should adopt a pedagogically grounded, motivation-supporting approach to teaching generic skills.



Recommendation #1: Generic skills should be strengthened throughout the educational trajectory



- Upper secondary education appears to strengthen generic skills more than vocational education.
- This aligns with research showing differences between general and vocational pathways in learning content, opportunities, outcomes, and careers (Leino et al., 2019; Härkönen & Sirniö, 2020; Kleemola et al., 2023).
- **Ensuring generic skill development across all pathways is essential**, especially in vocational education, to prevent widening skill gaps.
- **Generic skills are crucial** not only for academic success but also for **critical citizenship and navigating everyday life**—allowing citizens to distinguish true from false information and reliable from unreliable sources.
- **Strengthening generic skills at all educational levels promotes equity** and ensures equal opportunities in studies, work, and life.

Recommendation #2: The balance between learning quality and graduation speed should be reconsidered



- The KAPPAS2 results highlight a complex link between study progress and achievement: while generic skills are associated with higher grades, **some students—particularly at universities—with strong generic skills progress more slowly than those with weaker skills.**
- One explanation is **that students who engage in deep learning may struggle with self-regulation and time management** (Tuononen et al., 2022). Although **their thorough approach supports strong grades, it can slow progress and reduce credit accumulation.** This aligns with earlier findings showing tensions between deep learning approaches and rapid study progression (Haarala-Muhonen et al., 2017).
- Another explanation reflects a broader tension in higher education: **students are expected to progress efficiently and graduate on time, yet high-quality learning and the development of generic skills require time and persistence.**
- The results call for **rethinking whether higher education should prioritize efficient progression or the deep development of students' competencies—and how to balance these goals.**

Recommendation #3: HEIs should adopt a pedagogically grounded, motivation-supporting approach to teaching generic skills



- The KAPPAS2 results indicate that the development of generic skills in higher education is uneven and varies considerably between individuals (cf. Arum & Roksa, 2011).
- This variation is influenced by background factors, particularly students' engagement and effort during assessments (Oppenheimer et al., 2016; Ursin et al., 2021; Hyytinen et al., 2024). **Differences may therefore reflect test motivation rather than actual skill levels.** At the same time, **motivation is central to skill development**, as generic skills emerge through active use and application (Culver et al., 2019), **making it a key prerequisite rather than merely a measurement issue.**
- **Current higher education practices support some students effectively but do not consistently engage all groups** in developing generic skills (Roksa et al., 2017; Tuononen et al., 2025). **For some students, development remains limited, highlighting the need for targeted support**—especially for those with weaker initial skills, lower motivation or self-regulation, or fewer opportunities due to socioeconomic background (Roksa et al., 2017; Kleemola et al., 2023).
- **Promoting generic skills requires a pedagogically designed, motivation-supporting approach.** This involves systematically developing teaching, learning, and assessment so that skills are practiced in a goal-oriented, repeated, visible, and meaningful way (El Soufi & See, 2019; Hyytinen et al., 2025). It also **requires pedagogical training for teachers**, as experience alone is often insufficient to develop effective teaching practices or pedagogical thinking (Tuononen et al., 2025).

Closing remarks



- Limitations of the data and generalizability
 - **The data is skewed toward UAS students**, with very few university participants among exiting bachelor's students and in the longitudinal study.
- Area for future research
 - An **intervention study** on generic skills is needed to identify and evaluate the most effective teaching and learning methods.
 - **Expanding the target group** from bachelor's and master's levels to doctoral level (cf. doctoral pilot) and international master's programs.



UEF | PEDA

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Publications from the KAPPAS Projects



Scientific articles

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Book sections

- Hyytinen, H., Kleemola, K., Ursin, J., & Toom, A. (2025). Kriittisen ajattelun tukeminen korkeakouluopetuksessa [Supporting critical thinking in higher education teaching]. In A. Parpala, & L. Postareff (Eds.), *Hyvinvoiva ja pedagogisesti osaava korkeakouluopettaja* [A well-being and pedagogically competent higher education teacher] (pp. 105-115). Vastapaino. <https://doi.org/10.58181/VP9789523972704>
- Ursin, J., & Hyytinen, H. (2022). Assessing the generic skills of undergraduate students in Finland. In D. Van Damme, & D. Zahner (Eds.), *Does Higher Education Teach Students to Think Critically?* (pp. 179–196). Paris: OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/cc9fa6aa-en>
- Zahner, D., Kleemola, K., Hyytinen, H., Ursin, J., & Cortellini, O. (2022). Ensuring cross-cultural reliability and validity. In D. Van Damme, & D. Zahner (Eds.), *Does Higher Education Teach Students to Think Critically?* (pp. 71–85). Paris: OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/cc9fa6aa-en>

Dissertations

- Kleemola, K. (2023). *Variation in novice students' critical thinking and argumentation: Transition to higher education is not a level playing field*. Helsingin yliopisto. <http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-951-51-8941-7>

Final reports

- Ursin, J., Hyytinen, H. & Silvennoinen, K., eds. (2021). *Korkeakouluopiskelijoiden geneeristen taitojen arviointi: Kappas!-hankkeen tuloksia*. Opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriö. Opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriön julkaisuja, 2021:6. <http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-952-263-892-2>
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Thank you to everyone who has been involved in the project!



Steering committee (former and current members)

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Over **3,300 students** participated in the study, along with **numerous staff members** who helped organize the tests at the HEIs.

Save the date!



- **Two webinars** with the same content will be organized to discuss the findings of the KAPPAS2 study and their implications for the development of teaching and learning of generic skills in higher education:
 - **August 25, 9:00–11:00** (in Finnish)
 - **September 15, 13:00–15:00** (in English)

