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International degree students' experiences of internship and employment in Turku, Finland

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The PATH Project – International talents as resource for expanding companies, funded by the European Social Fund and coordinated by Åbo Akademi University, aims to help international students in the Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the Turku area to act as a productive part of the local economic life after graduation. The Migration Institute of Finland conducted a survey in September 2015 for all the international degree students in Turku and a year later a follow-up survey was conducted. This article brings knowledge of the international degree students internship and work experiences during their studies, and how successful they were gaining employment after graduation in Turku. Of the international degree students of Turku who were graduating either in the end of 2015 or in 2016, 86 percent had either worked in Turku or had completed an internship in Finland or had done both. Graduate respondents who had stayed in Turku after graduation, nine out of ten were working and one was about to start to work. Most of them were Ph.D. candidates.

The PATH Project

The international mobility has increased and these days more and more young people get their education outside their home country. There are around 20,000 international students studying in Finland every year. Many of them would prefer to stay in Finland after their graduation and build up their career and

life there. According to CIMO, out of all the international graduates of 2009, 51 percent were working in Finland a year after graduating, 48 percent three years after graduating and 44 percent five years after graduating. A third moved away from the country shortly after finishing their studies and the figure increased a little during the five year period. Around a fifth of the graduates stayed in Finland for some other reason than work.

The PATH Project – International talents as resource for expanding companies, funded by the European Social Fund and coordinated by Åbo Akademi University, aims to help international students in the Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the Turku area to act as a productive part of the local economic life after graduation. The focus is on a win-win situation where individual students can find a position according to their level of education and career plans at the same time as the industry in the Turku area can get new competences (cultural, language, innovation etc.) and contacts that further their development and internationalization. There are wide range of development activities for international degree students including for example Mentorship Programme, Project Aces, Entrepreneurship as an Opportunity for International Students, Finnish Language and Working Life -courses, Student Ambassador Network, Friendship Programme and so on.

As part of the PATH Project, the Migration Institute of Finland conducted a survey

in September 2015 for all the international degree students of Åbo Akademi University, the University of Turku, Turku University of Applied Sciences and Novia University of Applied Sciences. A year later it was conducted also a follow-up survey. This article brings knowledge of the international degree students' internship and work experiences during their studies, and how successful they were gaining employment after graduation in Turku. In total, 303 students responded to the year 2015 survey. 135 of them announced to be willing to take part in the follow-up survey a year later. Totally, 48 of them answered to this survey in Surveyappal.

Turku has been an international city attracting foreign-background people during its long history and present time. International students are one important segment of immigrants who enrich the life in the City of Turku. Important factor affecting to this flow is the high reputation of the HEIs there.

Internship and employment

Of the international degree students of Turku who were graduating either in the end of 2015 or in 2016, 86 percent had either worked in Turku or had completed an internship in Finland or had done both. 69 percent of the students who had completed an internship felt that they had learned necessary skills for further employment. 47 percent had made important contacts during their internship, and for one third the internship had led to paid employment. University students received paid employment from their host company or organization more often than the students of universities of applied sciences. 61 percent of the students receiving employment through their internship worked full-time, and importantly, 94 percent of them in a job matching their level of education.

Other ways the students felt they had benefited from their internship included earned credits, gained knowledge about Finnish working life, improved language skills (both Finnish and English), new friends and work experience. Only 8 percent felt they had not benefited from their internship in any way.

Students in Doctoral Degree Programs were most satisfied with their work matching their level of education. 90 percent felt being in a right level job. This is at least partly explainable by the fact that many Doctoral students work as researchers at the university as part of their education. A quarter of the Master's Degree students felt their work matched their level of education when only 8 percent of the Bachelor's Degree students felt so. Most students cannot find employment from their

field of study, but instead work in low-level jobs, such as in passenger ship cleaning.

Altogether 10 of the respondents (3 percent) had been working as self-employed in Turku. Seven were studying at the University of Turku and three at the Åbo Akademi University. Eight of the ten entrepreneurs worked in a job matching their education.

In the survey the respondents were asked to tell about their experiences, both positive and negative, about Finnish work culture. The positive aspects mentioned most often were related to the general positive quality of the working environment. Colleagues had mostly been friendly and helpful and the punctuality and honesty were greatly appreciated. Finnish working life was seen as flexible and independent. Aspects which most Finns take for granted, such as getting paid on time, paid holidays and other employee rights were appreciated by many students. Many felt respected as employees and enjoyed the equality at the work place.

The negative aspects brought up in the survey were mostly related to unfair treatment. Some students felt that foreigners were being discriminated against in the job market. The discrimination was mostly explained by the lack of Finnish language skills. It was perceived that in order to advance your career, or to have one in the first place, you first need to get into the circles. Finnish social culture, or the lack of it, was also seen as a negative aspect of work life. Many had gotten used to more social way of life and felt isolated and alone in a Finnish workplace.

Follow-up survey: Employment during studies and after graduation

32 international degree students and 16 graduates answered to the follow-up survey. Out of the 16 respondents who had already graduated, ten (63%) were still living in Turku, two elsewhere in Finland and four abroad. 44 percent of the students were in some kind of employment. One student was purely self-employed, two were both self-employed and employed by someone else, and 11 students were employed solely by someone else. 18 students (56%) did not work at all. Positive is that many students worked in their own field and some had received full-time work already before their graduation. Less than half of the part-time workers were employed in elementary occupations such as cleaning. More than a half of the students working part-time had found their job through personal contacts. This shows that personal contacts are important in gaining employment even during studies.

Graduate respondents who had stayed in Turku after graduation, nine out of ten were working and one was about to start to work. 80 percent worked as professionals and most of them were Ph.D. candidates. Three graduates had stayed for other work. Altogether five of the 48 respondents were self-employed, two part-time and three alongside other work. Three of the five entrepreneurs stated being self-employed rather by necessity than by choice, due to the lack of work available in Turku.

Challenges and future goals

Finding a suitable job is challenging for all graduates but especially so for international students for at least two reasons. First is rather obvious; they are not native Finnish speakers and often their Finnish language skills are merely basic. International students know this fact and often find the high demand of Finnish language skills and the lack of language talent the biggest obstacle when looking for work. The second is the lack of personal contacts and this is especially true for those students who have just arrived to the country and for those who perhaps only study for two years and do not work during studies or complete internships. Internships have found to be very useful for creating these personal contacts which may even lead directly to paid employment.

The government's aim clearly is to get more international students to study in Finland since the new target proposed by the working group for promoting education exports, set up by the Ministry of Education and Culture, is to have 60,000 international students studying in Finland by 2025. This means that the number of international students is expected to triple within the next 10 years. The wider perspective is to tie basic international degree students also to the Ph.D. studies, and

each to become skilled labour for the Finnish working life. As the report of the Ministry of Education and Culture from year 2017 points out, this requires active actions and changes in the attitudes in all levels of the HEIs, public administration and economic life. All in all, it means putting more efforts on integration of these talents to the Finnish society.

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