Finland and Sweden: Matching Labor Market Needs with Talented Migrants

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The latest financial crisis has given rise to sweeping transformations in labor markets. Today, many developed countries require a variety of skilled workers in order to develop a knowledge economy. Since these countries face certain internal demographic and educational problems that are obstacles to sustained economic growth, they require skilled migrant workers. Our study analyzes these situations in two Nordic countries, Finland and Sweden. We found that both countries are using an active strategy through policies aimed to attract and retain the most talented foreign students and workers, easing their entrance into labor markets and granting them permanent residence.

Key words: high skilled migration, skilled worker, knowledge economy, demographics, foreign students.

Introduction

The world is still struggling in the aftermath of the financial crisis that began in the United States in 2007/2008 and spread to all the capitalist countries at that time; it continues to have recessive effects in many countries. Many developed countries are facing demographic and educational difficulties and have to find a way to deal with the new migratory patterns, in which skilled migrant labor plays a significant role.

Up until the crisis, migratory flows up were, as always, determined by the demands of international labor markets. After the crisis, international labor markets require not only low-skilled laborers, but, increasingly, highly skilled workers. These requirements surfaced as plans were implemented to deepen innovation, science, and technology to create what can be called the "knowledge economy." Host countries require these types of workers not only because they have the competitive qualifications for joining the knowledge economy, but because their own demographic and educational problems are becoming obstacles for continuing development.

It is noticeable, however, that in contrast to previous crises, although the flow of skilled migrant labor declined slightly, it began to recover fairly quickly, and is rising steadily despite the crisis.

We first noted in our research on the United States (Aragonés and Salgado, 2013) that demographic and educational problems were largely behind the needs for highly skilled migrant workers. Subsequently we analyzed conditions in the five countries (the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Japan) that are the main recipients of skilled immigrants worldwide according to OECD data (Aragonés and Salgado, 2014). We also found that these countries had a very specific interest in retaining the most talented students with graduate degrees in disciplines like engineering, mathematics, technology, and computer science; this interest was demonstrated by certain facilities the countries offered them in obtaining permanent residence visas. It is not surprising that the students' disciplines were also closely related to the knowledge economy.

In this paper, we turn our attention to two Nordic countries, Finland and Sweden. Various international organizations consider that Finland and Sweden enjoy the highest indicators of human development and play a very important role in the knowledge economy.

Our hypothesis revolves around the idea that developed countries show internal structural problems at a demographic and educational level, which become obstacles for pursuing their plans to advance the knowledge economy. Their strategy for quickly overcoming these obstacles has been to incorporate highly qualified immigrants into their work force. These types of migrants are now becoming a determining factor in new migratory flows, not only because of their importance in overcoming the crisis, but as a complement to the domestic work force, compensating for internal structural problems. Demographers point to the difficulty countries face once they enter into a downward spiral in fertility rates, because the trend might not be reversed through internal measures (Ordorica, 2005; McDonald, 2008). As for the educational factor, it is easier and faster to attract migrant workers in the numbers and quality the labor markets require. Because highly qualified migrant workers are scarce, the strategy for attracting them involves making immigration policies more flexible, offering better conditions than those traditionally in place.

We analyzed demographic and educational conditions in Finland and Sweden to understand whether these are the factors that oblige them to make their immigration policies increasingly welcoming, not only to attract highly qualified immigrants but to keep them, given the scarcity of highly qualified native-born workers to stimulate the knowledge economy.

This article is divided into sections. First, we analyze demographic issues; second, we study the impact of policies for improving internal educational levels; finally, we present a brief analysis of the various immigration policies aimed at recruiting and retaining global talent in order to contribute to the development of the knowledge economy.

Demographic Aspects of Nordic Countries.

In Finland and Sweden, as in the rest of Europe, the population is aging. Life expectancies have risen to an average of 79 years in 2013 as a result of the welfare programs introduced by governments in the past. Mortality rates will continue to decline in the future, but in various degrees according to projections for each country. Sweden is more heavily populated, with 9.6 million inhabitants, while Finland had 5.4 million inhabitants in January 2014 (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2014).

Population aging in these countries is a result of a dramatic reduction in fertility rates that rarely reaches the level of population replacement (2.1 births per woman of childbearing age). Sweden and Finland reached this situation in 1968/1972 (Figure 1).

Population growth below the replacement rate in these countries has resulted in a gradual aging of their populations. According to demographic projections, the elderly adult population will more than double the old-age dependency ratio during the period 2007/2050 (Mamolo and Scherbov, 2009). This demographic situation is in part responsible for the shortage of workers in the labor market and is in turn an obstacle for long-term economic growth potential. It is interesting to note that despite the

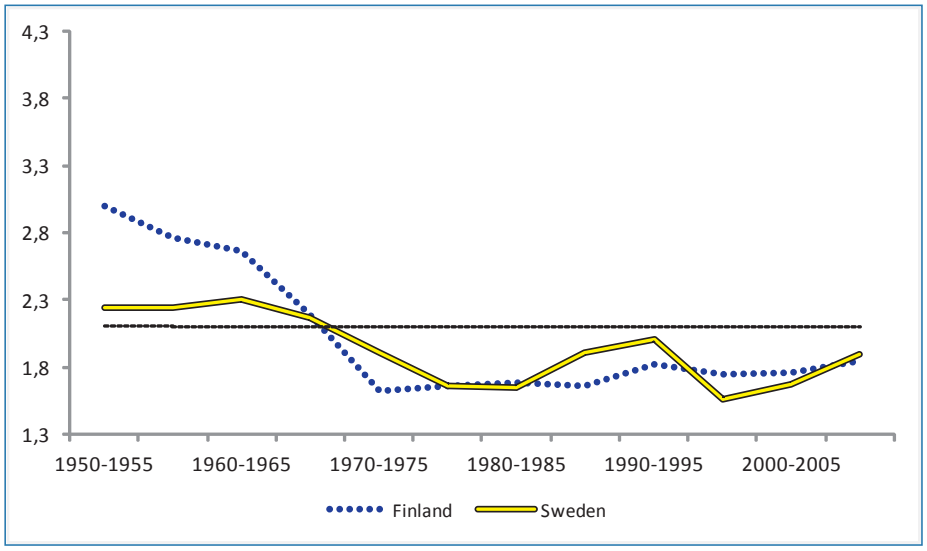

Figure 1. Fertility rates and replacement level of Nordic countries by five-year period, 1950–2010. Source: Statistics from the UN, World Population Prospects.

tremendous effort that countries have made to educate their populations, internal contingents remain insufficient to meet the demand of strategic sectors for building their knowledge economy.

Educational Aspects in Finland and Sweden

Knowledge is the driving force in international economic competition and the capacity to reach higher levels of development. For this, a country needs enough human capital trained in certain professions, such as science, engineering, mathematics, and computer science, enabling innovations that can generate an extraordinary surplus. Because of this, Finland and Sweden have made a huge effort to educate their populations, spending in 2011 6.5% and 6.3% of GDP, respectively, on education (OECD 2014).

This educational effort can be seen in Figure 2, where we find that a substantial proportion of young people (20/29 year olds) are enrolled in institutions of higher learning in Finland and Sweden. We have included the United States in this graph as a point of reference, and it is interesting to note that both countries' enrollment rates are higher than those in the United States.

When we look at graduation rates, we find that in almost all countries, slightly fewer than half of enrolled students complete their degrees. The country with the worst performance in this regard is Sweden, which reported a graduation rate of 39% in 2012, very close to the U.S. rate (Figure 3).

With a gradually aging population and less than half of young people completing their academic degrees, labor market demands within the framework of the knowledge economy cannot be met by internal contingents. This makes it necessary to incorporate highly qualified migrant workers. Finland and Sweden introduced two mechanisms to recruit global talent. The first is easing immigration policies to facilitate the transition from temporary to permanent residence visas. This type of change began to be seen during the worst part of the recent economic crisis of 2008/2009. The second mechanism is to attract foreign university students, offering them the guarantee of a job and permanent residence. This is a crucial mechanism, not just for the central role that education plays in the knowledge economy, but because it increases the exchange of goods, services, and knowledge in receiving countries.

Clearly, advances in communications technology and transportation have increased education-based migration to unprecedented levels (Institute of International Education, 2011). However, in order to make this student mobility and acquired knowledge a strategic mechanism for the countries of origin, the governments must have planned and created the infrastructure needed to fully incorporate these new professionals and employ them at a level that matches their exceedingly high level of training. This is what could make student mobility a trigger for greater competitiveness based on knowledge. It would in turn contribute to the development of the countries of origin. The problem is that very few underdeveloped countries strategically plan for this student mobility, and it therefore becomes an obstacle for workers who wish to return. Ironically, it also becomes an incentive for host countries that urgently need to attract talent from all around the world. International students are ideal candidates, because over time they have adapted to different countries' cultural and

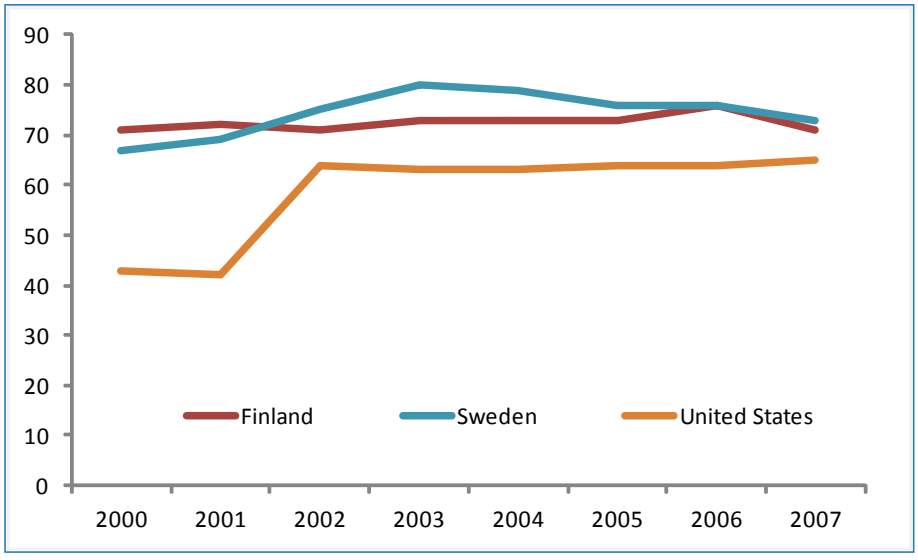

Figure 2. Students enrolled in higher education in Scandinavian countries (undergraduate students as a percentage of the population in the age group corresponding to this educational level); 2000–2007. Source: In-house calculations, OECD.

social characteristics. The problem is that these countries' main objective is to make up for the scarcity of talent in their own labor markets, so they would not want highly skilled immigrants to return to their countries of origin (Anderson and Solitander, 2014).

Finland does not charge international students tuition; this, combined with the availability of programs in English, explains the sharp rise in the number of foreign students enrolled in this country between 2003 and 2012. However, there is ongoing debate in Finland over the introduction of enrollment fees for foreign students due to the costs they represent for higher education in Finland. However, public loan programs are available for these students. The *Erasmus Mundus* program was introduced, offering to cover all or part of the enrollment cost; most of the beneficiaries are from China, Pakistan, Russia, and Iran (Myklebust 2014). Sweden has introduced tuition fees that have been compensated by scholarships for students from outside the European Area. In this sense, the government has encouraged this scholarship program, allocating around US$15 million in 2013 to finance foreign students' tuition and living costs (Diaz, 2014). In Sweden, foreign student enrollment declined sharply between 2007 and 2008, but began to rise again after that and is now showing a clear recovery (Figure 4).

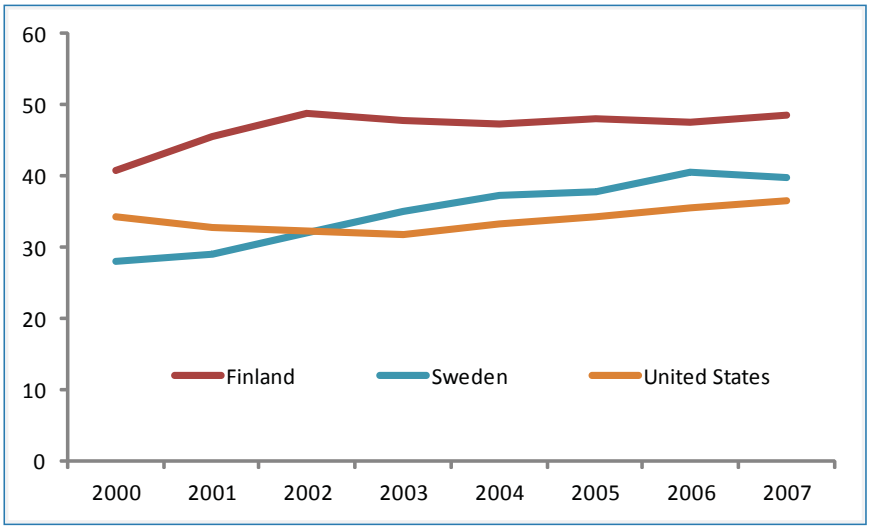

Figure 3. Terminal efficiency rate of higher education in Scandinavian countries (ratio of higher education graduates to population in the age group typical of graduation). Source: In-house calculations, OECD.

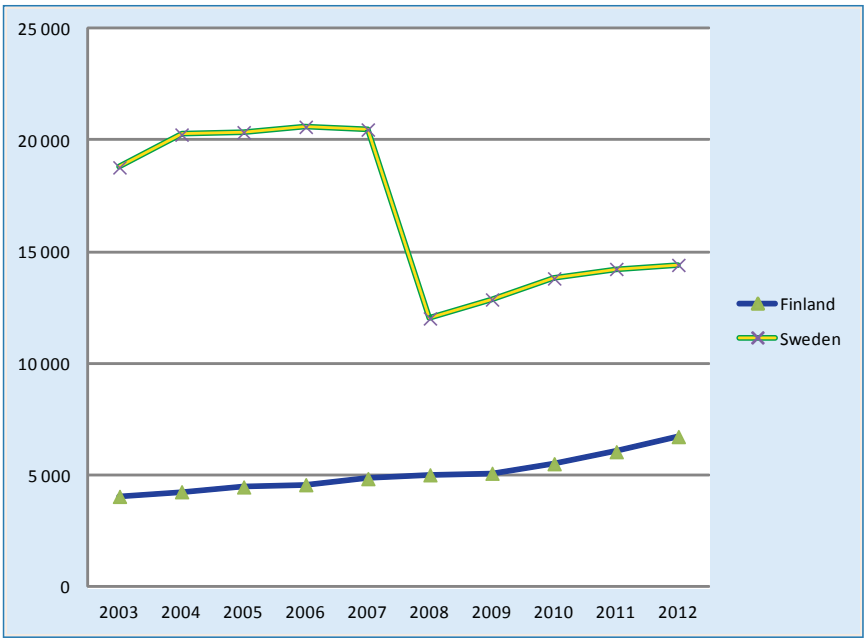

Figure 4. Foreign students enrolled in higher education, 2003–2012. Source: In-house calculations, OECD.

Highly Qualified Labor in the Context of the Crisis

Although the migration of skilled workers is not new, what makes today's trends different from what was happening 20 years ago is the surprising increase in the flow of this type of worker, encouraged also by increased intense global competition (Duncan and Waldorf, 2010). What is more interesting still is that the situation has prompted developed countries to introduce a set of immigration policies to attract these workers by offering them better conditions, even during the global economic crisis.

It is useful to recall that in recent years, migrant workers were the first to feel the effects of the

economic crisis. This happened in France and Germany during the serious crisis that began in 1970. It prompted them to virtually halt their guest worker programs (ibid.) in an effort to protect their labor markets from unemployment. The difference today is that even during the crisis, some countries hesitate to place restrictions on the inflow of highly qualified workers, because they bring special abilities, training, and experience that cannot easily be replaced in the short term. It is also a way for the countries to make up for the scarcity of this type of worker in their home markets and thus meet labor market demands (Cerna 2010).

Finland and Sweden are characterized by their rapid economic growth and the development of new technologies. They also maintain an extensive, modern system of social protection and regulation of labor markets that subjects all workers, whether immigrants or native, to the same standards. These countries have introduced research and development strategies consistent with changes in global economic conditions.

Finland carried out one of the most successful economic reconfigurations following the crushing 1990 crisis, including a restructuring of its institutions to modernize the economy. The strategy was coordinated by the prime minister based on social consensus and complemented by a centralized wage negotiation system (Benner, 2003). The traditional industries that had dominated manufacturing in Finland were based on commodities, primarily paper, wood, and metals. The country began a sweeping change in its industrial focus, moving toward high-tech products, particularly telecommunications equipment, helped by substantial increases in the research budget. Investments in R&D went from 1.5% of GDP at mid-1980 to 3.5% in 2001, backed by both public monies and private enterprise (Blomstrom, Kokko and Sjoholm, 2002). Because of these policies, Finland is now one of the countries that invest the most in R&D according to World Bank data. It spent 3.5% of its GDP on this budget item in 2012, just below Israel, which invested 3.9% of its GDP in the same year. According to the Global Innovation Index Finland is ranked as the fourth most innovative country (Dutta, Lanvin & Wunsch-Vincent 2014).

In 1991/1993, the Swedish economy was hit by a grave financial crisis, but it was able to recover over the course of the decade by decisively promoting research to substantially increase its competitiveness (Blomstrom, op. cit). Of all the world's economies, Sweden ranks third economy in its R&D investment, 3.4% of GDP, just below Finland, according to World Bank data. As a result of these policies, Sweden has been ranked as the third most innovative country in the world according to the 2014 global innovation index (Dutta, Lanvin & Wunsch-Vincent 2014).

Additionally, both Finland and Sweden are highly committed to reducing carbon dioxide emissions by increasing the importance of renewable sources in overall energy production and by improving energy efficiency in all industries. Sweden is recognized as one of the most environmentally friendly economies in all of Europe. In Finland and Sweden, the main renewable sources are biomass and hydroelectric energy. In Sweden, hydroelectric energy makes up about 84.6%, and in Finland, approximately 58% of renewable sources (Lindqvist 2010).

The renewable energy sector of the economy is very important for the Nordic countries, and creates demand for highly qualified workers to promote environmentally friendly innovations, together with investments in the knowledge economy. It is interesting to observe the ways in which these countries have eased immigration policies to benefit highly qualified immigrant workers. They have also tried to intensify measures for retaining foreign students in order to continue satisfying domestic demand.

The following is a brief analysis of changes introduced into the immigration policies of Finland and Sweden.

Sweden

A work permit can be issued to highly qualified workers to come to Sweden; if they are from member countries of the European Union (EU) or from Nordic nations (EEA members), they do not require this type of permit. These permits are valid for two years and can be renewed for up to four; after four years, immigrants are guaranteed a permanent residence visa.

Certain categories of workers who are citizens neither of the EU nor the EEA do not require work permits. These categories include high-skilled occupations, such as company representatives; visiting researchers or teachers in higher education; performers, technicians, and other tour personnel;

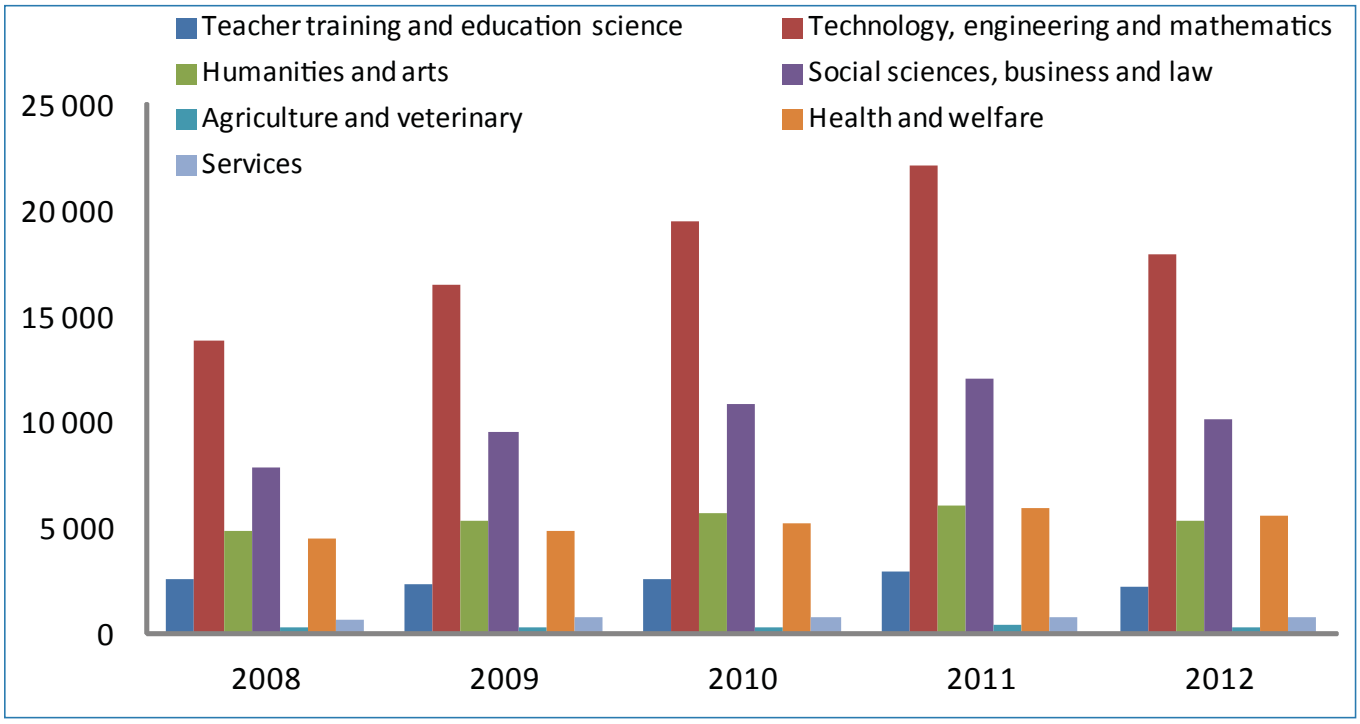

Figure 5. Foreign students by field of study in Sweden, 2008–2012 (number of persons). Source: In-house calculations, EUROSTAT.

specialists' temporary employed by a multinational corporation (Migrationsverket 2015).

In Sweden there are also a tax relief for foreign key personnel stipulated on the Chapter 11 Section 22-23 of the Income Tax Act of 1999, since 2001 they have covered experts, specialists, researchers and other key personnel; this legislation will provide a 25 percent reduction of taxable income of a foreign key worker, this reduction will apply to the first three years of the temporary stay in Sweden (forskarskattenämnden.se).

Because of this kind of policy aimed at facilitating access and retention of highly qualified immigrants, residence permits for researchers have risen considerably between 2005 and 2013, increasing from 341 to 1,129 respectively, according to the Swedish Migration Office.

To retain students, Sweden introduced measures to allow them to gradually enter the labor market even before they graduate. International students do not need work permits during the valid period of their residence permit: they can work while they study without restrictions of duration, specific profession, or employer. In 2011 the Parliamentary Committee on Circular Migration suggested that international students should be allowed to stay up to six months after completing their studies to look for a job; this law came into effect in June 2014. This could be a path to permanent residence in Sweden, because after graduation, they can obtain a work contract, which is needed to apply for a two-year, renewable work permit. After four years in Sweden, these students can apply for a permanent residence permit (Allison and Solitander 2014).

These foreign students are most likely working in industries related to the knowledge economy since many of them are working in the fields of as science, mathematics, and engineering (see Figure 5). It can therefore be said that foreign students play a central role in the knowledge economy for host countries.

Finland

Like other Nordic countries, Finland has special immigration policies for workers from the EU or the EEA, who face no obstacles at all for working in Finland. Immigrants from other regions can enter the Finnish labor market through a residence permit scheme. Work-related residence permits are limited to certain professional fields and depend not on

the employer, but on the government, which determines labor market needs in accordance with guidelines designed by the Finnish immigration service.

Highly qualified immigrants have an unlimited right to work in fields such as sports or as professionals in sciences, executives or mid-level corporate managers, experts with extraordinary abilities or professionals in the field of communications on the base of a residence permit. Another set of residence permit categories give immigrants limited rights to work, such as training-related work, the permit is good for only six months (The Finnish Immigration Service 2015a). Finally, a third category exists which allows the immigrant to work for just three months without having to request a residence permit (as long as they have documents validating their entry). This category includes interpreters, professors, specialists, artists, athletes, assistants working under contract, and fruit pickers (The Finnish Immigration Service 2015b).

Finland offers to highly skilled immigrants a special tax regime. If their stay is longer than six months but shorter than 4 years they can pay a flat rate 35 percent tax on their earned income, this special rate is applied to persons working as teachers or researchers in an institution of higher education in Finland, this applies also to workers whose duties in the service of a Finnish employer require special skills (Finnish Tax Administration 2012).

With this immigration policy, Finland favors the entry of the type of immigrants it requires and compensates for its demographic challenges. To further boost the flow of qualified immigrants into the labor market, in 2007 the Finnish government began to gradually change its immigration policy, assigning working rights to a larger number of occupations in various areas and thus ensuring the exact type of workers needed in the labor market (ibid.). These policies have brought about a slight increase in residence permits for specialists and researchers in the sciences, from 1,382 in 2011 to 1,519 in 2013, according to Finnish Immigration Service data.

Despite substantial changes in immigration policies to encourage the entry of highly skilled immigrants, the changes have proved insufficient to meet labor market demand. Accordingly, Finland introduced an interesting program aimed at retaining students already in the country. While the students complete their studies, they are allowed to work part time and full time during vacations, making the transition easier from a student permit to a work permit. It also gives them an incentive for remaining in the country by allowing them to apply for a residence permit for six months after completing their degree, in order to give them time to find a job. Those who are unable to find a permanent job after they graduate and still want to remain in Finland are encouraged to take any job. However, without proper orientation about their rights, these young people often agree to work under labor conditions below the standards of other Nordic countries just to be able to stay, because residence permits are based on labor contracts (*Helsinki Times* 2010).

Finland ranks ninth among the countries with the highest retention rates for foreign students, according to data from the OECD. In 2008, 22% of foreign students who completed their education in Finland were able to change their temporary immigration status to permanent residence. This will contribute greatly to Finland's efforts to participate in the knowledge economy, particularly given that most of the foreign students graduate in fields relating to mathematics, science, and engineering (see Figure 6).

Final Thoughts

Capitalist structural crises have given rise to transformations in patterns of accumulation, which modify immigration patterns by changing international labor market demands and needs and the forms of center-periphery articulation. "The crisis of the old does not open an array of infinite possibilities – quite the contrary" (Valenzuela 2012). It is therefore not surprising that in the new migratory pattern taking shape in response to the 2007/2008 structural crisis, highly qualified workers who began to play an important role toward the end of the last century are now becoming increasingly important, because the dominant world powers are convinced that one of the ways to overcome the crisis is to deepen the knowledge economy. However, since qualified workers are an insufficient supply in their countries because of the demographic and educational problems we have analyzed in this study, they will have to import highly skilled workers to overcome their domestic shortage. It cannot

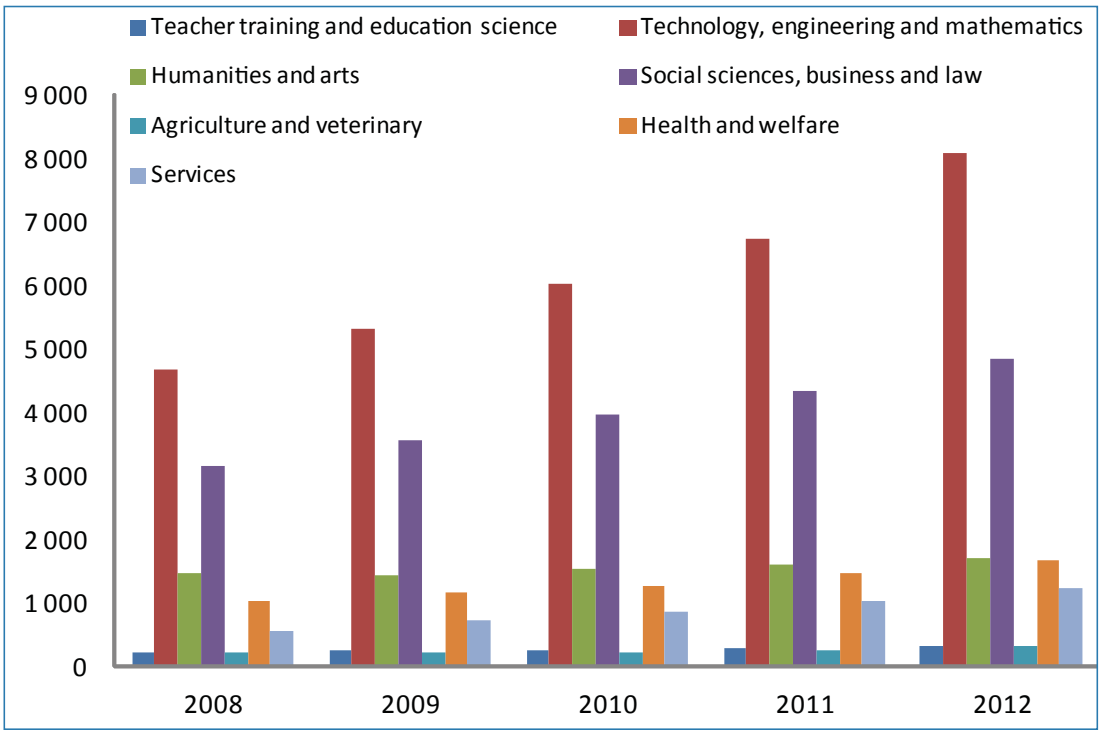

Figure 6. Number of foreign students by field of study in Finland, 2008–2012. Source: In-house calculations, EUROSTAT.

be ruled out that we will soon see an international competition for talent.

There has been renewed interest among foreign students to join these countries' work forces once they earn their degrees, in particular those whose professions are directly related to the knowledge economy. This strategy implies tremendous benefits for the host countries, because it gives them a supply of already trained, qualified immigrants. With regard to foreign students who receive training in these countries, the advantage is that their qualifications are consistent with labor market needs. If this process continues, what may happen is that the world's countries will begin to have to compete for this talent, which would have different repercussions. Among them, highly qualified immigrants would become a form of subsidy for developed countries with no positive impact on the immigrants' countries of origin (Aragonés and Salgado, 2011). This would deepen asymmetries with developed countries, condemning developing nations to remain in the same condition.

Another possibility, however, is that countries of origin will realize that development requires not only educating their population in the framework of the knowledge economy, but also addressing the pressing need to transform their economic, political, and social projects to create centers for research, technological innovation, universities, etc., so they can absorb their own human resources and avoid forcing their graduates and trained professionals to emigrate. This would trigger a basic change that could alter the inequitable relationship of forces and allow countries to progress toward development.

If not, these countries will continue to lose human resources and will remain in a pattern that is becoming a new way of deepening asymmetries among countries.

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