

Integration of Foreign Degree Students into the Finnish School System & Society

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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 should also stay in Finland and be available for the local and global companies and 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.

Keywords: Business studies, foreign degree student, integration, integration programme

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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 early autumn 2010, the student body of the faculty consisted of more than 170 foreign degree students coming from 16 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 should be changed. The newly gained, up-to-date expertise of the students should also be available for the local and global companies 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.

Background – Finnish Integration Laws and Integration Measures of Different Actors

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.)

Although setting a profound ground for the integration actions, the Finnish integration law is still quite problematic when considering the foreign degree students. 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). Thus 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.

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.

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](#).)

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

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 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.

Integration Measures During the Studies and Study Life

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.

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 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 cul-

ture having taken part in the course. The 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.

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.

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. 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.

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 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 family 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.

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.

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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