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Internationalization and Finnish Higher Education: A Critical Perspective

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Finland is among those developed countries in the world that have internationalized their higher education institutions in order to attract international degree students and scholars from other countries. Many international degree students choose to study in Finland because of the tuition-free education, equal study opportunities, and a wide variety of study programmes offered in English. However, Finnish higher education institutions (HEIs) face certain challenges due to internationalization. For instance, there is an urgent need to explore the employment opportunities of international graduates in Finland due to the aging Finnish population. While Finnish higher education internationalization has focused overwhelmingly on international programmes taught in English, languages are seldom mentioned as a motivation for international programmes. Furthermore, the internationalization of Finnish HEIs is challenged by the introduction of tuition fees for students coming from outside of the European Union (EU). In conclusion, although the strategy for the internationalization of Finnish HEIs has been implemented, and while the aim of the internationalization is both to attract international students and to internationalize the Finnish ones, the international students' employability has been neglected, as many of those who choose to stay in Finland after graduation — because of family ties, for example — face difficulties finding a job. The issue of language has not also been given proper attention in the internationalization process.

Finland is known globally for its high quality of education attributed to its high score in the Programme of International Student Assessment (PISA). In the past few decades, many international degree students have moved to study in Finnish higher education institutions (HEIs) for various reasons. Some studies have indicated that many international degree students chose to study in Finland because of the tuition-free education, equal study opportunities, and a wide variety of study programmes offered in English. According to CIMO, the number of international degree students in Finnish HEIs has gradually increased since 2003. In 2010, there were 15,707 international degree students in Finnish HEIs, of which 7,815 were enrolled at universities and 7,892 at the Universities of Applied Sciences (UAS). That represented a total of 4.6% of all university students and 5.7% of all UAS students in Finland. By 2012, the number of international degree students in Finnish HEIs had increased to almost 20,000. Out of the total international student population in Finnish HEIs in 2012, around 40% were from Asia, 39.3% from North America, 14.2% from Africa, 2.5% from Latin America and the Caribbean, 2.4% from Oceania, and 0.3% from other countries.

The 2009–2015 strategy for the internationalization of Finnish HEIs was to increase the number of international degree students to 20,000 by 2015, and “to create in Finland, an

internationally strong and attractive higher education institution and research community that promotes society's ability to function in an open international environment, supports the balanced development of a multicultural society and participates actively in solving global problems" (Ministry of Education 2009). This strategy for the internationalization of Finnish HEIs looked feasible in relation to the increasing number of international students into Finnish HEIs since 2003.

However, Finnish HEIs for the most part have traditionally been seen as a nation state project. Internationalization emerged as a means to increase the competitiveness of Finnish HEIs due to recent higher education developments and political demands for increased student mobility in Finland. Currently, in the "new" Finnish higher education system, tuition fees have been introduced for students coming from outside of the EU. These structural changes brought by internationalization have compelled the Finnish HEIs to increase the share of English language programmes to replace and complement the Finnish language programmes, or to a lesser extent, the Swedish language programmes. Therefore, this article looks at some challenges faced by Finnish HEIs as a result of internationalization.

Internationalization and Finnish Higher Education System

The concept of internationalization relates to the relationship between and among nations, people, cultures, institutions, and systems. The internationalization of higher education is described as "the process of integrating an international, intercultural and global dimension into the goals, teaching/learning, research and service functions of a university or higher education system". There is no "one size fits all" model of internationalization. The international mobility of students is a growing global phenomenon and at the same time the most visible part of internationalization. During the last three decades, the international mobility of students, scholars and professors, has grown into a competitive multi-million dollar international recruitment business. Currently, many countries are investing in higher education to attract the best and brightest foreign students to study and work in the countries in order to supply national innovation and research with new "brain power".

The number of international degree students enrolled at HEIs around the world globally increased by 50% between 2005 and 2012. As many as 4.5 million students in 2012, were

studying outside of their home countries. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) estimates that by 2025, the total number of international degree students studying abroad will reach 8 million. Currently, internationalization of HEIs is considered essential for strengthening the relationship between HEIs and countries in an increasingly globalized and interdependent world. Internationalization involves ensuring that international graduates are better prepared global citizens capable of living and working in the global economy or making a meaningful contribution to the society within research and innovation, in order to solve societal problems. Internationalization is therefore a strategic priority for both governments and HEIs. The internationalization of HEIs became an issue of interest in policy debates and research in the 1990s with the focus on academic policies and practices adopted by HEIs to address the needs of a globalized world. The internationalization in higher education policies and practices includes exploring the experiences of both international and local students, as well as the administrative, management and faculty staff.

A recent trend in internationalization of HEIs has been the establishment of collaborative programmes between institutions in different countries that lead to double (or multiple) degrees, and in some cases joint degree programmes. The joint degree programmes are intended to provide a rich international and comparative academic experience for students that would improve their employment opportunities. It is important to point out that there are many excellent and innovative joint and double degree programmes being offered, but one of their unanticipated consequences is the potential misuse or abuse of degree granting and recognition traditions. However, though internationalization of HEIs is especially important today, recent developments around the world are putting internationalization of HEIs at odds with emerging nationalist, xenophobic and intolerant thinking and policies in many countries. Some HEIs that have prided themselves on working across national and cultural borders, now find themselves dealing with governments that are campaigning to keep international students out. These developments threaten the internationalization of HEIs all over the world.

In Finland, the internationalization of Finnish HEIs began in the 1980s and it focused on internationalization of research, followed by student and staff exchange programmes. Since the 1990s, the internationalization of Finnish HEIs has focused more on develop-

ing international degree programmes and student participation exchange schemes, in order to give the students skills in international working life and cooperation. The 2010 Finnish higher education reform was motivated by the international attractiveness of the Finnish HEIs. As Finland is a member of the European Union, the Finnish higher education system has been adapted in many ways to meet the demands of the European Higher Education Area. The 2009–2015 strategy for the internationalization of Finnish HEIs, emphasized the importance of ensuring “the development of national strengths through international cooperation.” According to CIMO, the number of Finnish students studying abroad and the number of study periods spent abroad, have been on the rise since the early 2000s in all Finnish HEIs. Over the same period, the number of foreign degree students in Finland has increased more than three-fold.

Challenges of Internationalization of Finnish HEIs

It is forecast that by 2025, the global demand for international education will grow to 7.2 million students, which represents a significant increase from the 1.2 million students in 2000. After several decades of intense development, the internationalization of HEIs has grown in scope, scale and importance, and there is no question that it has transformed the world of higher education. But the question is whether the changes have been for better or worse. There are serious issues regarding the quality of the academic offer, the integrity of the new types of providers, and the recognition of credentials. The increase in the number of foreign degree awards and accreditation, and for-profit providers not recognized by national authorities are some of the realities that the students and their parents face, along with their future employers and the academic community at large.

Currently, the international education sector is struggling to deal with fake degrees from doubtful HEIs. It is impossible to ignore the latest race to attract international students and academics for “brain power” and for “income generation”. The original goal of helping students from developing countries to complete a degree programme in another country and then return home to contribute to their national development is fading, as countries compete in the 21st century brain race. This, in effect, brings with it benefits for some countries and HEIs and losses for others. However, technology and social net-

working have brought new opportunities for brain sharing that will mitigate the weight of winners and losers, although the current obsession with global rankings and economic competitiveness might suggest otherwise. There is no question that international and regional rankings of HEIs have become more popular and problematic since 2003.

In Finland, the internationalization of HEIs poses some challenges. For instance, there is an urgent need to explore the employment of international graduates in Finland due to the aging Finnish population. Finland is considered to have a rapidly aging population, and it is a culturally homogenous country challenged by emerging migration issues. The student population is becoming more diverse at a fast rate, but the consequences of this development are far from understood. Additionally, while the Finnish society and education system are often valorised for outcomes linked to equality of education, the emergent social stratification has remained opaque, amidst successive implementations of migration policies incapable of improving stratification, especially concerning non - white European migrants. Most international students from non-EU countries, who have completed higher education studies in Finland, face considerable challenges in finding their first job. Exacerbating this situation are ongoing and unconvincing use of notions, like “multiculturalism” and “integration” which are conceptually ungrounded, empirically vague and do not involve shared meaning within the general population, policy actors, academics and the migrants themselves. Another challenge facing the internationalization of Finnish HEIs is language. While the internationalization of Finnish higher education has focused overwhelmingly on international programmes taught in English, languages are seldom mentioned as any kind of motivation for the establishment of international programmes. Furthermore, the internationalization of Finnish HEIs is challenged by the introduction of tuition fees for students coming from outside of the EU.

In conclusion, although the strategy for the internationalization of Finnish HEIs has been implemented, and while the aim of Finnish HEIs’ internationalization is both to attract international students and to internationalize the Finns, the employability of the international students has been neglected, as those who choose to stay in Finland because of family ties face many difficulties finding a job. Furthermore, the issue of language has not also been given proper attention in the internationalization process.

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