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International degree students in Turku

Keywords: student mobility, higher education, employment, integration.

The demographics of Finland are changing; the population is aging and labor shortage is believed to be a great problem in the near future. Finland is also in an economic recession. At the same time there are thousands of international students studying in Finland. Staying here after graduation, they could not only pay back the funds used for their education, but become employees, tax-payers, consumers, even employers in the country that needs all of these. The threat is that these students will leave, because they cannot find work. Many students of Turku also move elsewhere in Finland, mainly to Helsinki, where the employment opportunities are better. With them, Turku loses all the cultural and social capital that these people possess.

The *International talents as resource for expanding companies (PATH)* project (2015–2017), funded by the European Social Fund and coordinated by Åbo Akademi University, attempts to improve the existing services for international students in Turku. The aim is that they would receive as much help in integration and finding employment as possible. As part of the project, the Institute of Migration 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. In total 303 students responded to the survey. Answers were analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively. The

main research questions were: 1) what attracts international students to Turku, 2) what does their socio-economic integration into Turku look like, and 3) what do they plan to do after their graduation.

The results showed that 85% of the respondents moved to Finland for their studies and 9% for social reasons. The most important reasons to choose Turku as a place to study was a specific study program and the good reputation of the higher education institutions (HEIs) in Turku. Many students had also arrived to Turku as exchange students but had liked the place so much they decided to stay or move back to complete a degree in Turku.

International students seemed to be very content with their studies in Turku. Nearly all of the students would have recommended their HEI. However, around half of the students of the universities of applied sciences and two thirds of the students of the universities needed more help with career planning and finding internships.

The need for more Finnish language courses and especially for the more advanced ones seemed to be great in all the HEIs in Turku. Positive fact is that 71% of the respondents were either motivated or very motivated to learn more Finnish. The lack of motivation for the rest was mainly due to their intentions of leaving the country after their graduation. It seems that while most students had studied the basics of Finnish, the majority also had left it at that.

This, of course, is not surprising if further language courses are not available.

Total of 86% of the international students, who estimated to graduate in 2015 or 2016, had either completed an internship in Finland or had been employed in Turku. Over 30% of the respondents had done both. One third of the internships had led to paid work and nearly two thirds of the students who received paid employment through an internship, worked full-time and almost all of them in a job matching their level of education. It was the Doctoral students, however, who were the most satisfied with their jobs, while the Master's and Bachelor's Degree students were mostly working in low-level jobs, such as cleaning. The difficulty of finding a suitable job was brought up time after time, a problem which is very familiar to the Finnish students too.

More than 60% of the respondents stated that they would prefer staying in Finland after graduation if work was available. Most of them would like to stay in Turku (44% of respondents). A quarter of the respondents were planning to leave the country. The desire to stay was the highest among those who had just arrived, and seemed to decrease with time. This was most probably the case because work is difficult to find. Lack of job opportunities is the primary reason why students plan to leave both Turku and Finland.

Out of all the international students the IT, engineering and technology students and the students of medicine are the ones most likely to stay in Turku. On one hand, job opportunities for the graduates of medicine are likely to be fairly good at the moment, which would explain their desire to stay. The employment situation in the IT sector, on the other hand, is not great. The students of this field seemed, however, to believe its future come back. At the same time most of the students of education planned to leave Turku (70%), as did those of humanities, arts and culture (71%). Social sciences students were the most likely leavers from Turku (77%). Alarmingly, even though most of the health care and social services students planned to stay in Finland, 55% of them wanted to leave Turku.

Students' countries of origin also seemed to affect their plans after graduation. While 55% of the Africans and 51% of the Asians planned to stay in Turku if possible, only 17% of the students coming from North America and 30% of the students coming from those European countries outside the EU/EEA planned to stay in Turku.

Surprisingly many international students were interested in starting up their own busi-

ness in Turku. Two thirds of the respondents were interested or possibly interested in becoming self-employed in Turku. The most interested were the students studying IT/Technology/Engineering and Business. These figures are significantly higher than those of the Finnish HEI students, for according to a survey conducted by Aarnio, 21% of HEI students in Finland planned to become entrepreneurs in 2015, and 65% felt it would be very unlikely that they would start their own business.

Even though international degree students have been a part of Finnish educational system for at least couple of decades and their numbers have been increasing steadily, Finnish employers and the society as a whole have still to realize their full value. The cultural and social capital these students possess will be lost if they leave the country after their graduation.

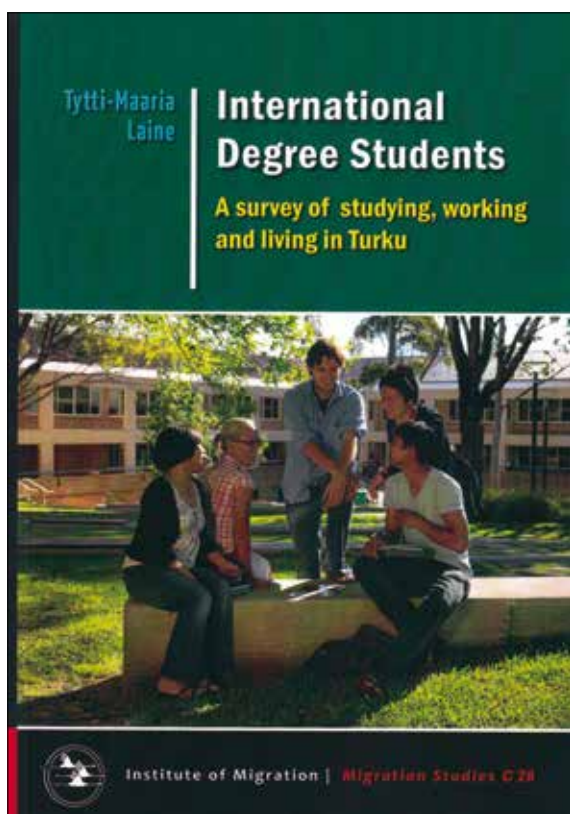
The international students often have to work extra hard to get what they want. They do not have the same kind of social network as native Finns do. Among the international students there are also strong professionals with years of international work experience, connections and skills. Most of them speak at least one other language besides English and Finnish, one respondent spoke nine languages. Besides the language skills, they also possess something that is hard to learn: the knowledge of the intricacies of communication in their own culture which would be valuable for any company dealing with international relations.

During the years leading to the new law establishing tuition fees for non-EU/EEA students, the Finnish government made some facilitations for the international students by means of changing the Nationality Act in 2011 and the immigration law in 2015. After these changes the international students are eligible to apply for Finnish citizenship sooner than before (for example, four years of studies in Finland counts as two years of permanent residency) and the students are allowed to stay and look for work for one year after their graduation instead of six months.

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 in the next 10 years. Unless the aim is to take example from the British and only get the short-time financial benefit from the tuition fees, more support than currently is available should be given to these students.

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