

Enhancing the Employability of International Graduates during Education – A Case Study based on Finnish Universities of Applied Sciences

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Abstract

The recruitment of international students is one way of recruiting foreign highly skilled labour. International graduates increase the availability of labour if they are able to enter the host country's

workforce upon graduation. If the aim is to educate the students for the local labour market, the employment of international students should be supported during education. This article describes the findings of a study on the employment of international graduates from universities of applied sciences in Finland and graduates' perspectives on how higher education institutions can support the employability of international graduates. The research data were gathered in 2008-2010 through semi-structured interviews. According to the graduates the most important areas for development in education were reflection on professional development, teaching of local language and culture, orientation to learning methods used, mix of international and local students, connections to work life, job-seeking skills and cultural competence.

Key words

internationalisation, higher education, university of applied sciences, student, employment

Introduction

This article describes the employment experiences of graduates with a foreign background after their studies at Finnish Universities of Applied Sciences (UAS), the factors in

their education which enhanced their employment possibilities and how, according to them, education could be developed. The aim is to find out how employability could be enhanced during education.

International students in Finland

The amount of international students who complete degrees, mainly in English, in Finnish higher education institutions is increasing. In 2009 there were altogether 14 097 students with foreign nationality in Finland, 7113 in UASs (5.2 % of the student population) and 6984 in universities (4.1 % of the student population) (CIMO, 2011). The rise of the knowledge economy and global competition for skills have provided a new driver for the internationalisation of education systems in many countries, with the recruitment of foreign students part of a broader strategy to recruit highly skilled immigrants. If the aim is to increase the human capital of the receiving country, it is important to prepare the students for the local labour market (Tremblay, 2004; Wächter & Maiworm, 2007).

The prerequisite for international students to study in a country which has national languages that are rarely spoken outside its borders, as in Finland, is that studies are offered in foreign languages, often in English. Many non-English speaking countries worldwide offer academic programmes in English to attract international students (Altbach, 2004; Marginson & van der Wende, 2007; Wächter & Maiworm, 2007). Higher education institutions in Finland often list the recruitment of inter-

national degree students and the development of complete English-taught degree programmes as important strategic goals. At the moment there are more than 350 English-taught degree programmes available. UASs mainly offer Bachelor's programmes, but the number of Master's programmes is also increasing. Universities focus on Master's programmes. Most provision is in the business and technological sectors, as it is elsewhere in Europe.

The basic question in the development of programmes in English is why and for whom, Finnish or international students, these programmes are developed. These considerations should guide the planning and implementation of the programmes. The integration of the students into Finnish society is one concern. If the aim is to educate foreigners for the Finnish labour market, the employment of international students should be supported. The role of support services in addition to the actual study programmes is important (Garam & Ketolainen, 2009).

Competences needed for the working in Finland

The world of work and its organisations have lately become knowledge intensive innovation centres in which collaborative work, networking and transformative and creative learning are key concepts. Professional expertise is much more than having a strong domain-specific knowledge base (Tynjälä et al., 2006). In a European survey on Employers' perceptions of graduate employability (European Commission, 2010) graduate recruiters highlighted the importance of team work, sector-specific skills, communication skills, com-

puter literacy, the ability to adapt in new situations, first class ability in reading/writing and analytical and problem-solving skills. Foreign language skills were regarded as more important when the recruiter had international contacts. A large majority of employers were satisfied with the skills of the graduates.

Higher education institutions should not only provide academic preparation and transmit knowledge to the students, but effectively prepare them for the labour market and the world of work in general. In the studies of Tynjälä et al. (2006) and Stenström (2006) university and UAS graduates were asked to describe the skills they needed in their jobs and to evaluate their studies in relation to their current job demands. University graduates rated social skills as the most important qualifications. The most important skills needed for their work life were learnt at work. It seems that both groups of graduates found their formal education inadequate as regards to the demands of work. According to the UAS graduates the institutions were less able to provide them with self-regulation and practical skills, while theoretical skills were supplied fairly well.

These challenges should be taken into consideration in the higher education curricula. Finnish UASs have actively developed their curricula according to European guidelines. The Rectors' Conference of Finnish Universities of Applied Sciences (ARENE) in 2010 gave recommendations on the use of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) in Finnish UASs (ARENE, 2010). According to the recommendations the competences in the curricula should be divided into subject specific

competences and generic competences. The subject specific competences form the basis of the student's professional development. The generic competences are common to different degree programmes, but their specific features and importance can differ in different professions. They form the basis for subsequent conduct in the students' work lives, as well as co-operation and development of expertise. The generic competences are learning competence, ethical competence, working community competence, innovation competence and internationalisation competence.

Employment of people with a non-Finnish background

Employment is important for an immigrant to integrate into a society. It is not only valuable as a means of maintaining a certain standard of living, but is a sign of being socially acceptable as well. Employability and labour market integration are influenced by several factors. An important individual factor is human capital which consists of e.g. an individual's education, knowledge, professional competence, language skills, cultural competence and work experience. Cultural capital, the command of social and cultural codes, is also important. Social capital, access to networks and trust is needed as well (Forsander, 2002).

An immigrants' employability and integration into the labour market are in some ways similar to the native population's, but more complex. The most qualified are generally more easily employed, due to their higher level of education, and greater ability to adjust and gather and process information. Human capital from abroad will certainly be in

demand in certain professions, and some skills may be considered to be transnational human capital. The international transferability of human capital is however limited. A distinction can be made between country specific and general human capital. Examples of country specific human capital are language skills, cultural skills and professional skills adapted to national requirements. Proficiency in the language of the host country is an essential factor in the successful integration to labour market. General knowledge about how labour markets operate and some occupation-specific skills are not readily transferable, for example due to technical or cultural differences. Also discrimination against immigrants can reduce their ability to transfer their skills. The possession of a degree from the host country is an additional advantage, not only because of the recognition of diplomas, but also because employers know the degree, and the linguistic and social proficiencies generally associated with education in the host country (Chiswick & Miller, 2007, 2009a, 2009b; Duvander, 2001; Friedberg, 2000; Noki & Kovanen, 2008; Tremblay, 2004).

Structural factors like labour market demand are also important. Many OECD countries have been looking to labour migration to help fill in the expected shortfalls in labour supply in the coming decades, but the present economic crisis has changed the picture. Net migration has tended to decline during past economic downturns because there are fewer job opportunities (OECD 2009).

According to earlier studies these factors are connected to the integration of immigrants into the Finnish labour

market as well. Country of origin often explains an individual's labour market position. The labour market status of refugees and immigrants from developing countries has been weakest, and is strongest amongst immigrants from Western countries and Asia. Educational level and work experience are also important, although academically educated immigrants have had difficulties in getting employed in their own fields and at a level equivalent to their knowledge. The country in which education has been completed is meaningful as well. A degree attained in Finland seems to offer a better starting point for employment than a degree attained elsewhere. Also language skills are very important for a person's labour market position. Personality and individual characteristics, such as being active, flexible, social, open, positive and friendly have been found important as social networks and social competence are instrumental to gaining access to the labour market. Social networks have a dual role, on one hand they act as a crucial resource opportunity, on the other hand they operate as constraining factors by channelling immigrants into the low-prestige sectors of the labour market. Ethnic discrimination and the prejudices and attitudes of employers, as well as those of employees and customers were regarded as obstacles. The experiences of discrimination were more common among immigrants who were visibly non-Finnish (Ahmad, 2005; Forsander, 2002; Forsander & Alitolppa-Niitamo, 2000; Haapakorpi, 2007; Heikkilä & Pikkarainen, 2006, 2008; Jasinskaja-Lahti, Liebkind & Vesala, 2002; Joronen, 2005; Juuti, 2005; Keski-Nisula, 2008; Kin, 2007; Kyhä, 2007; Liebkind et al., 2004; Markkanen & Tammisto, 2005; Salmenhaara, 2008; Tikkanen et

al., 2008; Väliehmas & Ylätaalo, 2008).

Graduates from Finnish HEIs should have a better labour market position than immigrants generally have because they have a degree from Finland and greater experience of Finnish society and working in Finland. According to the statistics most of the international graduates from Finnish UASs have stayed in Finland and are employed (Majakulma 2011).

Suggestions for the improvement of education from strategies and earlier studies

The importance of internationalisation is emphasised in the Strategy for the Internationalisation of HEIs in Finland 2009-2015 (Ministry of Education, 2009). One of the aims is to create a genuinely international higher education community. Thus, the number of non-Finnish degree students should rise. The competence and cultural know-how of these students should be utilised as a resource to enrich Finnish culture and Finland's higher education system. It is the responsibility of higher education institutions in collaboration with other actors to integrate non-Finnish students into both the higher education community and Finnish society.

According to the heads of the English programmes these programmes have been developed as a response to the strategic objectives of the HEIs themselves as well as national educational policy aims but also aim to serve the needs of the labour market. Rather than attracting an international workforce, however, the first priority was to

meet the overall demand for skills and competences. The two higher education sectors had differing reasons, making Finnish students more internationally aware was clearly a more important rationale for UASs. Additionally, labour market needs, such as making the work environment of the region more international and recruiting workers to Finland, were more often cited by the UASs than by the universities (Aalto, 2003; Garam, 2009; Lahtonen & Pyykkö, 2005).

According to earlier studies (Ally, 2002; Ciulinaru, 2010; Heikkilä & Pikkarainen, 2008; Kettunen, 2005; Kinnunen, 2003; Koivisto & Juusola, 2008; Kärki, 2005; Niemelä, 2008, 2009; Puustinen-Hopper, 2005; Taajamo, 2005) the students were somewhat concerned about their future careers and internship possibilities. Finding a job during their studies was important, not only because of the income, but also because it integrated them into Finnish society and Finnish work culture. In some programmes in universities and all programmes in the UASs the internships and practical work life experience gained through the projects is an integral part of the studies. Some suggestions for improving the possibilities for employment were proposed. It would be important to encourage Finnish and Swedish language learning in the beginning and throughout the studies. Also possibilities to learn about the Finnish culture and society, and how to behave in Finnish work culture and ways of acting in Finland should be developed. Internships during education were seen as one way to create networks for employment opportunities. Students should be encouraged to participate in career counselling

and to support each other and to share knowledge regarding employment. Material on the Finnish labour market and employment opportunities as well as on applying for jobs should be produced. Developing preconditions for international graduates to act as mentors for international students would further enhance support for finding employment. And graduates should be encouraged to maintain a relationship with higher education institutions after graduation. Lastly, a change of attitudes in Finnish work environments towards students with a foreign background is seen as necessary for improving their employment prospects.

These earlier studies concentrated on students, but in the study described here graduates with much experience of the needs of work life and employment both in Finland and abroad describe their experiences of the connection between education and employability. The aim is to answer the following research questions:

How did education support the employment of international graduates within the Finnish labour market?

How could the education and degree programmes be developed to support employment in Finland?

Data and methods

21 graduates from different fields of study and national backgrounds were interviewed for this study. A purposeful sampling method was used in the selection of the informants. The informants were searched using the graduate database of one UAS and through alumni organisa-

tions. The informants had graduated from different fields of study at four UASs, most of them from the capital region. Of the informants 7 represented social services, 6 business, 6 health care and 2 engineering. They were from different continents, 9 were from Africa, 7 from Europe (2 of them from Russia), 3 from Asia and 2 from Central America. They had graduated 1 to 12 years ago (mean 4). At the time of the interview 15 informants were employed, 3 were unemployed, 2 were at home with children and 1 was a student. Even though all informants were in Finland at the time of the interview six of them had lived in some other country than in Finland at some point after graduation, either working or studying in their home country or in a third country.

The data was collected through semi-structured, open-ended interviews in 2008-2010. Interviews were conducted individually and face to face. Since the aim was to find out experiences and conceptions of the informants, no specified categories were given, the themes were introduced and additional questions were used only when needed. Those themes that were connected to education were following:

- Which factors in your education have influenced your employability?
- How could education better support your employment possibilities?

The data was analysed using qualitative content analysis. The comments concerning education were first coded under three themes: experiences of studies, how has education improved the graduate's employment possibilities and how can the education system be im-

proved. The same topics emerged under these themes, and it seemed better to divide these comments into topics that described the contents and methods of education.

Results

In addition to experiences of education the informants were also asked about the factors that had affected their employment. They emphasised being able to communicate in Finnish and an understanding and knowledge of Finnish society. Personal characteristics like motivation, self-confidence, activeness, persistence, openness, flexibility, self-directiveness and independence were also important. Professional competence, the degree completed, competence gained during education and work experience were also seen as important, as were multicultural competence and foreign language skills, job seeking skills and networks which all enhanced an employee's employability. However, the attitudes of some employers were seen as a hindering factor. In the following the results concerning education are described so, that both the experiences of education and the development suggestions are described under each topic.

Curriculum contents

More than half of the informants emphasised the importance of the contents of a curriculum as a whole. The content, theories and practical skills learnt were important in professional development and needed at work. Several informants stated that they were generally very satisfied with their education and curricula. Some informants mentioned generic competences, such as ethical thinking or

learning to learn, which were included in the curricula, however a few mentioned that some generic competences could have been emphasised even more. Problem solving skills, knowing how to search for information, interaction skills, understanding work processes and presentation skills were examples of such competences.

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The question about basic professional skills and specialized skills arose as well. Some informants thought that the education can provide only basic professional skills, and that these skills are then developed at work. Some however pointed out that more in-depth studies would have been needed. Examples of special skills mentioned were doing business plans, marketing and financial understanding. The specialisation studies included in the curricula were found meaningful and the informants were generally satisfied with them, however some mentioned that there were fewer

options to choose from in the English programmes than in the Finnish programmes. Some informants mentioned that they had especially liked the research work or thesis work included in the studies and that for some of them, it had also been important for their employment.

Job-seeking skills were a specific content missing from the curricula. Several informants considered it important especially for international students. Some informants had later noticed that different techniques, for example in writing an application or a CV, are used in Finland than in their home country. Interview techniques, such as being prepared to answer certain questions, were considered important as well. Some had been taught such issues from an Anglo-Saxon point of view, but did not know the typical Finnish CV styles.

Reflection on professional development

Some informants emphasised that it is very difficult to know what is really needed for work when one is still a student and that making the right choices during studies is not easy. This is certainly a concern of national students as well, but was especially important for the international students. The importance of reflection on professional development during studies was emphasised and was clearly an area that should be developed. Supporting the professional development and self-esteem of international students was regarded as important, since they see examples of people with a foreign background who have not succeeded to find employment in Finland, even if they are educated. Changing such negative perceptions

would therefore be important and students should be offered more guidance and counselling.

Methods of introducing the topic should also be considered. Providing positive examples to the students would be beneficial, for example using alumni in the guidance of students, having persons with a foreign background on the staff and connecting students to national or cultural associations where there are successful role models. It was also thought that older students should be used as tutors for younger students, although they might still be in a similar situation to the younger students and not necessarily able to guide them in an appropriate way.

Integration into Finnish society

Finnish language skills and knowledge of Finnish culture are regarded as extremely important for employment and several ideas to improve international student's skills in them during the student's time in the Finnish education system were presented. Almost all graduates discussed Finnish language studies. They emphasised that it is very important to motivate the students to learn the language already in the beginning of their studies. The motivation to study Finnish depends on future plans; if the plan is not to stay in Finland, learning the language seems like waste of time, but it should be remembered that plans change. Finnish was not necessarily needed while studying, but in the practical placements it would have enhanced learning as not all tutors in the placements spoke English. A few graduates emphasised that Finnish studies should be compulsory

and not elective, since choosing Finnish as an elective study means missing out on something else. One suggestion made was to expect the students to learn Finnish before their professional studies start.

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A few informants had been guided to study Finnish outside school, but that was seen as demanding a lot to find out about the possibilities of completing studies outside school, which was already fulltime study. More Finnish courses, especially advanced studies, would have been needed. The type of Finnish studies was also discussed. Communication skills that relate to everyday situations and learning the spoken language were regarded as more important, though some graduates emphasised writing skills as well. Some informants found the requirements of the Finnish studies too low compared to the requirements of other language studies. It was also pointed out that since the

Finnish skills of students differ very much it is hard to offer something that would suit everybody, which leads to the conclusion that different types of courses are needed.

Some graduates suggested that there should also be more about Finnish culture and the work culture of Finland in their education. Finnish culture was found to be very different from other cultures. In particular, it was thought that practical issues on how to manage in Finnish society and work life must be emphasised. The student's own responsibility for learning the language and culture was also acknowledged.

Learning methods

The usefulness of the different learning methods, such as group work, project work and self-directive learning, for professional development was emphasised. The possibility to plan the studies and proceed at an individual pace was found to be good. A few informants however would have wanted to have more flexibility in their studies. The engineering graduates mentioned that several students dropped out during the studies as the programmes were so demanding.

Ideas for improving learning methods were also expressed. Many students were used to different learning methods and strategies than the ones used in Finnish education - learning cultures vary in different countries. It was pointed out that especially at the beginning of the studies, getting used to the new ways of learning and being self-directive had been challenging. Nevertheless, some graduates regarded the challenging experiences they had initially encountered

during their studies as preparing them for employment later on. Without a doubt, though, it can be difficult for students to understand the future benefit of these experiences and thus an improved orientation to Finnish learning methods is needed.

Learning methods where students from English and Finnish degree programmes studied together were considered important since getting to know local students usually enhances integration into society. This had been possible within elective studies, research work or in specific multiprofessional and multicultural projects. Also Tandem teaching where international students and Finnish students form pairs and learn about each other's languages and cultures was used. Furthermore, increased cooperation that enhances the integration of students with different national backgrounds would have been needed, because integration within the study group did not always succeed in the English study programmes, though sometimes it worked well. Some graduates emphasised that integrating very much depended on the students themselves. A mix of younger and older students was also appreciated.

Connections to Finnish work life

Almost all informants emphasised the importance of making connections with people and companies from the world of Finnish work life during their education. These connections had been developed in several ways, through internships, but also by using companies for case studies and by completing projects with them. This was also an area where the informants saw

many possibilities for improving their employment prospects.

Work placements were found to be valuable; during them it was possible to develop the competences needed in their work life and the students developed confidence in their own professional competence. The students had the possibility to see different workplaces and figure out which field would be most interesting for them. The importance of tutoring during the placement, especially the tutor's ability to understand the international students' special needs, was emphasised. Reflection on the learning experiences after the placements was also found useful.

It was also possible to develop networks during the placement. The fact that many students found employment through the placement either already during their studies or after graduation should be emphasised to future students. It would be important to motivate them to perform well during their placement as it enhances their future employment possibilities. Some informants completed their Bachelor's thesis at the company or institution of the placement. In contrast, some graduates had completed some or all of the placements abroad, which did broaden their professional development, but did not help to connect to the world of Finnish work.

Completing assignments or projects connected to work life was also regarded as a useful way of developing contacts. These contacts were also developed in workshops where companies and students jointly try to find solutions to real problems. Organising more study visits

was also one development idea. Another positive way of introducing Finnish work life to students occurs also by using local companies as case studies during their education. Using expertise gathered from people employed within companies, or having people from companies coming to school to talk about specific topics was also regarded as beneficial. More possibilities for this kind of cooperation would have been needed in the opinion of the graduates.

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Career and recruitment services had also been useful in getting connected to Finnish work life. Portals through which students can find placements or work and announcements on employment opportunities were mentioned as being beneficial, as was organising more exhibitions or recruitment fairs where companies and students could meet.

Several graduates felt that it was difficult for international students to find

companies and institutions for placements or projects, so it was recommended that the UASs and teachers form more contacts with businesses. Some felt that this was the most important issue to develop in the education, because those students who do not speak Finnish have fewer places to choose from. Nevertheless, the fact that many teachers had work life experience was valued, but the importance of even better connections between teachers and work life was emphasised. Consequently, it was noted that the UASs should be more active towards employers, inform them about the existence of international students. Additionally, better connections to policy makers was emphasised by some informants. A good practice that some informants had experiences of was being involved in the development of curricula as alumni. For the graduates this showed that UASs are willing to take the experiences of graduates into consideration in preparing current students for work.

Internationalisation and cultural competence in studies

The English programmes and the multicultural student group offer good possibilities for the development of international and intercultural skills. This is one of the reasons why these programmes were founded as they especially support Finnish students studying in these programmes. This seems to be important for international students as well. The informants mentioned that the cultural competence they had developed through the multicultural group during the studies had been useful and that this aspect of the programmes could be utilised more effectively.

Having intercultural competence as a topic in the curriculum was found important. There seems to be a room for improvement here, because the fact that the programme is in English and that the students come from different cultures does not necessarily enhance intercultural competence, if intercultural competence is not a topic that is included in the curriculum. Having special courses on this topic and going deeper than a general level into its contents was seen desirable. The development of language skills during the studies was also considered important, in addition to English and Swedish it was argued that there should be more possibilities to study other languages.

The importance of the teachers' intercultural competence was also emphasised. Some informants appreciated the use of non-Finnish teachers and suggested that there should be more of them, as well as teachers with a foreign background who have completed their education in Finland and are aware of the challenges the students meet. Exchange teachers from partner institutions abroad were also seen as bringing further international aspects to the studies.

The general enhancement of international cooperation was found important as well. Benchmarking higher education institutions that have more experience of international education was suggested and it was noted that intercultural competence can develop through studies abroad and that these experiences were appreciated.

Discussion

The employment status of most of the international graduates in this study was good and the education they had completed had supported their employment in the Finnish labour market in many ways. The degrees they had completed had provided them with a good labour market position, and many of them had benefited from the work life connections that were created during their education. They however recognised areas where improvement was required. Some of the issues they emphasised were issues that all graduates, Finnish and international, would find important, however there are issues that are especially important when educating international students. Some of these were connected to content that should be more strongly emphasised in the curriculum; Finnish language and culture, cultural competence, job-seeking skills and the importance of reflection on professional development throughout a student's education. Some issues were connected to learning methods and it was argued that HEIs should provide more orientation to the learning methods used and facilitate possibilities for interaction between international and Finnish students. Having the possibility to develop good connections to the world of work already during their education was very much emphasised.

The importance of learning the local language, job-seeking skills and good connections to work life aspects have been highlighted in earlier studies. In this study, graduates who already had a lot of experience of the needs of employment in Finland and abroad emphasised the same issues. In addition

they stressed the importance of reflection on professional development and the development of intercultural competence during education. Some issues concerning learning methods, for example familiarising oneself with them at the beginning of their studies, and the importance of multiprofessional studies and studies that are combined with Finnish degree programmes were emphasised by the graduates interviewed for this study.

All in all the special needs of international students should be taken into consideration in education. Offering the same study programme that already exists in the local language in English, without considering the aim and the content of the programme and the special services that the international students need, is not enough. When planning the English programmes the target group of the programme and the aim of the programme should be clear: Is the programme meant for international or local students, and for which labour markets are the students being educated, local or global? If the aim is to educate international professionals for local labour markets then the programmes should be planned accordingly.

It is important to realise that whatever the aim of the programme is, graduates will still make their choices independently and some of them will work abroad. This might benefit the country of study as well for example through the connections that the graduates have to the country. The informants interviewed for this study further emphasised that it is important to have knowledge of international work practices and that a balance between local and global competences should be found.

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