

Integration of foreign degree students into the Finnish school system & society

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Abstract

Most of the foreign degree students of Lahti University of Applied Sciences, Faculty of Business Studies leave Finland after their graduation. However, their newly gained expertise could also stay in Finland and be available for the local and global companies and the society after their graduation. To make the students more committed to staying in Finland, they should be better integrated into the Finnish school system and society. This is a common objective of many actors operating in the integration field. The different universities and other educational organizations should also understand their role and responsibility in this demanding process. Due to the current flight of educated foreign graduates, Lahti University of Applied Sciences, Faculty of Business Studies decided to construct its own integration programme for its foreign degree students.

Key-words

Finland, Foreign degree student, Integration, Integration programme

Introduction

Lahti University of Applied Sciences, Faculty of Business Studies, Finland is a melting pot of students coming from all over the world. According to a research done in the autumn 2009, the student body of the faculty consisted of more than 100 foreign degree students coming from 19 different countries. These students basically carry out all of their studies in Finland, and therefore it would be a great advantage to the Finnish society and companies if they would also stay in Finland after their graduation. Unfortunately only a minority of the foreign students actually do stay in Finland having received their degrees. Most of them return to their home countries. This is an unfortunate fact that could be changed with persistent work. The newly gained, up-to-date expertise of the students could also be available for the local and global companies in growing number after their graduation. The immigrants have also been seen as one solution to fix the

coming lack of labor force of the Finnish labor markets. A large proportion of the current Finnish labor force will be retiring during the coming years (Ministry of the Interior 2006). The foreign graduates would thus be needed in the Finnish markets and society both to benefit the Finnish and international companies with their fresh ideas and thinking but also to fill the coming gap in the labor force caused due to the massive, near-future retirements (Ministry of the Interior 2006).

To change the prevailing situation, the management of the Lahti University of Applied Sciences, Faculty of Business Studies decided to start acting towards better integration of their foreign degree students. The actions were begun in the form of setting up a study to address the important questions: How to integrate the foreign degree students into the Finnish school system and society more effectively and consequently, how to also make them stay in Finland after their graduation? Based on the research questions, the objective of the study was set to be the construction of a qualitative integration programme for the foreign degree students of the faculty. The integration programme was decided to be limited to school, study life, and work related issues. These topics were seen as factors the university could affect. The social welfare, healthcare, and similar issues were thus ruled out from the study.

The goal of this article is to describe the theoretical background of the study conducted and also to present its main findings. The emphasis is on presenting various integration possibilities and measures the faculty can adopt in the future. Although the study was conducted solely from the viewpoint of Lahti University of Applied sciences, the results gained are not linked to any specific university or country and can thus be utilized in various circumstances.

1 Background – finnish integration laws and integration measures of different

Actors

1.1 Finnish integration law

The theoretical framework of the study had its foundation in the first Finnish integration law, Act on the Integration of Immigrants and Reception of Asylum Seekers, that came into force in 1999. This first integration law and its amended version from 2005 give rules and guidance for the integration actions and procedures of different municipalities. The law sets the limits that can and should be done in order to enhance the integration of various types of immigrants. While setting the limits for the municipalities, the law also sets the limits and boundaries for all different actors operating in the integration field, including the universities. (Act on the Integration of Immigrants and Reception of Asylum Seekers 493/1999; Act on the Amendment of the

Act on the Integration of Immigrants and Reception of Asylum Seekers 1215/2005.).

According to the law, each municipality has the obligation to construct an integration programme for its immigrants and also to act according to the programme developed. The ideology behind the law is that each individual in a society should have similar rights and obligations. The law states the ground rules for the programmes, names the authorities involved in addition to their responsibilities, and gives guidance how to actually perform the planned integration operations. The law also recognizes the fact that an integral part of the integration process and especially its success, is the immigrant him/herself. Therefore, while setting obligations for the different authorities, the law also sets obligations and responsibilities for the immigrants themselves. (Act on the Integration of Immigrants and Reception of Asylum Seekers 493/1999.).

The amendment of the integration law (Act on the Amendment of the Act on the Integration of Immigrants and Reception of Asylum Seekers 1215/2005) goes deeper into the issue and gives more specific descriptions of the duties of the different authorities. Concentrating on the duties of the municipalities, the municipalities are responsible for planning, executing, and monitoring the integration of the immigrants living within their borders. The municipalities are obliged to organize such services that support the immigrants' adaptation process into the Finnish society and to enhance the integration via those services. The municipalities are also obliged to work in close co-operation and share information with the other authorities involved in the integration process, such as, for example, the employment agency. According to the law, the integration measures of different municipalities should include, for example, an introduction of the Finnish society and its customs and habits, teaching of oral and written Finnish language, offering of various types of information, guidance, and interpretation services, and organizing of different procedures advancing equality and enhancing the immigrants own initiative to acquire the knowledge and skills needed in order to function as a part of the Finnish society. (Act on the Integration of Immigrants and Reception of Asylum Seekers 493/1999; Act on the Amendment of the Act on the Integration of Immigrants and Reception of Asylum Seekers 1215/2005.).

As stated above, the integration law forces each municipality to design its own integration programme for its immigrants. The programmes include general strategic guidelines, how to execute the integration process and which actions to include; the programmes treat the immigrants as one entity. Based on the integration *programmes*, the municipalities are also obliged to construct a personal integration *plan* for each immigrant. The objective of the personal integration plans is to make each immigrant's adaptation process as effective and as fruitful as possible. While again setting objectives for the municipalities and its services, the plans also set profound responsibilities for

the immigrants themselves. The immigrants need to be active in their own integration operations. Otherwise the execution of the integration plans may be ceased. (Ministry of the Interior 2009; Act on the Amendment of the Act on the Integration of Immigrants and Reception of Asylum Seekers 1215/2005.).

As can be seen from the brief introduction, the Finnish integration law sets a profound ground for the integration actions of various authorities. However, as according to the law, permanent full-time work or full-time professional or academic studies cease the immigrants' right to have a personal integration plan (Act on the Integration of Immigrants and Reception of Asylum Seekers 493/1999), the foreign degree students are automatically ruled out from the governmental integration operations. This leaves a vast responsibility for the universities for integrating their own foreign degree students into the Finnish society and making them feel at home, although abroad.

1.2 Integration measures of different actors

As the integration law, although very important, was not able to give enough information in order to construct the integration programme of the faculty, the integration actions of various actors operating in the integration field were reviewed. The target of this review was to gain understanding of different integration actions already taking place, both in the Finnish society and abroad. Based on the review the faculty could consider which integration actions it should and could include into its own operations.

The main emphasis of the review was on studying the integration measures of the municipalities of Lahti and Helsinki, Finland, in addition to studying the Canadian integrations measures. Canada has been the forerunner in integrating its immigrants into its society. On the other hand, as Lahti University of Applied Sciences operates in the town of Lahti and as Helsinki is the capital of Finland, their integration actions were seen to greatly affect the actions the University of Applied Sciences could adopt. In addition to studying these actors, the integration measures of various other Finnish municipalities and universities were briefly reviewed. (See for example: Citizenship and Immigration Canada 2010; The Integration Programme of Lahti 1999; The Monitoring Report of the Integration Programme of Lahti 2006; The Integration Programme of Helsinki 1999; The Monitoring Report of the Integration Programme of Helsinki 2007; The Political Programme of Immigration Päijät Häme Region 2009; Byman & Ramberg 2008.).

1.3 Municipalities of Lahti and Helsinki

Presenting some ideas from the integration programme of the municipality of Lahti, the objective of the town is to support its immigrants to learn the Finnish language, to participate in different educational, cultural, and leisure time activities, to be employed, and to be personally active in his/her own integration measures, both in the planning and execution phase. The town has made a decision of locating its immigrants into different parts of town in order to enhance the integration. The town also organizes various cultural and language studies in order to make the immigrants familiar with the Finnish culture and language. The cold fact is that if an immigrant wishes to be employed in Finland, the Finnish language skills are nearly always required. In addition to teaching the immigrants the Finnish language, the town aims at enhancing their employment by organizing for them courses discussing the Finnish labor market and finding them practical training places. The immigrants are also given guidance concerning vocational selection and rehabilitation. (The Integration Programme of Lahti 1999; The Monitoring Report of the Integration Programme of Lahti 2006.).

One very important integration actor in the town of Lahti is the multicultural community center Multi-Culti. The objective of Multi-Culti is to promote the interaction between the locals and the immigrants and to increase tolerance and internationality of the area. The center organizes various events where both locals and immigrants are welcome. Multi-Culti aims at building an area which appreciates multi ethnicity, equality, and diversity. (The Integration Programme of Lahti 1999; The Monitoring Report of the Integration Programme of Lahti 2006; Lahden nuorisopalvelut 2010.).

Moving forward, the integration programme of the city of Helsinki follows the guidelines set by the Finnish integration law. Therefore the integration programmes of Lahti and Helsinki include similar items. However, as Helsinki has more immigrants and is perhaps more experienced and familiar with handling issues related to immigration, the integration programme of Helsinki is more profound. In addition to discussing the same items as the integration programme of Lahti, the programme includes, for example, translating of various important brochures into many different languages, organizing of sports, cooking, and relationship skill courses, offering multilanguage library services in more than 60 languages, and cooperating with different immigrant associations. Helsinki also has its own multicultural community center, Caisa. As was the case with Lahti and Multi-Culti, Caisa has a large responsibility and meaning in the integration actions of the town of Helsinki. (The Integration Programme of Helsinki 1999; The Monitoring Report of the Integration Programme of Helsinki 2007; Joronen 2003.).

As the immigration has increased and as the immigrants have increasingly started to be seen as a potential, positive resource for the Finnish society, many municipalities have

started to enlarge and refine their integration operations. This trend also reflects the situation in Lahti. The town of Lahti constructed its new political programme concerning immigration together with its surrounding municipalities during 2009. The programme was published in December 2009 and it sets a vast list of integration responsibilities to be executed by different actors (The Political Programme of Immigration Päijät Häme Region 2009). The actual execution and success of the programme remains to be seen.

1.4 State of Canada

As stated above, Canada has been a pioneer in organizing integration measures for its immigrants. It receives the second largest amount of yearly immigrants in the whole world and has been very successful in its integration operations (Citizenship and Immigration Canada 2010). Therefore it was seen as an interesting target to review while gathering background information for the integration programme of Lahti University of Applied Sciences, Faculty of Business Studies.

Canada has a vast number of various associations and voluntary organizations performing integration operations. Many of the persons working in these associations and organizations are former immigrants and therefore have a deep understanding of the challenges the immigrants go through when entering their new home country. The associations and organizations work under four Canadian governmental organizations responsible for aiding and guiding the immigrants. These organizations are called: LINC (Language Instructions for Newcomers to Canada), Host Programme, ISAP (Immigrant Settlement and Adaptation Program), and ELT (Enhanced Language Training). (Citizenship and Immigration Canada 2010.).

As the name says, the target of LINC (Language Instructions for Newcomers to Canada), is to make the immigrant familiar with the local language and habits. On the other hand, the Host Program matches the immigrant with a Canadian family or individual in order to enhance the integration and understanding of the Canadian way of life. ISAP (Immigrant Settlement and Adaptation Program) guides the immigrants how to use the different community services, such as social, economic, and educational services, offered. ELT (Enhanced Language Training), on the other hand, concentrates on giving the immigrants higher level language education. The target of ELT is to increase the immigrants' language skills to such level that they will manage in the Canadian labor markets. In addition to offering language training, ELT also gives work life related mentoring and helps the immigrants in finding internships and permanent work positions. (Citizenship and Immigration Canada 2010.).

The Immigrant Settlement and Adaptation Program (ISAP) is also responsible for

the execution and management of the Canadian Integration Programme. It sets the basic outline of the integration operations and provides funding for various governmental and non-governmental organizations involved in the integration process. (Citizenship and Immigration Canada 2010.). All in all the Canadian integration operations have been brought to the highest level. Many other countries and organizations could learn from their experiences.

1.5 Utilization of background research – methodology of the study

The information gained through the background research was used to give advice as to which integration measures to include in the integration programme of the faculty. As the faculty also wished to take into account the opinions of its current foreign degree students, an internet survey targeted at the foreign degree students was also conducted. The objective of the survey was to explore and gain knowledge of the students' opinions on the former integration actions executed by the university and how the university should develop its future integration operations.

To make the programme as thorough as possible, the experiences of other Finnish Universities of Applied Sciences were also used in designing the programme. The information used was gathered at a seminar organized in October 2009, discussing issues linked with the different English language programmes of the Finnish Universities of Applied Sciences

2 Integration measures of Lahti University of Applied Sciences, Faculty of Business Studies

Based on all the information gathered, a preliminary integration programme of the faculty was designed. The actions of the programme are versatile, starting with student recruitment and ending at the students' permanent integration into the Finnish society. The programme is divided into three parts: 1) integration measures to be taken before the students arrive in Finland, 2) integration measures during the studies and study life, and 3) integration measures aiming at permanent integration into the Finnish society in the form of finding a permanent work place in Finland.

The programme assigns duties for both the university itself and the surrounding community. It should be noted that although the report generated is called a programme, it is not a finalized plan with deadlines and responsibilities. The main objective of the programme is to give ideas of different integration measures that the university could adopt in the future. The decision, which actions the university will really execute, is to be made by the management of the faculty and university.

The main findings of all three parts of the programme are presented below.

2.1 Integration measures to be taken before the students arrive in Finland

A large number of the student body of the Lahti University of Applied Sciences, Faculty of Business Studies consists of students coming from Asia. As the Asian cultures differ considerably from the Finnish culture, there exists a serious risk of non-integration of the students. The large number of Asian students results from long term, close relationships with several Asian universities and organizations. A lot of resources have been invested into maintaining those close ties.

However, as the integration of the Asian students has not proved to be the easiest process, it is suggested that the faculty should start recruiting more actively students from such countries where the culture would be closer to the Finnish culture. In practice this would mean developing better recruiting methods in Europe and North America. It has been seen that the closer the cultures are to one another, the easier is the integration process when moving from one culture to the other.

On the other hand, as permanent employment has been seen as the key to the final integration into a society, it is also suggested that the faculty should recruit such students the current and future labor market would be interested in, considering both the nationalities and skills of the students. Adopting this ideology would mean that in order to find the right students to recruit, the faculty should do even closer cooperation with the business life to ensure that the future needs of the labor market would be taken into account and could be considered in the student recruitment.

Whichever recruiting strategy the faculty chooses to use in the future, the entrance examination venues should be used as a means of early integration. The more the students would receive information of the Finnish society, school system, and the university itself, the better platform they would have to start their studies in Finland. Moreover, the applicants could also use the information received to evaluate and validate their decision of wanting to study in Finland. The more conscious the decisions of coming to Finland to study would be, the more motivated students the university would consequently have.

In addition to giving information during the entrance examinations, the chosen applicants should also be given even more information before leaving their home countries. It is suggested that the faculty should send the coming students a written welcome to Finland and Lahti package which they could and should familiarize themselves with before coming to Finland and starting their actual studies. The ideology behind the package is that it would include a large amount of information ranging from a presentation of the town, university, and study structure to a presentation of the local

multicultural community center and a comprehensive list of Internet addresses which the students could follow to learn more about Finland, depending on their interests. The final contents of the package could be planned together with current foreign degree students of the faculty. They have the best knowledge of which information they would have needed when starting their studies.

As the information given in the material package would be rather formal in nature, the faculty could also open a tutoring platform where the coming students could discuss their questions and problems with the older students. The tutoring platform would guarantee that if the new students would be too timid to contact the personnel of the university with their questions, they would still have a way of getting the needed information.

2.2 Integration measures during the studies and study life

2.2.1 Beginning of the studies

Following the guidelines of the Finnish integration law, the apartments of the foreign degree students should be located around the town of Lahti. In the best case, in order to facilitate the integration, the foreign students could be placed into the same apartments with the Finnish students. This would guarantee that the foreign students would be exposed to the Finnish culture and habits and would be forced to interact with the local people. If this would not be possible to organize, in the second best case the new foreign students would share apartments with an older student of their own nationality. In this case the more experienced students could help the newcomers with their questions of settling in Finland and the university.

When the students actually arrive in Lahti, they should be met by a tutor student, who would help them to find their way home and make them feel at least a little bit like home, although being abroad. In an ideal case each foreign student would have two named tutor students, one student of Finnish origin and one older student of his/her own nationality. This would guarantee the best possible integration and problem solving in any situation. Although presented in the current chapter, the tutoring actions should not be limited to the beginning phase of the studies. On the contrary, they should continue at least throughout the first academic year.

When concentrating on the studies, the actual academic studies should start with an introduction week aiming at giving the students the best possible means to both begin their studies and to proceed with them successfully. The introduction week has already been used by the faculty since autumn 2008 and has proven to be really useful. The aim of the week is, for example, to give the students all the needed information in order for

them to be able to operate in the university, teach them how to use the university IT-systems, introduce them the social services of the university, and to make them socialize with and get to know one another, despite the nationalities. Some of the actual studies may begin, but the main emphasis of the week is to help the students to get settled in their new hometown and university. The introduction week has proven to diminish the uncertainties many of the new students are bound to have. In order to make the introduction week even more comprehensive, the faculty should put more emphasis on introducing the other integration operators in the area. As mentioned earlier in the article, Lahti has its own multicultural community center Multi-Culti. However, so far the cooperation between the university and Multi-Culti has been almost nonexistent. This is a factor that should be changed in order to enhance the integration of the foreign degree students.

In addition to the introduction week, the new students should have a compulsory introduction course to the Finnish culture. The cultural introduction would guarantee that each and every foreign student would have some knowledge of the Finnish culture having taken part in the course. The course could be organized even before the beginning of the actual academic year or at the latest in the beginning of the studies. The cultural course would enhance the foreign students understanding of the Finnish mentality and could thus help to prevent major cultural shocks. In order to facilitate the integration, other courses concentrating on different aspects of the Finnish culture could be organized and offered later on during the studies.

2.2.2 During the studies

It is a commonly known fact that knowledge of the local language is the key to the foreign society. Therefore the faculty should put a lot of emphasis on exposing the foreign students to the Finnish language. The curriculum of the foreign students of Lahti University of Applied Sciences, Faculty of Business Studies includes currently 16 ECTS compulsory Finnish language courses. Although already being a considerable amount, it is not enough to make the students manage with the Finnish language. Therefore more Finnish studies should be added to the curriculum. Based on the feedback received from the current students of the faculty, the studies should also be organized outside the class rooms.

To really make the foreign students absorb the Finnish language, they should also be forced to use it as much as possible. Although the students are taking part in English language programmes, the personnel of the university could use the Finnish language when handling their issues, whenever feasible. The lecturers could also translate the most important business terms into Finnish during the courses. This would help both

the Finnish students studying in the English language programmes and the foreign students. The Finnish students would also learn to understand the issues in their own language and, on the other hand, the foreign students would become familiar with the Finnish business terminology. This knowledge would help both groups later on when entering the business life. In addition to these measures, it could also be considered whether some of the last year courses could be taught in the Finnish language, adapting the contents of the courses to match the language skills. This could be a motivational factor for the foreign students to study the Finnish language as thoroughly as possible during the whole study time.

In addition to teaching the language, the integration could be facilitated by combining the Finnish language and English language programmes to study some subject together. This ideology is already used to some extent at the faculty, but its usage could be increased. The mixing would benefit both the Finnish and foreign students. In addition to having joint lectures, the Finnish and foreign students should also be forced to make mixed groups fulfill various assignments. This would enhance all students' knowledge of intercultural communication and how to work with people coming from different national and cultural backgrounds.

In addition to the proposed actions, a very recommendable integration measure would be to match the adult students of the faculty, who are studying simultaneously while working, with the foreign degree students. This measure has been adopted by some other Finnish universities and the results have been really promising. The student pairs have carried out various tasks together and have, for example, visited the adult students' workplaces. Such matching would benefit both parties. The foreign students would get a closer look into the Finnish way of doing things and Finnish business life, whereas the Finnish students would also be exposed to intercultural communication. The matching would also create a good opportunity to improve the language skills of both students. In the best case the students would become real life-long friends.

2.2.3 Extracurricular integration activities

In order to help the foreign students' integration, the faculty should also organize some extracurricular activities. Due to tight budgets, in the past the extracurricular activities organized by the faculty have been minimal. This side of study life should, however, also be improved.

By using consideration, the faculty could organize, for example, some recreational hobby groups and events where the students could get together and interact with one another. In the least case the faculty could organize the premises for the different

happenings and let the students themselves take care of the actually planning and execution of activities. As presented earlier in the article, a very unused resource for the organizing of various events is the local multicultural community center Multi-Culti. The faculty should take the initiative and tie closer relationships with Multi-Culti in order to reach the common objective of both parties, well-being and integration of the foreign degree students.

As discussed earlier in the article, the integration programme of the faculty also sets responsibilities for the surrounding community. The integration of the foreign students is heavily dependent on how they see the surrounding environment to act towards them, are they accepted or not. Moreover, the integration could also be boosted if the students could be given a real insight into a normal Finnish way of living. Due to these reasons, an idea of a friendship family was added into the integration programme of the faculty. The idea was to follow the Canadian model of turning the immigrants into a part of the society by matching them with local families. The faculty decided to test the friendship ideology by finding Finnish friendship families for the foreign students starting their studies in January 2010. So far the experiment has been exceeding all expectations, both foreign students and the Finnish families have been really happy with the cooperation. Encouraged by the good experience and feedback received, the friendship family actions have been decided to be continued in the future as well.

Integration Measures Aiming at the Permanent Integration into the Finnish Society in the Form of Finding a Permanent Work Place in Finland

Finding a permanent work position is a very decisive factor integrating the foreign degree students into the Finnish society. However, finding a suitable and satisfying work place is not always an easy task. Therefore the university and faculty should assist the students in this challenge.

It is controversial as to whether the faculty should assist the students in finding a workplace after their graduation. However, the least the faculty should do would be to assist the students in finding practical training places in Finland. Practical training forms a compulsory part of their studies and could open doors to future employment possibilities. Currently the students are obliged to search and find the practical training places on their own.

In order to help the students, the faculty should assign persons or an organization responsible for cooperating with the Finnish companies and consequently finding connections and practical training places for the foreign students. The networking demands a lot of time and therefore should be given enough resources. It cannot be

performed halfheartedly. While helping the students, by organizing its practical training operations more effectively and visibly, the faculty could also improve its image among the local business life as a source of talented and educated current and future labor force.

In order to boost the employment of the foreign students, the faculty should also build closer connections with the Finnish employment authorities. The faculty could offer study places for immigrants listed as unemployed workforce, whereas the employment authorities could simultaneously inform the faculty of open vacancies and practical training places. The faculty and the employment authorities could also organize various job seeking courses together.

In addition to the measures mentioned, the faculty could also design two small guidebooks in order to improve the execution of the practical training process, one for the foreign degree students and another for the possible employers. The target of the first guide would be to give the students brief insights how to apply for a job in Finland and how to operate in the Finnish business life. On the other hand, the objective of the guide targeted at the employing companies would be to give them information they need to know when hiring a foreign trainee.

To briefly summarize all the issues linked with employment in any form, it can be said that anything the faculty could do in order to find practical training places and open vacancies for its foreign degree students would be an investment into integrating the students into the Finnish society and creating a more diversified Finnish labor market.

3 Execution of the integration programme, closure

Integrating the foreign degree students into the Finnish school system and society is a very challenging task. Although the preliminary integration programme has now been constructed, it is only a first small step in the actual integration process. In order for the programme to be successful, it needs a very motivated group of people responsible for the actual actions. If the people responsible for the integration measures are not genuinely interested in their duties, the programme is bound to fail.

The programme should also be updated as the experience of the chosen integration measures grows. The faculty should continuously gather feedback from its foreign students concerning the integration actions performed and act accordingly.

Although being a challenging and demanding task, the integration of the foreign degree students should be taken seriously. Hard and persistent work can lead to rewarding end results. If the faculty is able to work persistently towards the final goal of permanent integration, it will see more and more of its foreign students staying in Finland after

their graduation. This would benefit both the local and global companies searching for talented, educated, multicultural workforce.

Lahti University of Applied Sciences is in a key role, together with all other universities and educational organizations, making the Finnish society and labor market more multicultural and diversified. Although the amount of various integration operators is numerous, all educational organizations should understand their role and responsibility in the process and take part in achieving the common goal.

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