Matriculation exam vs. entrance exam

First-year English students' experiences on university admission

Marinella Smirnios
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As of 2020, approximately more than half of the new university students are chosen via certificate-based admission with points gained from the matriculation examination grades while the rest of the student population is admitted with a programme and subject-specific entrance exam. The aim of this thesis is to evaluate how the Finnish higher education admission reform of 2020 affected the student selection process to the English study track of the Bachelor's Programme in Languages offered in the University of Helsinki. This is done by studying how the English matriculation exam and the entrance exam into the English study track compare to one another, how the new English students themselves view the university admission process and the two exams, and finally, what types of skills are tested in the exams.

Both qualitative and quantitative data are used in the study. The English matriculation exam and the English entrance exam of spring 2021 are analysed systematically with qualitative content analysis. First-year English students' experiences surrounding the student selection and the two exams are explored with the help of a survey which collects both quantitative and qualitative information. The skills tested in the two exams are studied with close reading of the exams and with the student survey. Limitations such as the COVID-19 outbreak, and the student sample size are considered as well.

The results of this study show that the English matriculation exam and the English entrance exam share similarities as they are both language exams testing skills in English, but the main differences emerge from purposes for which the exams were created and their difficulty level. The results also show that the first-year English students consider the English matriculation exam to be easier than the English entrance exam, but the entrance exam prepares students better for university level English studies compared to the matriculation exam. In addition, both the exams test for different English skills both explicitly and implicitly.

Finally, it is also discussed how the English matriculation exam and the English entrance exam fit to the criteria of a functional entrance exam, how comparable the two exams truly are as entrance exams to the English study track, and how first-year student expectations of studying in the English study track can be met in the future.

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Table of contents

List of examples and figures

1   Introduction

Completing a higher education degree has become increasingly popular in Finland where universities have traditionally had a *numerus clausus* approach in their admission process with extensive subject-specific entrance exams (Ahola et al. 2014). In 2020, the yearly procedure with which new students are accepted into universities changed. As of that year, approximately more than half of the new university students are chosen via certificate-based admission with the points gained from the matriculation examination grades while the rest of the student population is still admitted with programme specific entrance exams. The main idea behind this higher education admission reform is to make the student selection process easier and less strenuous for both the applicants and the universities (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2021). The admission reform was agreed upon with the Ministry of Education and Culture and Finnish universities already in 2017, but its effects start to show only now when the admission reform is finally completed, and the new student admissions ways are being tested in practice.

The admission reform also affects new students applying for the English study track of the Bachelor's Programme in Languages in University of Helsinki (henceforth just the English study track), which previously selected its students with the combined points gained from the Matriculation Examination and the English entrance exam. Both the entrance exam and the required reading list for it were a useful way to familiarize future English students with the basic academic theories, terminology, and literature of their chosen field of study. With the recent admission reform, the Matriculation Examination completed at the end of upper secondary school, which includes the English matriculation exam, has taken precedence in student selections. In contrast to the entrance exam, the English matriculation exam is based on the completed upper secondary school curriculum and The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (The Matriculation Examination Board 2022).

Based on these new changes in university admissions as well as my own experiences in completing both the English matriculation exam and the English entrance exam in 2016, the initial assumption is that the two "entrance exams" are quite different from each other. Nevertheless, these exams are now used for a common purpose of testing and evaluating how well an applicant could perform in their English studies at university level. Thus,

with the admission reform being so recent, it is worth looking into the exams themselves, how they function as entrance exams, and the effect they might have in student selection. With this in mind, three research questions have been formulated to aid this study. They are:

1. How do the English matriculation exam and the entrance exam into the English study track compare to one another?
2. What types of skills are tested in the two exams?
3. How do the first-year English students themselves view the university admission process and the two exams?

After this introduction, I will elaborate on the theoretical background for my study in chapter 2 including themes such as student selection, features of a functional entrance exam and student satisfaction as well as the Finnish university system. In chapter 3 I justify my methodological choices and introduce the material and data I am analyzing in addition to ethical considerations and limitations. The focus of chapter 4 is on results and analysis where I aim to report my findings and answer the three research questions found above. Finally, in chapter 5 I will discuss whether the two exams have the features of a functional entrance exam, how comparable they are, and how student expectations can be met before concluding this thesis with a short summary of my findings and current research being done on the topic.

2   Background

The theoretical background of this thesis focuses on student selection for higher education, the nation specific context of the study, and on what competences a university entrance exam should ideally measure. In this chapter I will first describe the most often used ways of admitting new students into higher education and briefly evaluate their functionality (2.1) before moving on to introduce the specific context of this study, the Finnish university system (2.2), and the three ways a new student can gain admittance into a Finnish university (2.3). Finally, I also attempt to outline the features of a functional university entrance exam in the light of previous research and existing literature on the subject (2.4).

2.1 Student selection for higher education

Institutions of higher education such as universities have traditionally been the leaders of scientific and academic research that aims to advance society with new innovations (Stemler 2012). In addition, completing a higher education degree has favorable effects on the lives of individuals as well: a degree from a university enables students to develop skills that will help them to find employment upon graduation (Stemler 2012, 5), and thus to seek better socioeconomic status in a world that places increased value on higher education. Because of this, the number of people wanting and applying for a higher education degree is increasing and applicants are more heterogeneous than ever with differences in educational background, skills, and academic potential (Danilowicz-Gösele et al. 2017, 513). Yet it is obvious that every higher education institution wants the best possible students they can get as students that do well in their studies, for example, also influence the yearly international prestige a university can gain in QS World University Rankings as well as funding. This raises an important question for the institutions offering higher education: On what basis should they select their student population when it is impossible to accept all applicants?

Institutions offering higher education have answered this question with different admission procedures. The admission process to higher education often includes utilizing a predictor of students' future performance as well as possible additional factors targeted towards increasing the number of accepted candidates from different backgrounds (Mathioudakis et al. 2020). The prediction of future academic performance can be done in many ways prior, during or even after the admission process into higher education but it is important to note that the student admission process differs significantly from country to country. Yet most of the available research and literature is concentrated around Western academia, specifically the United States and Western Europe, which means that the admission types described next in this section are not all encompassing or necessarily even directly comparable with each other.

2.1.1 High school grades and GPA

Students are selected into higher education institutions based on their high school performance in many countries (Silva et al. 2020) and thus high school grades and grade point average (HSGPA) is one or if not the most studied student admission type

(Danilowicz-Gösele et al. 2017). Because of this, almost all literature on higher education students' academic performance at least somewhat examines the effect high school grades have on predicting success at university level (Danilowicz-Gösele et al. 2017, 515). There are a couple of explanations for this. First, studying grades and their point average is often much easier than studying other more vague or individual metrics as grades are carefully collected and stored (Sackett and Kuncel 2018, 18). Second, when considering graduation rates from colleges and universities as well as a student's final GPA in university, HSGPA is considered by some an even better predictor for graduating from higher education than scores from standardized tests (Bowen et al. 2018, 196; Sackett and Kuncel 2018) or final exams (Silva et al. 2020), which will be discussed in more detail later in section 2.1.2.

According to Bowen et al. (2018, 206), the reason behind high school grades (and HSGPA) being a powerful tool in predicting future academic success is simple: high school grades are an indicator of how well a student has mastered required course content in the past, and that a student consistently met a certain standard of grading criteria. High school grades also reveal how motivated a student is, whether they are likely to persist with a difficult task, and if they have good study habits and time management skills (Bowen et al. 2018, 206). Teacher given grades also promote a more in-depth student assessment as grading is often based on a variety of different assessment methods throughout a course (Silva et al. 2020, 450).

Even if high school grades are considered a good way of measuring future academic success in higher education, as an admission tool into higher education high school grades have faced critique on the grounds of teacher involvement (Hurwitz and Lee 2018; Silva et al. 2020) and internationalization of the student body in higher education institutions (Schwager et al. 2015). The main concern has been the potential inflation of good high school grades (Hurwitz and Lee 2018) if teachers are knowingly lax in their evaluation process so that their students could have a better chance at entering the higher education institution of their choice (Silva et al. 2020, 438). Furthermore, teacher given grades could be more prone to the evaluation of student characteristics, such as attendance and behavior in class, rather than actual academic success (Silva et al. 2020, 438). When adding the internationalization of higher education degree students to the mix with the variety of ways different countries evaluate their students, grades can often be difficult to compare across international applicants (Schwager et al. 2015, 71). Because of this,

higher education institutions need a cost-effective, fair, and valid method of evaluating applicants in order to admit the best candidates for their degree programmes (Shwager et al. 2015, 71). One viable option is to shift the focus from grades and GPA into final exams and standardized tests distributed at the end of high school or secondary education, which will be discussed in more detail next.

2.1.2 Final exams and standardized testing

In many countries students face final exams when graduating from high school or secondary education, and the performance in these final exams is evaluated in the admission process into higher education. The contents and structures of final exams vary internationally but the main differences can be narrowed down to whether the exams measure what a student has learned from all the completed courses of a school or a national curriculum, or a student's general aptitude in certain skills such as critical reading and analytical thinking. Final exams are usually national so that all students take the same set of final exams no matter which school they attend, and the exams are exclusively written for this very purpose of measuring a student's knowledge on different subjects before graduating high school or secondary education (Silva et al. 2020, 437). According to Silva et al. (2020), the reason behind national final exams being favored in many countries as a way to compare student performance is because "the exams are believed to represent a fair and comparable measure of students' knowledge and cognitive skills" (Silva et al. 2020, 442).

Some national final exams can be considered standardized tests when the final exam is the same for every student, and there is a set of criteria on which the evaluation and grading of these exams is done by independent authorities instead of individual teachers in every school. Standardized tests are used as a tool in many countries for measuring aptitude for future university studies, and thus they are administered at the end of the last year of high school or secondary education in preparation for the university application process (Mathioudakis et al. 2020). Research suggests that well-designed standardized tests offer high predictability of future academic performance in higher education (Sackett and Kuncel 2018, 15) because a high score on a standardized finals test indicates a high first year GPA (FYGPA) in a college or university as well (Shaw 2020, 43). In addition, standardized test scores before higher education can also somewhat predict academic direction students take in the future (Sackett and Kuncel 2018, 18). Students

with high test scores could have a tendency for applying to more demanding study fields and competitive universities, and even the area of skills a student excels in a standardized test can point towards the direction a student takes when entering higher education (Sackett and Kuncel 2018). In general, high scores on verbal and reading skills on a standardized tests such as the SAT (Scholastic Assessment Test) used in the United States are more strongly associated with choosing majors such as English and journalism, while students with high mathematic skills are more likely to choose a major from one of the STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) fields (Sackett and Kuncel 2018, 18).

Using the scores of national final exams or standardized tests to evaluate a student's suitability into higher education has its weaknesses as well. Even though evaluating the performance of students in a final exam does allow easy comparison between higher education applicants, it can also reinforce existing inequalities between students (Silva et al. 2020, 438). As the student body in high schools or secondary education is not homogenous, and thus the scores of a single final exam or standardized test can disadvantage lower-scoring students during the higher education admissions processes (Hurwitz and Lee 2018; Shaw 2018). In addition, distributing these types of exams once a year relies on a single observation in time which makes the exams more vulnerable to external effects (Silva et al. 2020, 438) such as a global pandemic, if current events are taken into consideration, or simply the pressure to perform well in a high stakes exam that might just dictate the direction of a student's future.

2.1.3 Entrance exams

High school grades and final exams are often the main way of admitting students into higher education institutes, but in some instances students need to take additional entrance exams into these institutions to provide more information about themselves during the admission process. The types of entrance exams vary in different countries and higher education institutions from university specific (i.e., auditions or similar processes for Schools of Arts) to subject specific (i.e., law, medicine, or teacher training) exams across different universities (Mountford-Zimdars 2016, 65). In some cases, additional entrance exams offer the opportunity for students to show untrained potential for a specific subject regardless of previous education and grades (Mountford-Zimdars 2016, 66). Utilizing entrance exams in higher education student admissions is also helpful when considering

international students as these tests provide comparable information when prior examinations possibly do not (Mountford-Zimdars 2016, 65).

Subject specific entrance exams are tailored to measure a student's potential as well as to demonstrate aptitude for specific academic fields (Mountford-Zimdars 2016, 67). In addition to these more traditional pen and paper entrance exams, curriculum-sampling entrance exams have been researched and implemented in some countries. Curriculum-sampling tests as entrance exams are tests which "mimic behavior that is expected during an academic study [..] and parts of the academic programme that a student is applying to" (Niessen et al. 2018, 1-2). This would entail the entrance exam to be based on a domain-specific introductory course or literature so that the applicant gets an idea what is expected of them on admission. Niessen et al. (2018) consider curriculum-sampling entrance exams to be valuable tools in admission procedures as they have predictive validity for future academic achievement. Students admitted with a curriculum-sample exam have, for example, higher grades in their study programmes, complete their studies faster, and drop out less often compared to students who are admitted with more traditional options e.g., high school GPA or even through matriculation examination (Niessen et al. 2018, 3) which will be discussed in more detail later in 2.3.

Niessen et al. (2018, 3) explain that participating in curriculum-sampling admission processes such as introductory courses has been both voluntary and only an additional way of gaining admittance into higher education with the traditional routes still being predominant. Curriculum-sampling entrance exams being optional brings the importance of an applicant's self-motivation and self-selection to the discussion. Applicants with high motivation to study in their chosen field could be more likely choose to participate in a more demanding curriculum-sampling admission in the first place to test their suitability for the programme even before enrolment (Niessen et al. 2018, 3; 15), which then explains the positive effects of this type of entrance exam discussed above. Yet with motivation and possible self-selection playing such a big part in curriculum-sampling entrance exams, it cannot be unanimously concluded that this admission type is best suited for every situation. For example, Niessen et al. (2018), 16) do note that more research in different study fields is needed as their results on the topic stem from a single university, and theory-heavy degree programmes instead of fields that favor different skills such as creativity, communication, or ethical reasoning.

2.2   The Finnish university system

The Finnish basic education system and its students are generally regarded as highly successful, even internationally, as Finland is consistently found at the top of Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) rankings. The good quality of students continues even in higher education which is the result of a gradual structural change as the higher education system in Finland was one the first in the world to change its approach from elitism to state funded and governed mass higher education (Kosunen, 2018).

The Finnish higher education system is currently divided into universities of applied sciences and traditional universities which focus on academic research. Universities offer bachelor's and master's degrees in different study programmes in addition to academic, artistic and third-cycle postgraduate degrees depending on the university (Ministry of Education and Culture 2021a). Finnish universities are independent legal institutions that have the right to make independent decisions on matters related to their internal administration as well as the criteria for student admissions, but the objectives of different university degrees as well as the structure of studies and other criteria are issued by government decree (Ministry of Education and Culture 2021a).

Finnish universities have a three-cycle degree system (Studyinfo 2021). Students first complete a bachelor's degree or corresponding studies, after which they can move on to complete their master's degree and later to a doctoral programme if they so wish. In most cases students that are admitted to a bachelor's degree have an automatic right to complete a corresponding master's degree in the same university. The general extent of the bachelor's level degree is 180 ECTS credits and it takes approximately three years to finish one's studies. The Master's degree is an additional 120 ECTS credits and two years of studying amounting to a total of five years of full-time studies.

2.3   Gaining admittance to a Finnish university

With the rapid growth of emphasis and expansion of higher education, there have been some changes which affect Finnish universities and their admission process as well. For example, the academic level of university students is much more varied and there are considerable differences in the admission rates between different universities and study programmes (Isopahkala-Bouret et al. 2018, 144). According to the Ministry of Education

and Culture (2021a), "In the [higher education] application process, applicants may be divided into separate applicant categories on the basis of their different educational backgrounds". This is the result of a gradual historical shift from *numerus apertus* to *numerus clausus*. Ahola et al. (2014) explain the difference between these two as such: *numerus apertus* signifies the "open access" era in the early 1900's when university admissions were for the elite who had simply completed the matriculation examination while *numerus clausus* with extensive entrance exams for each field and university was taken into use during the 1960's due to uncontrollable expansion of secondary education and students graduating from secondary education.

Isopahkala-Bouret et al. (2018) note that the quality of education can be considered a factor in the selectivity of academic degree programmes in higher education, and this applies to Finnish universities as well. Nori (2011, 12) suggests that being accepted into an institution of higher education in Finland can be considered a two-step process: the possible new student is firstly selected as an overall suitable applicant for higher education via eligibility requirements, such as completing the matriculation examination, and secondly as an applicant for a university. In the first step the new university applicants go through a process of "self-selection", during which they evaluate their future prospects and abilities for studying in a university (Nori 2011, 12). This happens even before filling out an official application form in Studyinfo during the joint application process taking place every spring. After officially applying into university, the admission services in universities further eliminate the applicants with preselected admission requirements and entrance exams as is customary in the *numerus clausus* system (Nori 2011, 12).

Now in the era of *numerus clausus* after the admission reform of 2020, there are three different yet sometimes overlapping ways of gaining admission into a Finnish university: with points gained from the matriculation examination, a subject-specific entrance exam, and through previous studies in open university. Next, I will briefly introduce each of these options.

2.3.1 The Matriculation Examination

The matriculation examination has always had a close relationship with university admissions in Finland. The aim of the early matriculation examination was to guarantee the academic quality of future university students (Nori 2011, 14). The matriculation

examination was arranged for the first time in 1852 when the purpose of the exam was to show evidence of previous education and a sufficient knowledge of Latin, and it also functioned as an entrance exam into the University of Helsinki (The Matriculation Examination Board, 2021). The matriculation examination was also tied to the syllabi of upper secondary schools the same year, but the responsibility of organizing the matriculation examination did not fall to upper secondary schools before 1874 (The Matriculation Examination Board, 2021).

The matriculation examination took its place as the final examination of upper secondary school in 1919, and until that same year the matriculation examination was used as the only way to admit new students into university (Ahola et al. 2014, 36). Because of the increased number of university applicants and practical issues in organizing numerous matriculation exams, it was decreed that from then onwards the matriculation exam would function only as a final exam before graduating secondary school so that the system would not overload (Nori 2011, 18). Completing the matriculation examination in addition to an entrance exam made the applicant eligible for a university degree. In the 1930's the elimination process of university applicants was mainly based on the matriculation examination scores, but some faculties did already use an entrance exam as the only way to gain admission (Nori 2011, 19). By the end of 1960's, entrance exams became the norm in all university admissions due to expansion and massification of universities in Finland (Ahola et al. 2014, 36).

Today completing the matriculation examination is still one if not the most important prerequisite factor in university admissions as, for example, in 2014 two thirds of new university students had completed the exam shortly before applying to higher education (Ahola et al. 2014, 37). The increasing number of completed matriculation examinations has caused a phenomenon named matriculation backlog. Ahola et al. (2014, 37) explain this phenomenon as "applicants of higher education tend to pile up in growing numbers due to the discrepancy between the number of applicants and the number of places in higher education". This phenomenon could become an even bigger problem for Finnish higher education especially now that secondary education has become mandatory for everyone under the age of 18, yet higher education institutions obviously cannot accept every student that wishes to continue their education in a university.

Universities and the Ministry of Education and Culture have tried to mitigate this problem of matriculation backlog and over-extensive entrance exams to universities in various ways over the last couple of years. As mentioned already in the introduction, one of the ways was an admission reform that was agreed upon with the Ministry of Education and Culture and Finnish universities to make the admission process to higher education easier to the applicants. This reform included making the time needed to prepare for the admissions shorter as well as making the entrance exams less strenuous for the students applying to higher education immediately after the matriculation examination (Ministry of Education and Culture 2021b). In addition, since 2020 more than half of the new student places have been filled through certificate-based admission with the points earned from the matriculation examination (Ministry of Education and Culture 2021b).

Now that completing higher education is even more important for future employment, and the number of applicants is higher than ever, it is quite interesting that there has been a shift back to using only the matriculation examination as an admission way to university. Placing increased emphasis on certificate-based admission to universities can be in a sense seen as a hybrid form of the *numerus apertus*/*numerus clausus* systems. As was customary with *numerus apertus*, the "elite" gain admission to university, but this time around with a twist: the "elite" consists of top-performing students with high grades who are still in competition with each other for a place in higher education as is customary to the *numerus clausus* system.

2.3.2 Entrance exams

The two main differences between university entrance exams before and after the admission reform of 2020 are the preparation process for the exam and how the scores of an entrance exam are used in the admission process. First, before the reform of higher education student admissions, most of the entrance exams could be categorized as traditional subject-specific exams with preselected literature associated with the academic field being used as preparatory reading material. Because of this, many graduating upper secondary school students were required to begin reading the material for a university entrance exam immediately after completing the matriculation examination the same spring which often led to fatigue. This also created thriving preparatory-course companies offering private and often costly tutoring before the entrance exams (Kosunen, 2018) with almost one in four university students having taken a private preparatory course before

the university entrance exam (Ministry of Education and Culture 2022). This can even be seen as a problem at a constitutional level. The Ministry of Education and Culture explain in their answers in a FAQ section about the higher education admission reforms how "Under the Constitution of Finland, everyone has an equal opportunity to receive other educational services besides comprehensive school education [...] without being prevented by economic hardship" (Ministry of Education and Culture 2022).

Second, admission into higher education is no longer based on the combined scores of the matriculation exams and the subject-specific entrance exam as was done before the admission reform (Ministry of Education and Culture 2021b). Instead, if an applicant is not eligible through the certificate-based admission process, then only the entrance exam is taken into consideration. Because of this, the entrance exams have been made less strenuous with universities either reducing the required reading material or completely removing the need for it (Ministry of Education and Culture 2021b). In some instances, entrance exams are developed towards being a continuum of the matriculation examination as some fields have chosen to test for general knowledge acquired from the general upper secondary school syllabus (Ministry of Education and Culture 2021b). This in turn means that students who have completed the matriculation examination have a good basis already in place for succeeding in an entrance exam.

Despite certificate-based admission with the matriculation examination gaining importance in the university admission process after the student admission reform, entrance exams have not disappeared. Subject-specific entrance exams are still widely used in every university as almost half of the student body is admitted with an exam as per custom with the *numerus clausus* system. The key development is that it is encouraged that the entrance exams should slowly be developed towards tests that can be used in several fields, which in practice means that an applicant takes one test to apply for several study fields, or tests that are used jointly by many universities for the same study field (Ministry of Education and Culture 2022).

2.3.3 Open university route

In addition to degree programmes, Finnish universities offer the option of studying in an open university. An open university follows the main university's own syllabus and enables individuals to study university-level courses (either from bachelor's or master's

programmes) no matter their age or education, provided they can pay the required tuition fees (see e.g., Studyinfo or Open University of Helsinki for more information). Open universities promote lifelong learning and offer a glimpse into what types of study contents university degree programmes have to offer, but studies completed in an open university do not lead to qualification (Studyinfo, 2021). The reason for this is that studies in an open university, even though they follow the syllabus of a university, are not considered as official full-time studies.

Despite open university studies not leading to qualification, it is also possible to gain admission into a full-time university degree programme after completing specific studies beforehand in an open university. Admission criteria and quota vary, and this option is not available with every subject, degree, or university, but usually admission is based on the amount of completed basic subject-specific studies and the grades of these studies (Studies Service, University of Helsinki 2022). The vacant places reserved for the open university route are usually very limited, and only a handful of students gain admittance through open university studies as students still need to apply for these places separately in the joint higher education application process (Studies Service, University of Helsinki 2022).

Using open university studies as an option for degree student admissions has opened a doorway to develop innovative ways of using these studies in a university admission process. A relevant example of this innovation is using a subject-specific introductory course as a curriculum-sampling entrance exam (see 2.1.3. in this thesis or Niessen et al. 2018) as a part of the application process into selected university degree programmes. In the context of Finnish open universities, some examples of these subject-specific introductory courses are the University of Helsinki's Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) version of the introductory programming course in the Bachelor's Programme in Computer Science and an online introductory course to Social Sciences utilized by the Universities of Helsinki (University of Helsinki 2022b). The MOOC course of the Bachelor's Programme in Computer Science has proven to be an especially effective curriculum-sampling entrance exam. Students admitted through the introductory course perform better in their studies when completed credits and GPA are taken into consideration, and the retention rate of students is better compared to those admitted through the traditional way (Leinonen et al. 2019).

2.4   Features of a functional university entrance exam

As already discussed in the beginning of this chapter, institutions of higher education have a positive effect on society in general. It can also be argued that their primary function is to develop student expertise in two important areas (Stemler 2012, 5-7): domain-specific knowledge and domain-general abilities. Domain-specific knowledge or the mastery of a certain field is generally achieved through completing a degree with substantial number of courses in a university while domain-general abilities (e.g., cognitive skills, critical thinking, and ethical reasoning) develop over time while studying, as students need to have a minimum level of competence before they can begin implementing domain-general abilities in earnest (Stemler 2012, 7).

The focus higher education institutions place on domain-specific knowledge and domain-general abilities offers a way to observe the functionality of an entrance exam through the lens of how a single test can predict future achievement in these two areas. When discussing which type of admission procedure should be favored with a specific field in mind, it should be considered whether institutions care more about the gains of the mentioned skills over time, or the absolute levels of the skill that the students should graduate with (Stemler 2012, 9). With this in mind, Stemler (2012) argues that there are three major areas that should ideally be measured when admitting new students into universities: 1) aptitude, 2) ability, and 3) achievement.

Aptitude focuses on a student's future and in a sense "natural" potential regardless of past achievements or abilities, and it can be divided into domain-specific or domain-general aptitude (Stemler 2012, 11). Domain-specific aptitude would entail, for example, natural inclination towards musicality while domain-general aptitude in contrast would mean a student is a fast learner in general. Measuring aptitude in a university entrance exam can be somewhat difficult as an individual's natural potential can be seen in various ways and not necessarily with only one exam or a section in an exam. One way to test aptitude would be through dynamic testing which is based on an interaction between the test administrator and the student, in which a series of hints are given to the student until the item is answered correctly if they cannot answer it correctly on the first try (Stemler 2012, 11). Unfortunately, this type of testing simply does not function well in a large-scale

admission process into higher education as they are based on individual administration, and thus are very time consuming for everyone involved (Stemler 2012, 11).

Ability refers to a student's skills and proficiency on a specific subject at present moment regardless of if they have been acquired through formal education or not (Stemler 2012, 11). It is believed that underlying cognitive abilities are the best predictors of who will excel in academia (Kuncel and Hezlett 2010, 339) as well as acquiring domain-specific knowledge and domain-general abilities, and the testing for these abilities is achieved through ability-based measurement which includes questions that are evaluated with objective criteria for correct and incorrect responses (Stemler 2012, 12). In addition, using ability-based measurements in entrance exams tend to be more predictive of future performance compared to more general skills, and thus evaluating knowledge or ability in the specific subject an applicant wishes to study in university yields the best results (Kuncel and Hezlett 2010, 340).

Achievement is viewed through demonstrated competence in a specific subject after formal education i.e., there is tangible proof of some kind that a student has gained previous credentials in something (Stemler 2012, 11). Achievement can be measured with a test of achievement that usually tests knowledge as well as how well a student performs within specific environmental and temporal constraints (Stemler 2012, 13). It is this performance which is "captured in finite time [that] yields an achievement (or product) of some sort [and] is then judged and evaluated" (Stemler 2012, 13). National final exams are a good example of an achievement test that measures competence in a specific subject, and thus it may be viable to combine previous scores of a final exam with an ability-based entrance exam to create a balanced and predictive way of measuring future academic success during the admission process into higher education, even though aptitude, ability, and achievement cannot be measured with only one specific exam.

2.5   Student satisfaction surveys at the University of Helsinki

The experiences of studying in higher education in general and the wellbeing of students matter to institutions of higher education. As the student population is usually large in these institutions, it is impossible to chart every student's opinion or delve deep into individual experiences. Because of this, digital student surveys distributed to either small sample populations or even nationally have become an important tool in measuring

student satisfaction within their studies, whether some changes are needed in different areas related to higher education and student life as well as to develop the quality of teaching.

As the contextual background of this study is the English study track in the Bachelor's Programme in Languages at the University of Helsinki, it is worth to briefly introduce some of the student surveys that have been distributed to the English students. The digital surveys or questionnaires can be divided into three survey types depending on their purpose and who conducts them. The first type of survey is a nation-wide survey for all students studying for a bachelor's or master's degree in Finland such as the Student Barometer by Research Foundation for Studies and Education Otus. The Student Barometer is an extensive survey which gathers information on students' experiences of their studies, student life and their current everyday life. The aim of the Student Barometer is to develop, for example, the wellbeing of students, student activities, internships during higher education, and educational institutions (Research Foundation for Studies and Education Otus 2022).

The second type of survey is more specific as it is conducted and distributed by the student organization for English students (SUB ry) at the University of Helsinki. The surveys conducted by SUB ry focus on the students' experiences, and information is gathered on basic, intermediate, and advanced courses. This is done in order to develop the quality of teaching and pin-point possible issues when reforms are made within the study degrees at university level.

The third type of survey is the HowULearn questionnaire distributed by UniHow for the University of Helsinki. This survey is given to the students four times during their studies, and it gathers information regarding "students' engagement, wellbeing and experiences on the teaching and learning environment in a study programme" (UniHow 2022). In addition, students themselves receive the results of these questionnaires and information on their study methods as well as study tips for the future.

All the surveys introduced above have one thing in common: they gather information about students' experiences after being admitted into a university. While this information is very valuable, one should think that so are the student experiences during the application and admission process into universities. Yet surveys directed to students in

higher education seldom touch upon this subject, even though this type of information would help develop the admission process even further. Because of this, there is a gap in research that this study aims to begin filling at least a little by actually asking the students themselves what they think about the admission process into the English study track.

3   Materials and methods

As mentioned already in the introduction of this thesis, the aim of this study is to compare the English matriculation exam and the English university exam with each other as well as to explore the experiences of the student selection process from the point of view of students who already have been admitted into the English study track. The three research questions guiding this study are:

1. How do the English matriculation exam and the entrance exam into the English study track compare to one another?
2. What types of skills are tested in the two exams?
3. How do the first-year English students themselves view the university admission process and the two exams?

To answer these research questions data was collected in various ways in the early months of 2022. In January the focus was on the English matriculation exam and the English entrance exam into the University of Helsinki. Both exams were published online and thus free to use for research purposes. The survey for first-year students in the English study track was constructed during February and distributed in early March. The research methods used in this thesis to analyze the collected data can be categorized as mixed methods as both qualitative and quantitative methods were used in a side-by-side design of answering the research questions with separate methods (see e.g., Phakiti and Paltridge 2015). Qualitative materials analysis was used on the English matriculation exam of spring 2021 and the English study track entrance exam of 2021, and a student questionnaire was distributed for qualitative and quantitative data on student experiences and opinions. Next, I will describe these research methods in more detail. In this chapter, I will first describe the gathered material in more detail (3.1) and justify the methodological choices made (3.2) before discussing the ethical considerations (3.3) and limitations (3.4) surrounding this study.

3.1   Materials analysis

In the field of applied linguistics, and more specifically when the focus is on English as foreign language (EFL), materials analysis is one of the main methods used for analyzing EFL teaching materials and curricula. This method can also be applied to the analysis of language exams, as is the case with this study, when one of the aims is to compare the English matriculation exam of spring 2021 and the English study track entrance exam of 2021 with each other. Materials analysis works well with comparative analysis as it relies heavily on qualitative content analysis with interpretive and inductive orientations.

Qualitative content analysis can be described as a set of techniques used in the systematic analysis of texts and their contents that allow the analysis of themes and core ideas found in said texts (Drisko and Maschi 2015) Qualitative content analysis is a useful tool to explore new topics and theories as well as to compare and contrast differences (Drisko and Maschi 2015, 86). Qualitative content analysis is also highly systematic as utilizing this research method requires "the examination of every single part of the material that is in any way relevant to the research question" (Schreier 2014, 171). This in turn prompts close reading and analysis of the material as the aim of materials analysis, and thus qualitative content analysis as well, is to describe the material under analysis in detail (Schreier 2014, 173).

An important step in the process during materials analysis with qualitative content analysis is the building of a coding frame. A coding frame consists of selecting material, structuring and generating categories, defining categories and finally revising and expanding the frame if needed (Schreier 2014, 174). The coding frame should have at least one main category and at least two subcategories, and the main category includes the aspects of the material the research wishes to know more about while the subcategories specify what has been found in the material (Schreier 2014, 174). In addition, coding frames should ideally meet the following requirements according to Schreier (2014, 175): the main categories should cover only one aspect of the material (requirement of unidimensionality), subcategories under the main category should be mutually exclusive (requirement of mutual exclusiveness, and all relevant aspects should be covered when going through the material (requirement of exhaustiveness).

With these steps and requirements of coding frames in mind, I have created five main categories which in turn include two subcategories each of perceived similarities and differences. These main categories are used for analysis to answer the first two research questions in a data-driven way (i.e., through close comparison and contrast of the exams), and they are:

1. Exam structure
2. Exam language
3. Test items
4. External material used in the exams
5. Skills tested

These categories will be further expanded upon in 4.1 where the similarities and differences of the exams are discussed. Next, I will present the English matriculation exam and the entrance exam into the English study track in more detail.

3.1.1   The English matriculation exam

The matriculation examination in Finland is a set of digital exams distributed biannually to upper secondary school students to measure how well they have learned the subject specific objectives proposed in the National Core Curriculum for General Upper Secondary Education (NCC). The students take part in the matriculation examination after completing the required studies in their chosen exam subjects. The matriculation examination consists of a minimum of five exams from which only the exam testing a student's mother tongue is compulsory. Yet in practice, almost every student completes the English matriculation exam even though it is not mandatory because English can almost be considered a "third national language" of the Finnish society in informal contexts as the language's influence is so widespread with both media and increasing globalization (Pahta 2008, 4).

The English matriculation exam is arranged either in advanced or basic syllabus level, and it is constructed in accordance with the current NCC and The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) measuring receptive and communicative language skills (The Matriculation Examination Board 2022). Spoken interaction and production are not measured in the English matriculation exam. The material used in the English matriculation exam is as authentic as possible, and all or some of the following

material can be used: text, pictures, statistics, maps, video, or audio (The Matriculation Examination Board 2022). The English matriculation exam is assessed by sensors in the Matriculation Examination Board. Based on this assessment a grade is given which can be from highest to lowest *laudatur*, *eximia cum laude approbatur*, *magna cum laude approbatur*, *cum laude approbatur*, *lubenter approbatur*, *approbatur* and *improbatur* (failed) with only 5% of the students gaining either *laudatur* or *improbatur* (The Matriculation Examination Board 2021).

The exam this study is focusing on is the advanced English matriculation exam of spring 2021 which can be found and viewed online in its entirety at YLE Abitreenit (see Appendix 1). The exam in question was a digital exam and the students had six hours to complete it. The exam consists of four parts which are *listening comprehension*, *reading comprehension*, *grammar and vocabulary*, and *production*. The highest number of points a student could get in the exam is 299 points divided as follows: listening comprehension 84 points, reading comprehension 77 points, grammar and vocabulary 39 points, and production 99 points. All four parts were taken into consideration in the grading process provided that the student had answered the task or question. Tasks or questions without answers were not graded.

3.1.2 The English entrance exam

In 2020, a decision was made that the University of Helsinki would begin the gradual transition towards digital entrance exams, and thus half of the entrance exams were arranged digitally during the joint application process of Spring 2021 (University of Helsinki 2022b). In general, the digital entrance exams into the Bachelor's Programme in Languages are constructed to measure an applicant's proficiency in a specific language as well as text production and comprehension of academic text. This study focuses on the 2021 English study track entrance exam which was a digital exam, and applicants had three hours to complete it.

The entrance exam of Spring 2021 can be found and viewed online at University of Helsinki's own website as a public PDF file (see Appendix 1). The published version of the English entrance exam differs from the original exam in two ways. First, the online version includes the reviewed assessment criteria used for grading the exam as some changes needed to be made because of a technical issue which affected the performance

of some applicants. Second, this version also includes either the correct answer to a question in bold, or the features of a good answer if the question requires the applicant to frame the answer in their own words.

The entrance exam consists of two parts which measure reading comprehension with different approaches. The first part of the exam is more of a classic reading comprehension section with specific questions, while the second part focuses on student's ability to explain and summarize academic text in their own words after reading it. The highest number of points an applicant can receive from the entrance exam is 100 points divided equally between the two parts as both amount to 50 points in total. The first part of the English entrance exam was graded for all the applicants and the applicants were ranked in order based on the grades of the first part. The second part of the entrance exam was graded only for the 96 best applicants based on the performance during the first part. The minimum number of points needed for each section to successfully pass the exam was 20 points and for the whole exam 50 points in total.

3.2   Survey

To answer the third research question, data was collected through a student survey which aimed to explore first year English students' experiences during the 2021 admission process through a questionnaire. There are a couple of key reasons a questionnaire was constructed and distributed to the students in addition to analyzing the relevant exams. Using a questionnaire to explore student experiences allows measuring attitudinal questions that cover e.g., student attitudes, opinions, and beliefs. Moreover, a questionnaire is also an efficient tool in collecting lots of data in a short amount of time, it promotes participant anonymity, and it enables to process the gathered data in a straightforward way provided the questionnaire is constructed well (Dörnyei 2007, 115). On the other hand, the amount of time a participant is willing to use answering a questionnaire tends to be fairly short (i.e., longer and more complex the questionnaires tend to get fewer answers), and an ill-constructed questionnaire can result in superficial, unreliable or even invalid data (Dörnyei 2007, 115).

As the aim was to complete this master's thesis during spring 2022, a questionnaire was the best option to quickly collect as many first-year student experiences as possible while keeping the experiences and opinions completely anonymous for ethical reasons and

student privacy. To combat possible respondent fatigue, the questionnaire was kept short with under twenty questions while using mainly closed-ended questions with multiple choice items or Likert scale items. The basic rules about item writing (see e.g., Dörnyei 2007, 108-109) and the related instructions proposed by Dörnyei and Taguchi (2009, 39-46) were consulted while constructing the questionnaire and writing question items. Based on these instructions, special care was used in aiming for short questions and items, using simple and natural language, and avoiding negative constructions. In addition, items were written so that they would be optimistically answered differently by the respondents, so that differences in experiences and opinions in the student selection process would emerge.

3.2.1 First-year student questionnaire

The questionnaire was prepared with Microsoft Forms in February 2022 for the first-year students of the English study track of the Bachelor's Programme in Languages. Microsoft Forms was used as a platform for the questionnaire as it not only enables the construction of a questionnaire easily, but it also converts the data directly to figures which will be used to illustrate the results later in the 4.2 and 4.3. The questionnaire was specifically directed to students who completed their admission process into the University of Helsinki in 2021. The questionnaire was open for answers from late February until mid-March, and it was distributed to students through SUB ry's email list and Facebook group. The questionnaire was completely anonymous, and no personal data or other recognizable indicators were gathered as the objective was to gather experiences of the student selection process only generally.

The short questionnaire had three sections that collected both qualitative and quantitative data with multiple-choice questions, Likert items and open-ended questions. The first section was a general section with questions aimed for all first-year students, and the purpose of this section was to gather information of the expectations the students had prior to their studies, how well these expectations have been met and what studying English at university level has been like. The second and third sections were divided between the two different admission types i.e., the English matriculation exam and the university entrance exam. The second section was aimed for those students who were admitted into the English study track based solely on their matriculation examination grades, and the questions focused on the English matriculation exam of spring 2021.

Finally, the third section was for those students who completed the entrance exam in spring 2021 and the aim of this section was to gather information on the university entrance exam and to compare it with the English matriculation exam. For the full questionnaire, see Appendix 2.

3.3 Ethical considerations

Ethical principles were taken into consideration when writing this master's thesis as the research included both written documents as well as human participation. The written material analyzed in this thesis was uploaded online by the respective organizations prior to this research already in 2021. Thus, I was able to use the two exams freely in my research without violating possible copyrights as the original material used in the two exams was either adapted with sources or removed completely during the publication process.

As the research included parts where human participation was necessary, the guidelines regarding said participation proposed by the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity TENK were followed. The focus was specifically in making sure the distributed student survey followed the ethical guidelines in both data collection and in the voluntary participation in the survey. With data collection, participants were informed before answering the questionnaire that their answers would be completely anonymous, no personal data would be collected, and the answers would be destroyed after the completion of this thesis. Thus, it was not necessary to include a GDPR agreement in the beginning of the survey. Participating in the student survey was also completely voluntary and students were informed of this in the questionnaire instructions. When submitting the questionnaire answers the students agreed to these terms regarding data collection and participation.

3.4 Limitations

While collecting data and evaluating the usefulness of my research methods prior and during the analysis process, some obvious limitations emerged. Explaining these limitations is important not only for ethical reasons and academic transparency, but for better understanding the process of analysis and later the discussion surrounding my findings.

The first limitation this research faced is the fact that the higher education admission reform at hand is quite recent. As it was implemented in full for the first time in 2020, it also affects the amount of material available for analysis. In addition, the reform unfortunately coincided with the COVID-19 outbreak which forced many universities to make both quick and sometimes difficult decisions on how to carry out the student selection process safely. The new certificate-based admission quota certainly helped, but with the entrance exams in mind, some last-minute changes were most likely introduced by the University of Helsinki in either the exams themselves or their assessment criteria. Similarly, the situation affected upper secondary schools and the Matriculation Examination Board as well with the matriculation examination process. Thus, I made the decision to use only the English entrance exam of 2021 in my analysis as it will most likely resemble the "usual" post-reform and post-COVID-19 entrance exams. For consistency, only the English matriculation exam from the same spring was used as well.

The second limitation concerns the questionnaire distributed to the first-year students in the English study track. The questionnaire explores the experiences and opinions of a very specific target group, and the sample size ended up being very small as only nine out of sixty first-year students took part in the survey. Thus, the results that emerged from the questionnaire are not necessarily accurate for measuring student attitudes as even ten to twenty more answers could have resulted in an entirely different outcome. Moreover, the admission reform affects other Finnish universities and their English students as well, but it was not feasible to include other universities in the study because of the limited scale of this thesis.

Finally, the questionnaire itself should have undergone more revision and perhaps a round of piloting with a couple of first-year English students. This was not done because of timing issues during the writing process, but the benefits would have been obvious as it would have enabled me to see which questions or Likert items needed to be changed or removed. This was the case specifically with question 17 (a set of Likert scale statements comparing the English matriculation exam with the English entrance exam) which did not receive any answers. Possible reasons for this are that the question itself just did not work for whatever reason (e.g., because of its construction or wording), or the informants had possibly completed the English matriculation exam already before spring 2021, which would have stood out during the piloting process.

4   Results and analysis

In this chapter, I will present the results and analyze the collected data according to the methodological choices discussed in the previous chapter. First the focus will be on the comparison of the English matriculation exam with the entrance exam into the English study track (4.1). I will then move on to reporting both the qualitative and quantitative findings of the first-year student survey with the focus being on student experiences of the admission process and the two exams (4.2).

4.1   The English matriculation exam vs. the English entrance exam

In this subsection, I will compare and analyze the similarities and differences of the English matriculation exam and the English entrance exam using the coding frames introduced in 3.1. First the structures of the exams and languages used in them are explored before focusing on the test item types, and outside materials used in the two exams. Finally, I also aim to evaluate the types of skills the exams measure based on the exams themselves, and whether the skills are similar or not.

4.1.1   Exam structure

As exams, the English matriculation exam and the English entrance exam differ from each other, especially considering how the two exams are constructed. As mentioned already in 3.1.1., the matriculation exam consists of four parts: listening comprehension, reading comprehension, grammar and vocabulary, and production. In practice this means that each individual part of the exam has a bigger theme in terms of the basic linguistic competences it measures. In contrast, the English entrance exam consists of only two parts. The first part tests reading comprehension of "two texts as well as [the applicant's] ability to recognize and interpret the main arguments of the texts" (The English entrance exam 2021, 3), and the second part tests the applicant's ability to comprehend academic text, explain its meaning in their own words, and summarize a text.

When comparing the exams structurally, the main difference is the absence of separate sections in the entrance exam that test for listening comprehension as well as grammar and vocabulary. It could be argued that an applicant's grammar and vocabulary are tested implicitly throughout the entrance exam, and especially in the second part of the exam with the summary, thus a separate section is not needed for these skills as it is given that

someone applying to an English programme should have adequate English skills in the first place. Yet listening comprehension is omitted altogether without any means for the applicant to prove that they can understand spoken academic English. Nevertheless, the skill is needed in the actual studies as the courses in the English study track are taught almost exclusively in English.

What is interesting as well is the fact that the differences in the exam structures also reflect on the functions the exams have. The English matriculation exam seeks to evaluate a student's skills in a comprehensive way based on the objectives of CEFR upon upper secondary school graduation, so it makes sense how structurally diverse the English matriculation exam is in order to cover as many skills as possible with one exam. In contrast, the English entrance exam functions as a gate-keeping exam in a sense that only the applicants who perform well enough in the exam are eligible for a place in the English study track. Thus, the English entrance exam seems to test more cultivated language skills needed to succeed in higher education e.g., the comprehension of academic material. Because of these differences in the exam structures and their basic functions, they might not be directly comparable for conclusive analysis, even if it can be argued that they are essentially used for the same purpose i.e., student admission. This discrepancy will be further explored in the discussion section of this thesis.

4.1.2 Exam languages

In addition to structural differences, another aspect which reflects the different purposes and difficulty levels of the two exams is the combined use of Finnish and English. The English matriculation exam utilizes Finnish (or Swedish, if a student's native language is Swedish as the exam is prepared in both languages) in three different ways, which are somewhat easily explained.

Example A: A question entirely in Finnish in the English matriculation exam

14. Retired Opera Singers 9 p.

Read the text carefully and answer the questions **in Finnish**. (Maximum length 100 characters each. Exceeding the maximum number of characters will lead to points being cut.)

> **Material**
>
> 14.A   Text: Retired Opera Singers

14.1 Keille Verdi tarkoitti taiteilijakotinsa? (max 100 characters) 3 p.

Example B: The mixed use of English and Finnish in the English matriculation exam

The first way is to use Finnish in the otherwise English instructions so that only a specific part is in Finnish e.g., the number of times a student can listen to a recording in the reading comprehension, or how only one prompt of the writing assignment must be answered. As Finnish is the first language for most of the students completing their matriculation examination, it does make sense that Finnish is used especially in the instructions so that they are understood by everyone no matter the skill level a student has in English. It is also important to note that the use of only Finnish in the instructions can create a possibly unfair situation for those students who have Finnish as their second language. Thus, including the Finnish instructions in English instructions as well would promote equality between students. The second way Finnish is used can be seen in Example A above where the instructions and the task itself are both in Finnish apart from the reading material. The third and final way Finnish is used in the exam is through mixing it with English in a specific question. Example B illustrates this mixed type of language use as the instructions with the task description are in English (e.g., the maximum number of characters required in the answer) while the actual question is asked in Finnish and the answers must also be in Finnish. These types of tasks in the exam bring variety to the questions as well as measure specific comprehension which also requires some translation skills as English is taught as a foreign language in Finland.

In contrast, very little Finnish is used in the English entrance exam of 2021. As mentioned earlier, the published entrance exam is an edited and reviewed version of the exam, so there is no way to be certain of how much Finnish was present in the original version or whether the Finnish parts were added later to the published version. The Finnish passages included in this analysis are the first two paragraphs under the header *Valintakokeen*

arviointi (Assessment of the entrance exam) which describe the general assessment of the exam (i.e., the distribution of points throughout the sections and how many points are needed to pass the exam). Otherwise, the whole exam is completely in English, including descriptions of the different sections and task types. This in turn indicates that compared to the English matriculation exam, it is assumed that an applicant has sufficient English skills to understand and complete instructions without using Finnish as a possible crutch, thus making the entrance exam more challenging than the matriculation exam.

4.1.3 Test item types

Test items are the smallest individual units of specific tasks in an exam that the exam takers are asked to complete. Test items are used in assessing one or several objectives (e.g., grammar or vocabulary) and they often vary in structure and difficulty. When comparing the English matriculation exam and the English entrance exam with each other, both similarities and differences in the test item types emerge. The similarities between the two exams stem from the fact that both exams utilize almost the same test item types, and the differences can mainly be seen in the general difficulty levels of these test items, as it seems that the test items of the entrance exam are slightly more demanding than the ones in the matriculation exam. As the English matriculation exam is an extensive language exam measuring different language skills, this enables the use of diverse test items within the matriculation exam itself as well as within the different parts of the exam. On the other hand, the English entrance exam being a subject-specific exam is much more condensed as there are fewer types of test items utilized. Next, I will compare the test items that can be found in both exams which are multiple-choice questions, open questions and writing assignments.

9.4 Why is Graeme Muller worried about the election? (3 p.)

○ New kinds of methods may be attempted in producing a scam
○ US corporations are likely to try to influence the results
○ Authorities are helpless in confronting fake news

What words could replace the underlined words in the text (material 12.A)? Choose the alternative that best fits the context and conveys a similar meaning.

16.1 This novel is a heart-stopping story of survival, danger and love, as they undertake the grueling journey to the United States. (2 p.)

○ revengeful
○ violent
○ exhausting

Example C: A multiple-choice questions in the English matriculation exam

> 9. What does it mean when the text says identity is "in part deliberate and intentional"?
> - **That we partly build our identity consciously in changing interaction and discourse.**
> - That we sometimes use offensive language to hurt other people's feelings.
> - That we tend to give a false picture of ourselves.
> - That we do not always mean what we say

Example D: A multiple-choice question in the English entrance exam

Multiple-choice questions, such as Example C above, are the most prominent type of test items in the English matriculation exam. These types of items can be found in three out of four parts of the exam, excluding only the written composition part. Multiple-choice questions are used mainly to measure listening and reading comprehension skills (e.g., 9.4 in Example C), but they are also used to gauge a student's vocabulary size and the correct use of synonyms in English as can be seen in Example C (16.1) where the test taker is asked to "choose the alternative that best fits the context and conveys a similar meaning" (The Advanced English Matriculation Exam of Spring 2021). In contrast, multiple-choice questions are only found in the first part of the English entrance exam where the exam measures an applicant's reading comprehension while referring to a piece of text as can be seen in Example D. As with the English matriculation exam, the multiple-choice questions in the English entrance exam do test vocabulary as well, but the emphasis is on whether applicants know what a particular word or phenomenon (see Example D) means as 12 out of the 25 multiple-choice questions ask the *meaning* behind something mentioned previously in the exam material. Asking the meaning of a phenomenon seems to promote the necessity of applying the knowledge an applicant gains through reading the given exam material rather than just choosing the option that most closely resembles the passage in the text as is done in the matriculation exam.

Read the text and answer the questions. Answer questions 13.1–13.2 **in Finnish**. (Maximum length 100 characters each. Exceeding the maximum number of characters will lead to points being cut.) Choose the best alternative for 13.3.

> **Material**
> 13.A   Text: In a House of Lies

13.1 Mikä paikka Saughton on? (max 100 characters) **3 p.**

Example E: An open question in the English matriculation exam

Task 2.1

Bucholtz and Hall mention **labels** as something that are used as markers of both negative and positive identity categorization. For example, a social category label like *hijra* 'impotent' is a term that carries an extreme derogatory force in normative Indian society. **Explain in your own words what negative labelling is and how it functions in identity construction.**

Example F: An open question in the English entrance exam

Test items such as open questions can be found in both the English matriculation exam and the English entrance exam, but the use of these questions in the exams varies slightly. Open-ended questions are used only four times in the English matriculation exam of spring 2021 (twice in the listening comprehension section and twice in the reading comprehension section), and each time the question has two to three parts a student must answer in Finnish (see Example E). The answers to these questions are expected to be concise and under 100 characters in length (i.e., one short sentence) of what the text was about. In contrast, open questions can be found only in Part 2, Section A of the English entrance exam which has five open questions in total. With these questions the applicant must explain in their own words what a specific linguistic concept means according to the exam material as well as give relevant examples of said concepts (see Example F). In addition, the answers must be under 300 characters in length (i.e., one longer sentence, or a couple of short and concise ones).

The comparison of the types of open questions used in the exams seems to show a difference in both the difficulty and function of these questions. The open questions in the English matriculation exam are inherently easier than the ones found in the entrance

exam. Answering in Finnish to questions whose answers can be deducted from the text is much easier than explaining abstract concepts in English with your own words while coming up with relevant examples. In addition, the aim of open questions in the matriculation exam is for the student to show their comprehension of a specific text but in the entrance exam the focus is on explaining a linguistic concept further based on a specific text. Thus, the open questions, while being the same test item type and similar in appearance, do not have the same function in the exams.

19. Production (99 p.)

ⓘ *Vastaa yhteen kohdista 19.1–19.4.*

Write a composition of 700–1,300 characters on **one** of the topics below, following the instructions. Spaces and line breaks are not included in the character count. Please note that the limit is 1,300 characters **not** words.

Leave the three other text fields empty.

19.1 My language biography (99 p.)

The Council of Europe wants to develop understanding of the languages spoken in Europe. They are inviting young Europeans to write their language biographies. What languages or dialects do you speak? Where and with whom do you use those languages? What language or languages are the most important for you? Write your own language biography.

Example G: Writing assignment in the English matriculation exam

Summary

In Part 1 Section B of the exam you read an excerpt from Vera Tobin's article. Using only the ideas found in Tobin's article, summarize in 250–300 words (1500–2000 characters with spaces) what Tobin has to say on "Cognitive Bias and the Poetics of Surprise." Write this summary in your own words (do not copy chunks of text from the source text). Your summary will need to introduce the main ideas, elaborate on them, and end with a conclusion. Marks will be given for content as well as the structuring of your summary. (0–30 points)

Example H: Writing assignment in the English entrance exam

The final type of test item that can be found in both the English matriculation exam and the English entrance exam is a writing assignment. Writing assignments are an important part of both the English matriculation exam and the English entrance exam as they not only award the most points within the exam (see examples G and H above), but they also allow a student or an applicant to showcase their skills in different linguistic areas during a single comprehensive exam task. When comparing the lengths and topics of the writing assignments, it becomes clear that this is the test item type which differs the most despite it being perhaps the most prominent of the test items in both exams.

As can be seen from the examples G and H, the first difference between the writing assignments is the length of the completed assignment. In the English matriculation exam, the length of the production should be 700-1300 characters (approximately 150-250 words) while the finished summary in the entrance exam should be 1500-2000 characters (approximately 250-300 words). The maximum length of the summary can be almost double the length of the production. In theory, this should enable the use of more idiomatic language as well as more elaborate arguments in the entrance exam, which in turn supports the notion of the test items being more difficult in the entrance exam compared to the matriculation exam.

The second difference with the two writing assignments is the type of writing expected from the student or the applicant. In the English matriculation exam, the writing assignment is a production, and the student has four writing prompts to choose from. The topics included in the spring 2021 matriculation exam are language biography, sustainable travel, reading habits, or either a re-telling of a fairy tale or an original one. A reason for needing a variety of topics on the writing assignment could be the number of students taking the exam, as it would be both restrictive and counterproductive that every student answers the same prompt if the objective is to showcase writing skills in English rather than on the subject matter of the topics. In contrast, the writing assignment in the English entrance exam is a summary of an academic article, and every applicant must complete the same assignment. Yet the applicants taking the entrance exam to the English study track should have skills that help them in their English studies, so it is much more viable to have only one writing assignment that measures these skills (e.g., understanding the main points of an academic article and condensing it in your own words).

4.1.4 External material used in the exams

Both the English matriculation exam and the English entrance exam utilize materials from external sources as additional or supportive content to the test items and questions. When comparing the two exams, there are a couple of key differences and similarities to be found. The differences lie in the types of materials present in the exam, how much of it is used and how specific said material is. On the other hand, the similarities can be seen in whether the material is adapted to the exam setting and how the material is integrated to the exams.

The advanced English matriculation exam of spring 2021 being a digital exam enables the use of diverse external material as the material can be almost anything from audio clips to videos, and different types of text or pictures depending on which part of the exam the material belongs to. Video and audio are used in the listening comprehension section while text and pictures can be found in the reading comprehension, grammar and vocabulary, and production sections of the matriculation exam. The content of the material used in the English matriculation exam is quite general and varied in nature so that no specific subject is favored above others. For example, the external material used in the spring 2021 exam included a YouTube clip of a late-night talk show, a news article from New-Zealand, an information board of a national park, and excerpts from books as well as stock photos. Thus, the matriculation exam uses external material in almost every section as questions are constructed to measure English skills as authentically as possible, and the diverse use of material supports this aim.

In comparison, the English entrance exam includes only two separate pieces of text as material despite the exam being in digital format as well. Both texts are academic articles in English linguistics; the first one is Vera Tobin's article "Cognitive Bias and the Poetics of Surprise" and the second article "Identity and interaction: A sociocultural linguistic approach" is written by Mary Bucholtz and Kira Hall. The same two pieces of text are used throughout the exam in reading comprehension, open questions, and in the writing assignment. Thus, in contrast to the English matriculation exam, the external material used in the entrance exam is very specific in nature and directly linked to the English study track as the aim of the entrance exam to admit only the best performing applicants to the study track instead of measuring general proficiency in English.

Example I: A picture used in the reading comprehension part of the English matriculation exam

> Read the text carefully and choose the correct alternative.
>
> **Material**
>
> 11.A   Text: Before the Lagoon Was Lost

Example J: A link (in blue) leading to the attached material of the English matriculation exam

> The following text is adapted from Vera Tobin's article "Cognitive Bias and the Poetics of Surprise," published *in Language and Literature* 18.2 (2009): 155–172. All emphases (*italic font*) are faithful to the original text. Underlining has been added to help with answering the questions.
>
> Read the text carefully and then answer the questions following it.
>
> *[Text omitted from the published version of the exam]*

Example K: Text integrated in the English entrance exam

As mentioned earlier, there are some similarities in how the external material is used in the two exams. First, the material in the matriculation exam is either integrated to the exam itself as is the case with e.g., pictures (see Example I) or there is a link in the task description which leads to a new tab with additional attachments (see Example J) which include e.g., longer bodies of text and a video for listening comprehension. Integration of the material can be seen in the English entrance exam as well, as the bodies of texts used in the English entrance exam are situated in the beginning of each section of questions. It is also important to note that the published version of the exam which is used for this analysis does not include the texts (see Example K), so conclusive close reading of the external material cannot be done. Second, the materials from external sources used in the two exams are adapted to a degree so that they can be used in an exam setting in the first place. This might be in part related to copyright as sources are explicitly stated in both exams, but an important reason for adaptation is also keeping the exams suitable for their purposes so that the questions are not too difficult as the applicants might not have prior experience in reading academic literature.

4.2   First-year student experiences of the 2021 student selection process

The aim of this section is to first describe the student experiences related to the student selection process and expectations of studying in the English study track (4.2.1). After this I will move on to analyzing how the university students themselves view the English matriculation exam (4.2.2) and the English entrance exam (4.2.3). The number of students that completed the survey is rather small, with the answer percentage is only 14 %, as

only nine first-year English students answered the questionnaire from the 65 students who started their studies in 2021. Out of these nine students four were selected with certificate-based admission (i.e., with overall points from the grades received from the complete matriculation examination) and five had completed the entrance exam in spring 2021.

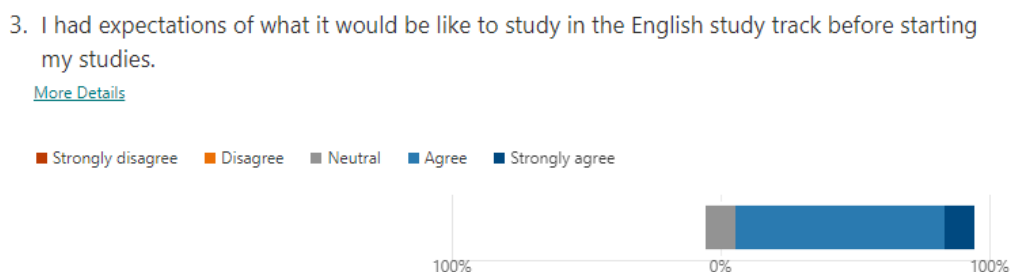### 4.2.1 Expectations and experiences of studying English at university level

Figure 1: First-year student expectations on studying English prior to their studies

It is not far-fetched to assume that every applicant has expectations of studying at university level prior to being accepted as a student. The first-year students who answered the questionnaire were no exception. As seen in Figure 1, most of the informants agreed (77,8%) or strongly agreed (11,1%) that they had at least some expectations of what it would be like to study in the English study track before starting their studies, while only one student had a neutral opinion.

Figure 2: Met expectations of studying English at the University of Helsinki

Yet when considering whether the students' expectations of studying in the English study track were actually met, some differences emerge. Most students (66,6%) lean towards neutrality or disagreement on met expectations while only two agreed and one strongly agreed that their initial expectations were correct as can be seen from Figure 2. Two different reasons can be found for the reported discrepancy of the expectations being met

by the first-year English students. The reason leaning towards a more negative point of view is the fact that some students disagreed when asked if they had done research on what it would be like to study English at university level before applying to the English study track (see Figure 3). At worst, this means that new students were not prepared for the reality of studying English at university level if they based their expectations only on prior upper secondary school English classes which are quite different from university level language studies.
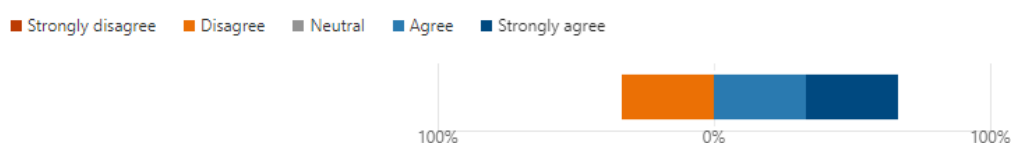

Figure 3: Research done before applying to the Bachelor's Programme in Languages

At best, the unmet expectations take on a much more positive aspect as there was also a possibility of elaborating on why expectations were not met if a student answered "disagree" or "strongly disagree". One student chose to elaborate, and they explained how "Studying [in the English study track] is more versatile than I originally thought (not just English grammar etc.)". This illustrates the point that even if initial expectations of studying in the English study track were not met, it does not necessarily mean that disagreement should be taken negatively. On the contrary, in this case the versatile studies in the English study track are a welcome surprise. English lessons in upper secondary schools can be quite focused on grammar (thus grammar is also a separate section in the English matriculation exam as seen previously in this thesis), which traditionally is not the most popular aspect of English classes. Because of this, it would seem like the basic studies offered to the first-year students in the English study track offer new perspectives to the English language and its use in academic context.

6. In general, the English study track courses I've completed so far have been (choose all that apply in your opinion)

More Details

● Too hard	0
● Hard	3
● Appropriate	6
● Easy	5
● Too easy	0

Figure 4: The difficulty level of the English courses so far

Continuing with the subject of first-year student experiences of studying in the English study track, the informants were asked about the difficulty level of their English studies so far, and multiple applicable options could be chosen. As seen in Figure 4, 43% of the students think that the difficulty of the courses has been appropriate, 36% evaluate them as easy and only 21% find the courses hard, and none think them either too hard or too easy. Moreover, the students being able to choose multiple answers yields interesting results as two students answered that the difficulty of the completed courses is appropriate yet sometimes either hard or easy as well. This indicates that even though English courses differ in how demanding they are, students generally perform well in their studies. The students' reported first-year GPAs in the questionnaire also support this as the GPA's range from 3 (N=1) to 4 (N=6) and 5 (N=2).

4.2.2 Student experiences of the English matriculation exam

The advanced English matriculation exam is the only way upper secondary school students can prove their acceptable proficiency in English prior to being accepted into University of Helsinki with a certificate-based admission. It is required that the applicant's English matriculation exam grade is either an *Eximia* or a *Laudatur* (i.e., one of the two highest grades you can get in the matriculation examination grade scale) before they can be considered as a student for the English study track. Because of this, the English matriculation exam plays an important role in student selection, and thus experiences and opinions of the exam were asked with interesting results.

8. I prepared for the English matriculation exam

More Details

●	Not at all	3
●	Somewhat	1
●	Quite a lot	2
●	Very much	1

Figure 5: Preparing for the English matriculation exam

As the matriculation examination can be considered a set of high-stakes final exams with its increasing importance in higher education student selection, it would be expected that intense preparation would take place before the exams. Yet the first-year English students' experiences of preparing for the English matriculation exam differ in a surprising way as seen in Figure 5. Three of the informants (43%) answered that they did not prepare for the exam at all, three reported preparing somewhat (14%) or quite a lot (29%) and only one (14%) studied very much for the exam. This indicates that the amount of preparation and studying done prior to the exam is quite polarized within the student body.

9. The difficulty of the English matriculation exam was (choose all that apply in your opinion)

More Details

●	Too hard	0
●	Hard	1
●	Appropriate	4
●	Easy	3
●	Too easy	0

Figure 6: The difficulty of the English matriculation exam

A reason for the minimal or non-existent amount of studying for the English matriculation exam could relate to the exam's difficulty level as seen in Figure 6. Half of the students who answered this question found the matriculation exam's difficulty level appropriate (50%), three thought it was easy (38%) and only one found it hard (12%), but at the same time appropriate as well. Based on these findings, it seems that students who apply and are accepted as students to the English study track find English as a school subject rather easy in the first place, and thus extensive preparation is not deemed necessary. In other words, upper secondary school students who apply to the University of Helsinki's

Bachelor's Programme in Languages are more likely to have affinity towards languages in general, and thus the English skills measured in the English matriculation exam are so developed already that the exam is not too challenging for these students.
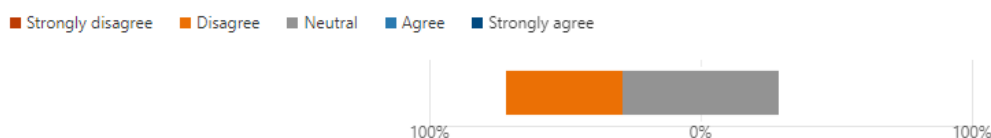

Figure 7: Completing the English matriculation exam prepares students for studying English

Nevertheless, studying in the English study track is both different and perhaps more challenging than studying English in a Finnish upper secondary school, mainly because the emphasis moves from general communicative skills towards more academic skills including English literature and linguistics. As seen from Figure 7, most of the informants are neutral (57%) towards the usefulness of completing the English matriculation exam as preparation for their English studies at university level, and almost half of the informants disagree (43%) about the matriculation exam preparing them for their studies. This result is interesting as none of the first-year students outright agree that the English matriculation exam prepares upper secondary school students to study English in higher education. Yet with the certificate-based admission being currently the most prominent way of selecting new university students to the English study track, it seems that the English matriculation exam should in fact prepare new English students for their studies. Alas, this does not seem to be the case based on the results of this specific student survey.

4.2.3 Student experiences of the English entrance exam

In addition to a certificate-based admission, new students can still be selected to the English study track through a subject-specific entrance exam, which is used when an applicant does not have enough overall points from the matriculation examination to gain eligibility through the certificate-based admission. As almost half of the student body is still admitted through the entrance exam, the survey focuses also on student experiences on the English entrance exam of 2021 starting with the process of preparing for the entrance exam after completing the English matriculation exam.

12. Did you prepare for the English entrance exam?
More Details

- Yes   3
- No   3

Figure 8: Preparing for the English entrance exam

While the English matriculation exam measures English skills learned throughout upper secondary school and is based on the completed English courses and CEFR, the English entrance exam does not require prior reading material or courses to complete before the exam. Thus, the question is whether the first-year students who completed the entrance exam prepared for it in the first place. As can be seen from Figure 8, half of the students did, and the other half did not. According to their written descriptions when asked to elaborate on the question, the students that did prepare for the entrance exam did so well. Mostly these informants reported that they read up on some basic linguistic terminology and academic texts, but one of them also tried to use English as much as possible in their daily life in general.

In addition, an interesting detail emerges from this question. As mentioned in the beginning of 4.2, four informants were selected with certificate-based admission and five through the entrance exam, yet six students answered this question. Studying the answers more carefully reveals that one student who was admitted with certificate-based admission also prepared for the entrance exam since they were one of the three who answered "yes" to this question. The reason for this could very well be that upper secondary school students receive their grades from the matriculation examination quite late in the spring, and thus some prepare to take the entrance exam before knowing if they are required to do so or not. To illustrate this further, in 2021 upper secondary school students received their matriculation examination grades on 19th of May and the English entrance exam was held just a week later on 28th of May. This is precisely why the Ministry of Education and Culture advocated to either remove or reduce required reading material for the university entrance exams, so that the process of applying to higher education straight after finishing the matriculation examination would not be so strenuous to the graduating students.

16. Completing the English matriculation exam prepared me for the English entrance exam

More Details

●	Not at all	3
●	Somewhat	3
●	Quite a lot	0
●	Very much	0

Figure 9: Completing the English matriculation exam prepared students for the English entrance exam

As the preparation time between getting the grades from the matriculation examination and taking the possible entrance exam is so short, one assumes that in this case the English matriculation exam itself would serve as a good tool for preparing for the entrance exam. According to Figure 9, the case is not so straightforward as that. Half of the informants who answered this question (including again the one student who was admitted through certificate-based admission) think that completing the English matriculation exam did not prepare them at all for the English entrance exam, while the other half of the answers indicate that the matriculation exam prepares applicants for the entrance exam only somewhat. After the university admission reform of 2020, the English entrance exam is designed in a way that does not require the applicant to read obligatory material beforehand, as the academic articles that the exam questions are based on are included within the entrance exam itself. Because of this, it could be argued that there is no need for the English matriculation exam to necessarily prepare applicants for the English entrance exam.

18. Completing the English entrance exam prepared me for studying English at university level.

More Details

■ Strongly disagree ■ Disagree ■ Neutral ■ Agree ■ Strongly agree

100%   0%   100%

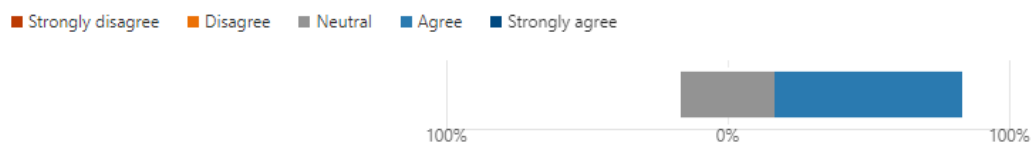*Figure 10: Completing the English entrance exam prepares students for studying English*

The results in Figure 9 and Figure 10 showcase a possible discrepancy between students who were selected into the English study track through certificate-based admission and the entrance exam. The English entrance exam, while naturally being easier than the

actual university courses, reflects the type of materials and tasks a student might face when studying in the English study track. Thus, if the English matriculation exam prepares applicants for the entrance exam only somewhat or not at all, how can the students selected through certificate-based admission prepare for their university studies, or know what they are getting into in the first place, as they do not take part in the entrance exam? This could also be one of the factors why student expectations on studying in the English study track are not always met as discussed previously in 4.2.1. Consequently, those informants who were selected as students with certificate-based admission were also the ones who disagreed on their expectations of studying in the English study track being met. When compared to the students who gained admission through completing the English entrance exam, 67% of these students agree that the English entrance exam prepared them for their university studies.

Figure 11: The difficulty level of the English entrance exam

Finally, as the entrance exam to the English study track is an exam which does not require prior preparation or studying on the applicant's part, 63% of the informants who completed the exam find its difficulty level very appropriate for an English entrance exam (see Figure 11). Individual experiences nevertheless do affect the results as two students found the entrance exam both appropriate yet hard at the same time, or just hard. In contrast, one student thought the entrance exam was both appropriate and easy. Compared to the results on the English matriculation exam's difficulty in 4.2.2, the entrance exam is deemed slightly more challenging than the matriculation exam.

4.3   Skills tested in the two exams

As can be seen implicitly throughout the analysis in the previous sections, the English matriculation exam and the entrance exam to the English study track measure a somewhat similar yet different set of skills. The problem stems from the main purpose each exam

has even if they are used for the same end goal i.e., student selection to the University of Helsinki. After close comparison of the exams done in this analysis section, the skills the exams measure can be roughly divided into explicit and more implicit skills. The explicit skills were also used as a starting point to ask first-year English students what skills they think the English matriculation exam and the English entrance exam respectively test for, and multiple skill options could be chosen.

4.3.1   Explicit skills

The explicit skills the two exams measure can be found easily when examining both the test item types and the structures of the exams. For example, the English matriculation exam has a table of contents at the beginning of the exam which includes all the sections and the specific English skills they measure (*listening* and *reading comprehension*, *grammar* and *vocabulary*, *general writing skills*). In contrast, while the English entrance exam does not directly state what skills are tested, the test item types, and exam questions help in defining the more explicit skills. These skills have been categorized as *academic text comprehension*, *academic writing skills*, and *defining academic concepts or terms*. Finally, *text analysis* was added as an answer option as a "bridge" between the exams since analytical skills are also needed in both of the exams in conjunction with reading comprehension if a student needs to explain their comprehension of a text in their own words.

The results of what explicit skills the first-year English students think the two exams mostly focus on based on their own experiences can be seen below in Figure 12 (English matriculation exam) and Figure 13 (English entrance exam). Comparing the two figures with each other shows that the students mostly agree with the differentiation of skills the exams test i.e., how "general" language skills are tested in the matriculation exam and more academic skills are tested in the entrance exam. In addition, exceptions and overlap in the tested skills emerge from the student answers which promotes interesting results for analysis.

10. The English matriculation exam focused on (choose all that apply in your opinion)
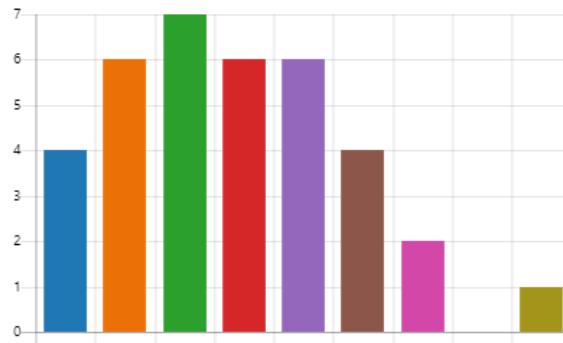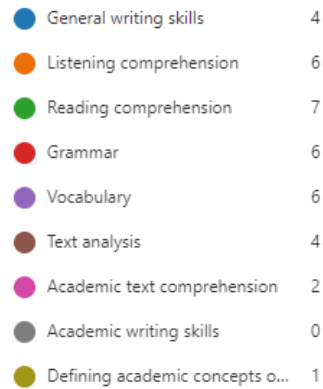
More Details

● General writing skills	4
● Listening comprehension	6
● Reading comprehension	7
● Grammar	6
● Vocabulary	6
● Text analysis	4
● Academic text comprehension	2
● Academic writing skills	0
● Defining academic concepts o...	1

Figure 12: Skills the English matriculation exam focused on according to the English students

Figure 12 shows how in addition to the "general" language skills tested in the English matriculation exam, text analysis seems to be a somewhat important skill according to the students (N=4) as it is strongly linked to reading comprehension which received most answers (N=7) out of all the options. To a lesser degree two students think that the matriculation exam tests for academic text comprehension and one student agrees how the exam tests for definition of academic concepts or terms, even though these skills should more likely be tested in the English entrance exam, at least in theory. Yet curiously, academic writing skills do not feature in the English matriculation exam even though in students' opinion other academic skills were present according to the answers.

15. The English entrance exam into the University of Helsinki focused on (choose all that apply in your opinion)

More Details

● General writing skills	2
● Listening comprehension	0
● Reading comprehension	5
● Grammar	1
● Vocabulary	1
● Text analysis	5
● Academic text comprehension	6
● Academic writing skills	4
● Defining academic concepts o...	5

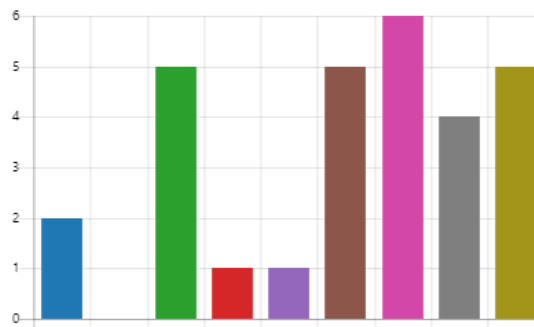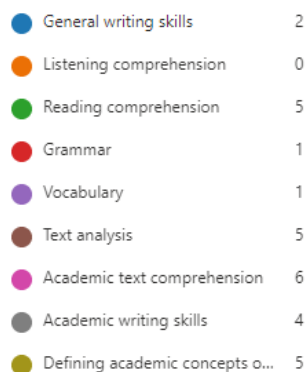*Figure 13: Skills the English entrance exam focused on according to the English students*

Figure 13 shows some more overlap with the skills the English entrance exam tests when comparing it to the English matriculation exam, as "general" language skills (e.g., grammar and vocabulary) are still tested even though the main focus of the entrance exam is clearly on more academic skills. It is noteworthy how some first-year students differentiate between general writing skills and academic writing skills as according to the answers both are tested in the English entrance exam. This raises an interesting question: are the general writing skills different than academic writing skills, or are the general skills included in academic writing skills? According to student answers, they consider the skills to be separate, even though it would be more likely that general writing skills are tested implicitly rather than explicitly, which will be discussed next.

4.3.2   Implicit skills

Implicit skills, though not as transparently tested as explicit ones, are also an important part of measuring whether a student or an applicant performs well enough for the exam's purpose (i.e., passing the matriculation exam or gaining admittance to the English study track). Within the English matriculation exam of spring 2021, the most notable implicit skill the exam tests is media literacy. Media literacy is tested as a part of the reading comprehension section where a student must choose the most suitable Instagram caption in English for each picture (see Example I in 4.1.4). This type of exam task can be also seen to promote authentic language use and testing with bringing the topic close to the students' personal lives with implied everyday social media use. Thus, the possible implicit skills tested in the English matriculation exam are skills that cannot be found in the exam sections themselves, or they are most likely related to transversal competences included in the current NCC for upper secondary schools (see e.g., NCC 2019).

In contrast, the implicit skills tested in the English entrance exam are quite different from the ones tested in the English matriculation exam. This is in part because there are no official or nationwide guidelines to what should be included in an English entrance exam and how authentic it should be. Thus, the implicit skills the entrance exam of spring 2021 to the English study track tests are the same general skills which are explicitly tested in the English matriculation exam, excluding listening comprehension. This is the case especially with grammar and vocabulary which can be seen from Figure 13 as one student answered how these skills are tested in the entrance exam as well.

5   Discussion

In the discussion chapter of this thesis, I first link the findings of my analysis and results to the background literature (5.1). After this I will evaluate how comparable the English matriculation exam and the English entrance exam truly are in the context of student selection for the English study track (5.2). Finally, I discuss what affects first-year English student expectations and how they can be better met in the future (5.4).

5.1   Revisiting the features of a functional entrance exam

Studying and comparing the English matriculation exam and English entrance exam closely yielded some interesting results in the analysis. These results on their own can already tell at least partly how useful the two exams are in selecting students for the English study track of the University of Helsinki's Bachelor's Programme in Languages, but it is also good to mirror these findings back to Stemler's (2012) features of functional entrance exams as introduced previously in section 2.4 of this thesis. Reflecting upon these features of a functional entrance exam, the two exams analyzed for this thesis do not have all the necessary features. The English entrance exam is slightly more functional as an entrance exam likely because it is constructed for the very purpose, while the English matriculation exam's main purpose is to test how well students have learned English during their upper secondary school education. Next, I will explain why this is.

Aptitude focuses on an applicant's "natural" potential to perform well in higher education, but it can be hard to measure in an entrance exam as there are many ways in which an individual can showcase their potential (Stemler 2012). Linguistic aptitude in English can be especially hard to measure in cases such as university admission because learning foreign languages is such an intricate part of the Finnish education system. Moreover, neither the English matriculation exam nor the English entrance exam is currently constructed in a way that allows e.g., spoken or interactive exam tasks which could potentially be used in measuring domain-specific aptitude. Yet it can be argued that the English entrance exam of 2021 does in fact somewhat measure domain-general aptitude i.e., how quickly new knowledge is internalized and then applied. The exam is designed to function without prior preparation from the applicant's part, as the required reading material is provided during the exam so that the applicant must quickly familiarize themselves with the texts before they can answer the questions correctly.

Ability refers to an applicant's skills or proficiency on a specific topic regardless of how these skills or proficiency are acquired (Stemler 2012). With this definition, the English matriculation exam does not measure English ability as the whole examination process is the epitome of approximately three years of English studies in a Finnish upper secondary school. In contrast, the English entrance exam does indeed test an applicant's ability to complete their higher education in English. It is not specified in the English study track's admission criteria (see e.g., Studyinfo 2022 for the criteria) how and where sufficient English skills should have been acquired prior to the entrance exam, as it only matters that the applicant gets a high enough score in the exam to be eligible as a student.

Achievement, i.e., demonstrated competence in a subject after formal education (Stemler 2012), is perhaps the easiest feature to utilize in the student selection process to the English study track. Using the two highest grades one can receive from the English matriculation exam as a threshold for an applicant to be considered in the certificate-based admission, measures achievement directly. Yet taking part in the English entrance exam does not require this type of subject-specific achievement beforehand as the exam's purpose is to offer those students a way into the English study track who did not receive enough overall points with the certificate-based admission.

Finally, it is noteworthy that based on these criteria, the old way of selecting new English students met Stemler's features of a functional entrance exam slightly better than the new system post-admission reform. This is simply because the old way combined the points gained from the English matriculation exam and the English entrance exam together for the evaluation process so that both achievement and ability were measured. In contrast, the old English entrance exam had required reading material for the applicant before the exam itself, thus domain-specific and domain-general aptitude were not measured as applicant's had to prepare for the exam extensively.

5.2 How comparable are the English matriculation exam and English entrance exam in student selection?

As can be seen throughout this thesis, the English matriculation exam and the entrance exam to the English study track share enough characteristics so that close analysis of the exams and the comparison between them is made possible. This is mainly due to the fact that both exams are constructed to test one's skills in English, and many language tests

are similar enough in general for the comparison to work. The close analysis of the two exams supports this phenomenon as can be seen, for example, with the similar test item types explored in 4.1.3. Yet there is a key difference between the exams which needs to be taken into consideration when discussing how comparable the exams are as they are currently used side by side with an either-or approach in student selection.

This key difference between the two exams that might make comparing them somewhat problematic is the inherent purpose of each exam, as it could be argued that they have been created for different purposes, at least originally. The English matriculation exam serves the purpose of a national final exam for upper secondary school students. The exam measures how well the students have met the objectives proposed by the NCC in accordance with CEFR as a graduating upper secondary school student should ideally be placed in the B2 category in CEFR. Consequently, the University of Helsinki requires B2 as a starting level in CEFR for its new students whether they are native Finnish speakers or incoming exchange students. In addition, the English matriculation exam being a part of the matriculation examination brings difficulties in comparing it directly with the English entrance exam, as the exam is only one exam out of five from which a student can gain points during the certificate-based admission. Thus, it might not be too feasible to focus simply on the English matriculation exam but rather the focus should be on the complete matriculation examination, even if a sufficient grade from the English exam is a prerequisite for student eligibility.

In contrast, the English entrance exam used by the University of Helsinki for the student selection for the English study track is constructed specifically for this purpose. Essentially, this means that the entrance exam's focus lies on making sure that an applicant who completes the exam with sufficient points is eligible to become an English student, if their points are also among the best of thirty or so applicants who are accepted to the English study track through entrance examination each year. To further complicate the matter of effective comparison between the exams, the English entrance exam is currently based on the advanced English syllabus proposed by the NCC for general upper secondary schools according to the exam description found in Studyinfo (2022). Nevertheless, this change is not that obvious yet in the entrance exam of spring 2021 as the questions in the exam revolve around terms and phenomena mostly relevant in the field of English linguistics.

5.3   Meeting student expectations – What can be done?

The student admission reform of 2020, while certainly useful and welcomed by many, can also bring dissatisfaction among those whose paths to higher education and university studies are most affected by it – the students. The inklings of unmet expectations can be seen from the first-year English student experiences analyzed in 4.2 as there is a slight discrepancy in how the admission reform should have affected the students, and how the English students experienced the student selection process, and later their basic studies in the English study track. For example, some of the answers still indicate that students feel the need to prepare for the entrance exam despite the reform making it so that it is not required, and the reality of studying English at university level does not necessarily meet previous expectations. If this is the case, what can be done to make sure that the English students at University of Helsinki are satisfied with their choice of university and studies?

The University of Helsinki has already a good basis from which it tries to focus on student satisfaction in various ways. As explained previously in 2.5, there are a couple of student satisfaction surveys that are distributed to the English students throughout their years in higher education. The surveys vary from topics related to the study modules offered in both the bachelor's and master's programmes as well as overall learning habits and student life, which helps in developing the studies even further as necessary. This indicates that student satisfaction and development is an important factor for the English faculty. This should be continued in the future when the effects of the reform can be seen and studied in even more detail when more students have been selected with either certificate-based admission or an entrance exam, and possible differences between these students emerge more clearly.

In addition, the University of Helsinki practices transparency in its student admission process, especially with the entrance exams, as it is the only Finnish university that has published previous English entrance exams online for everyone to see. From a graduating upper secondary school student's perspective, this transparency is extremely important as it is one of the only ways applicants can see for themselves what kind of topics or phenomena are discussed during the English courses even before starting their studies. This way, future students are not going in blind to their studies, and the possibility of dropping out within the first year could be prevented even better.

Naturally, some improvements could still be made with how much information the applicants receive about student life and English studies beforehand. Following the hypothesis that applicants mainly use Google for their research about future studies, an interesting observation can be made from the search results for "Studying English at university" (Englannin opiskelu yliopistossa) in Finnish. The first link leads to a profit-oriented company's website which collaborates with Finnish universities in providing detailed descriptions of different study options. The second link leads to Studyinfo, in which the actual application form is filled out during the joint application process each spring, and finally direct links to university websites start afterwards. This indicates how the information is somewhat splintered throughout different sources, and it is up to the applicants to dig deeper in order to find relevant information of their future studies. Thus, it might be useful to evaluate what can be done with different collaborators (e.g., profit-oriented companies, the National Agency of Education, or upper secondary schools) so that the information is as accessible, accurate and easily found as possible.

6   Conclusion

The purpose of this thesis was to evaluate how the higher education admission reform of 2020 affected the student selection process to the English study track of the Bachelor's Programme in Languages offered in the University of Helsinki. Previously, new English students were selected with points combined from the matriculation examination grades and the English entrance exam, but the changes implemented with the admission reform separated this process into two. New English students are currently selected through either certificate-based admission (i.e., with points gained from the grades of the matriculation examination) or through a subject-specific entrance exam. In addition, a possible English student should have a high enough grade in the advanced English matriculation exam to be eligible in the first place. Intrigued by these changes, I set out to find out with this study how do the English matriculation exam and the English entrance exam into the English study track compare to one another, how the new English students themselves view the university admission process and the two exams, and finally, what types of skills are tested in the exams.

The research was conducted as transparently as possible so that my study can be replicated if needed. Special care was taken so that the criteria used for data collection and justification of the material used in this study was described openly. Similarly, the process of analysis was explained thoroughly with the help of coding frames introduced in 3.1, and the questions found in the first-year English student questionnaire. The only question from the questionnaire not included in the analysis was question 17 as it had no answers, and it is important to note how the results could vary significantly if more students had answered the questionnaire. Thus, limitations and ethical considerations surrounding this thesis were taken into account to the best of my abilities.

The main findings of this thesis were somewhat expected but some surprises also emerged. First, as explained in 4.1 and later in 5.2, the two exams studied are in fact similar enough for a comparison because they are both language exams testing skills in English, but the differences emerge from the exam structures and the purposes for which the exams were created. Essentially, the controversy in comparing the two exams can be condensed to a single question: How can two exams designed for different purposes be compared and then used for the same end goal successfully? This is a question that needs to be considered by both The Matriculation Examination Board and Finnish universities alike as the current path is leading towards joint admission where one subject-specific entrance exam is used for multiple universities (UNIFI 2021). It must be evaluated how to maintain the quality of new English students if even more emphasis is placed on the skills learned in upper secondary school instead of measuring how well an applicant performs when faced with academic texts and linguistic phenomena in English.

Second, according to the first-year English students of 2021, the admission reform might not work with foreign language studies at university level quite as well as is intended. This can be seen with answers pertaining to the difficulty of the two exams, and how well said exams prepare the applicants for English studies at university level. The limited results show that the English matriculation exam is considered easier than the English entrance exam, and the entrance exam prepares applicants for their English studies much better compared to the English matriculation exam. The skills which the two exams test for support these findings as well. The matriculation exam tests for more explicit English skills learned throughout upper secondary school while the English entrance exam tests

e.g., academic reading comprehension and the ability to apply new knowledge in a much more implicit way.

Naturally, reforming and developing the ways in which students are admitted to universities is often both a necessary and welcome process as the higher education institutions adapt to the current demands of working life and economic situation in the society. Nevertheless, implementing these types of drastic changes as was done with the admission reform of 2020, should be done carefully and the effects should be studied in detail. Especially as the chair of UNIFI's (Universities Finland UNIFI) meetings of vice-rectors for education admits in a recent press release that "There is no extensive research-based knowledge available on the topic [the effects of the certificate-based admission]" (UNIFI 2022). On a more positive note, a new study on developing certificate-based admission is in the works as of spring 2022 by the Research Foundation for Studies and Education Otus and Labore (UNIFI 2022). According to the very same press release on UNIFI's website, the new study will analyze "university entrance examinations extensively [in addition to] identifying the knowhow measured in the entrance examinations of various fields" (UNIFI 2022). This means that there is much research to be done and more knowledge to be gained concerning the topic of university student selection, whether it is on a general level with certificate-based admissions or on a subject-specific level with the entrance exams Thus, it will be interesting to see what kind of results emerge from the new studies, and how the results affect the future development of higher education student selection.

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Appendix 1

The advanced English matriculation exam, Spring 2021:

http://yle.fi/plus/abitreenit/2021/Kev%C3%A4t/2021-03-22_EA_fi/index.html

The English entrance exam to University of Helsinki's Bachelor's Programme in Languages, Spring 2021:

https://www.helsinki.fi/assets/drupal/2021-07/ENG%20koe%2Barviointiperusteet%20FI.pdf

Appendix 2

The student selection process for the English study track in 2021: Student experiences

This is a survey on student experiences of the student selection process into the University of Helsinki's Bachelor's Programme in Languages, specifically the English study track, whose data will be used in a Master's thesis conducted at the University of Helsinki.

You are welcome to participate in this study and answer the following questions if you applied and were accepted into the University of Helsinki in 2021, and have completed at least some of the basic studies in the English study track.

The questionnaire consists of three short sections and will take approximately under 10 minutes to complete. The data collected in this study will only be used for research purposes. The questionnaire is completely anonymous and no personal data is collected. Completing the questionnaire is strictly voluntary, which means you are free to cancel your participation at any point before completing the questionnaire. When submitting your answers, you consent that your answers are stored for research purposes and deleted after the Master's thesis is completed.

If you have any questions regarding the study or questionnaire, you can contact me at marinella.smirnios@helsinki.fi (mailto:marinella.smirnios@helsinki.fi)

Thank you for participating!

General questions

Please answer questions 1-7 for some general information on your experiences before and after the student admission process of Spring 2021.

1. I was accepted into the English study track of the Bachelor's Programme in Languages

   ◯ with certificate-based admission (todistusvalinta)

   ◯ with an entrance exam

2. I researched studying English in advance before applying for the Bachelor's Programme in Languages.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
	○	○	○	○	○

3. I had expectations of what it would be like to study in the English study track before starting my studies.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
	○	○	○	○	○

4. Studying English at the University of Helsinki has met my expectations.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
	○	○	○	○	○

5. If you answered "Strongly disagree" or "Disagree" in Question 4 and you wish to elaborate, do so below (in English or Finnish).

6. In general, the English study track courses I've completed so far have been (choose all that apply in your opinion)

☐ Too hard

☐ Hard

☐ Appropriate

☐ Easy

☐ Too easy

7. Which grade is the closest to your current GPA (if you know it)?

○ 1

○ 2

○ 3

○ 4

○ 5

The English matriculation exam

Please answer questions 8-11 if you completed the English matriculation exam in Spring 2021. Otherwise leave this section's questions empty, press "Next" and continue to the questions for the English entrance exam of Spring 2021.

8. I prepared for the English matriculation exam

- ◯ Not at all
- ◯ Somewhat
- ◯ Quite a lot
- ◯ Very much

9. The difficulty of the English matriculation exam was (choose all that apply in your opinion)

- ☐ Too hard
- ☐ Hard
- ☐ Appropriate
- ☐ Easy
- ☐ Too easy

10. The English matriculation exam focused on (choose all that apply in your opinion)

- ☐ General writing skills

- ☐ Listening comprehension

- ☐ Reading comprehension

- ☐ Grammar

- ☐ Vocabulary

- ☐ Text analysis

- ☐ Academic text comprehension

- ☐ Academic writing skills

- ☐ Defining academic concepts or terms

11. Completing the English matriculation exam prepared me for studying English at university level.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
○	○	○	○	○

The English entrance exam

Please answer questions 12-18 if you completed the entrance exam for the English study track of the Bachelor's Programme in Languages in Spring 2021. If you were accepted as a student through certificate-based admission (todistusvalinta), leave these questions empty and submit the questionnaire.

12. Did you prepare for the English entrance exam?

    ○ Yes

    ○ No

13. If you answered "Yes" on Question 12 and you wish to elaborate, do so below (in English or Finnish). For example, if you reread English course material from upper secondary school, read scientific or academic articles etc.

    [   ]

14. The difficulty of the English entrance exam was (choose all that apply in your opinion)

    ☐ Too hard

    ☐ Hard

    ☐ Appropriate

    ☐ Easy

    ☐ Too easy

15. The English entrance exam into the University of Helsinki focused on (choose all that apply in your opinion)

- [ ] General writing skills

- [ ] Listening comprehension

- [ ] Reading comprehension

- [ ] Grammar

- [ ] Vocabulary

- [ ] Text analysis

- [ ] Academic text comprehension

- [ ] Academic writing skills

- [ ] Defining academic concepts or terms

16. Completing the English matriculation exam prepared me for the English entrance exam

- ( ) Not at all

- ( ) Somewhat

- ( ) Quite a lot

- ( ) Very much

17. If you completed both the English matriculation exam and the English entrance exam in Spring 2021, compare them with each other.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
The English matriculation exam was **more difficult** than the entrance exam.	○	○	○	○
The English matriculation exam was **easier** than the entrance exam.	○	○	○	○
The entrance exam was **more difficult** than the English matriculation exam.	○	○	○	○
The entrance exam was **easier** than the English matriculation exam.	○	○	○	○
The exams are too different with each other for comparison.	○	○	○	○

18. Completing the English entrance exam prepared me for studying English at university level.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
○	○	○	○	○