

Rebekah Rousi
tohtorikoulutettava, opettaja
Jyväskylän yliopisto
Nykykulttuurin tutkimuskeskus
Taiteiden ja kulttuurin tutkimuksen laitos
rebekah.a.rous@jyu.fi

INTERNATIONAL COMPETITIVENESS – BRINGING FINNISH EDUCATION TO THE WORLD OR THE WORLD TO FINNISH EDUCATION?

Abstract

The following article takes a brief look at what is meant by 'international competitiveness' in the context of Finland's current higher education. In order to reflect on the multiple meanings of this concept in relation to education and internationalisation, I have chosen to compare Finland's higher education system to Australia's. I have done this for the reason that being western, democratic, individualistic welfare states both countries share similarities in relation to access to education and perceptions of global competitiveness.

KEYWORDS: International competitiveness; internationalisation; higher education; multiculturalism; multicultural education.

1. Introduction

"AUSTRALIA must follow Finland's education system to save our failing students, says Prime Minister Kevin Rudd..."One of the best examples of quality schooling is in Finland,""
(Fineran 2008)

Australia and Finland have shared many similarities over the past 100 years. Both countries actively strived to construct modern national identities – in both countries this was most prominent during the post- World War II years (Willis 1993; Vesikansa 2008) through industry and promotion of cultural products – and both countries strived to establish and maintain welfare states during the 20th century (Mau 2005; Yeend 2000). However, as the above quote suggests, Finland has managed to develop a world leading comprehensive schooling system which has proven to achieve highly competitive results in the literacy and numeracy of its population (Fineran 2008). Where Finland has increasingly excelled, Australia has progressively declined. According to Australia's current Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, this is due to Finland's investment in specialist teachers and higher taxes to fund a free education system, so that 'no child is left behind' (cited in Fineran 2008). Thus, in terms of comparing the results of

the comprehensive Finnish education system to the rest of the world, it seems that Finland is already on good competitive footing. But what does this mean in terms of higher education? And, what is actually meant by 'international competitiveness' - are we meaning competitive in terms of know-how, or competitive in terms of attracting interested stake-holders from abroad?

I am an Australian born academic, who undertook comprehensive education and high school in South Australia, and graduated with a Bachelor Degree (Honours) in Western Australia. I came to Finland three years ago to undertake masters studies in Nordic Arts and Cultural Studies. Since this move, I have trained as a teacher here in Jyväskylä, have commenced my doctoral studies and have been working consistently at the University of Jyväskylä. Many aspects have impressed me about the Finnish system. These mainly include the smaller class sizes, the selection of courses on offer, and the amount of emphasis which is placed on learning about internationalization, intercultural communication and overall multiculturalism. Lastly, and possibly the most decisive factor when choosing Finland to study, was the free tuition.

This article will begin by discussing matters of internationalisation and multiculturalism from a comparative perspective. I will end the article by discussing the matter of tuition fees and its relationship to international competitiveness.

2. Internationalism from a comparative perspective

In Australia, only 517,000 (2006 figure; Australian Bureau of Statistics 2007) people out of approximately 21,536,953 (2008 figure; Australian Bureau of Statistics 2008) inhabitants are of indigenous descent. Thus, it is assumed that roughly 97% of the population have migrated to Australia from other countries in the world. Although this should mean that for the past 220 years Australia has been a predominantly multicultural society, the institutional and political systems in place, are mainly dominated by Anglo structures and ideals. Given this traditionally cultural diverse background of the country's inhabitants, one notices when browsing the internet, and searching library data-bases, that relatively sparse study has been undertaken into the role of multiculturalism in Australian higher education. Over recent years more work has been done on attempting to include indigenous Australians into the fields of education and labour (see Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs 2006), however surprisingly little has been mentioned about developing a multicultural learning community based on incoming international students, and other international members of society.

Whilst in Australia I was blind to the issues of considering diverse cultural backgrounds within the learning environment, upon moving to Finland, I became painfully aware that this so-called 'homogenous' nation had actively achieved much more in the past 14 years (refer to Koivukangas 2003)

regarding multicultural research and action projects, than in the last two centuries in the so-called 'heterogeneous' society of Australia. Amongst the many multicultural education programmes which have taken place in Finland over the past two decades, a new project is currently being launched at the University of Jyväskylä called the Centre for Multiculturalism and Interactional Competency (Monikulttuurisuus ja vuorovaikutus -osaamiskeskus). This interdisciplinary centre is dedicated to: 1) multilingualism as an individual's and community's resource; 2) multicultural learning and work environments; and 3) the challenges of multicultural action, participation and thought (University of Jyväskylä 2008a.).

The starting point of inclusion into this Nordic society is language. As of 2008, the University of Jyväskylä alone offers 15 masters programmes in English (see the University of Jyväskylä International 2008b.). Whilst English is known to be an international lingua franca, still studies in foreign languages in Australian universities are mostly limited to language subject studies. This means that in order to complete a degree in Australia, the student must use English as the main study language. From my point of view, not only does that make Finland attractive in terms of programmes that are specifically designed for approaching issues of internationalisation in courses which vary from the humanities to business, but local students also have the opportunity to become fluent – linguistically and socially – in international language and practices. This means, that even Finnish students are not limited to national job opportunities and industrial possibilities, but may have the competitive edge when vying against international applicants and opponents.

Apart from those Australians who have majored in languages, or come from a multi-linguistic background, most Australians are faced with competition in only English speaking settings. If the major subject happened to be languages, then job and industrial possibilities may be limited. Further, without having faced the situation of studying in an international setting, with recognised diversity amongst peer backgrounds, graduates may be 'culture-blind' when attempting to deal with potential colleagues in an international environment. By 'culture-blind' I refer to the denial "that any difference exists between one's own culture and the culture of another (Lustig & Koester 1999)", and possibly more importantly, denial and ignorance of power structures set in place through the use of language (Gumperz 1982). The Centre for Multiculturalism and Interactional Competency follows suit with Finland's national strategy of internationalisation (CIMO 2008) and can be compared to the already active requirement amongst Finnish Universities of Applied Sciences in intercultural competency.

3. Tuition fees and competing for the study dollar / euro

On January 1st, 1974, Australia's Whitlam government abolished tuition fees in institutions of higher education (National Archives of Australia, n.d.). The free tertiary tuition system was to be replaced by the Hawke Labour government in 1988 (Commonwealth Consolidated Acts 1988) with the Higher Education Contribution System (HECS). This was (and still is) a system whereby part of the university fees were funded by the government, and part of the fees were to be covered by the student in either up-front payments or as a loan scheme. Perhaps, it is not surprising that it was also under the Hawke government during the 1980s that deregulation of Australia's economy began (McKissack, Chang, Ewing & Rahman 2008). This saw import tariffs decrease which gradually influenced change in export patterns from primary products to secondary products and service industries. One such industry was, and is, education. With full fee-paying international positions on offer, education has fast become Australia's second largest export industry (Australian Government - Austrade 2008).

One may ask, what has made Australia's export of education so competitive given that 25% of the country's study population is international. When looking on the Studies in Australia website (2008), reasons for studying there include:

- dynamic and progressive education programs with a reputation for excellence
- globally-recognised courses and qualifications
- a relaxed, enjoyable and safe lifestyle
- cheaper study and living expenses compared to many other countries
- vibrant, appealing and multicultural cities
- great weather
- amazing and diverse landscapes and scenery
- unique and wonderful flora and fauna.

In the list above, only three of the points related to the actual education: "dynamic and progressive education programs"; "globally-recognised courses and qualifications"; and "cheaper study and living expenses". This last point seems to be now slightly outdated as, for example, the tuition fees for international students studying for a Bachelor of Arts at the university of Western Australia, must now pay AUD\$18,500 (9,101.20 euros) as of 2009, slightly more expensive than i.e., Nottingham Trent University which costs GBP£8,450 (9,039.67 euros) per year (University of Western Australia 2008; Nottingham Trent University 2008). However, the point of dynamic and progressive education seems to be quite in line with why individuals would choose to travel to Finland for their education.

As of 2010, Finland will be introducing a trial run of charging tuition fees to international students. The International Edition of *Helsingin Sanomat* (August 15 2008) states that the fees may range between 3,500 and 12,000 euros. Providing the fees do not reach the upper-end of this scale, Finland might still

be seen as an attractive education destination in the global arena. One hindrance that I find might tar Finland's competitive edge is the matter of language, and the difficulties, if not, inabilities of students finding part-time work to aid in paying for these fees and living expenses. Another structural feature of the traditional education tertiary export nations are their scholarships systems. Almost every higher educational institution in these other countries have a certain amount of scholarships readily available for international students to apply for, which cover either tuition fees, living expenses or both. In Australia's case, the latter is particularly applicable for postgraduate degrees such as Masters by Research and PhDs. Thus, the questions should be posed: "What measures will Finland take to ensure international students can afford to pay fees in Finland?"

4. Conclusion

What seems most ironic when reflecting on the opening quote, is that under the current government, Australia appears to be striving to return to – or achieve – a situation as identified by the current (recent) Finnish education system. At the same time, current trends in re-structuring and internationally commercialising Finnish education resonate with trends which occurred during 1980s in Australia under the Hawke government, which saw the implementation of HECS (fees) also being applied to local students. As figures of Australian higher education rates suggest, 58% of the population have vocational or tertiary education (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2005). The level of tertiary education can be seen in a state level example whereby 17.9% of Adelaide residents possess a university qualification – between 1991 and 2001 Adelaide saw a decrease in tertiary qualifications by 10% (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2001). Perhaps it is by chance that the decrease has coincided with the implementation of the HECS system.

The measures that Finland is currently taking in terms of providing international study environments in higher education institutions is commendable. Further, the opportunities for not only providing education in multicultural settings, but also training interculturally competent local and international professionals is indisputably a firm strategic move. My only concern is in regards to whether or not the Finnish system is structurally ready to enter the international fee-paying education market, and maintain its competitiveness, whilst at the same time ensuring that education levels of local students will not decline due to the possible introduction of a nation fee-paying education system.

References

Australian Bureau of Statistics. 2008, June 30. Population Clock. Retrieved December 19, 2008 from:

<http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs%40.nsf/94713ad445ff1425ca25682000192af2/1647509ef7e25faaca2568a900154b63?OpenDocument>

Australian Bureau of Statistics. 2007, August 15. Population Distribution, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, 2006. Retrieved December 19, 2008, from:

<http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/mf/4705.0?OpenDocument>

Australian Bureau of Statistics. 2006. Census 2001. Available online from:

<http://www.abs.gov.au/websitedbs/d3310114.nsf/home/Census+data>

Australian Bureau of Statistics. 2005. Year Book Australia 2005. Retrieved December 15th, 2008 from:

<http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/94713ad445ff1425ca25682000192af2/1a79e7ae231704f8ca256f720082feb9!OpenDocument>

Australian Government – Austrade. 2008, December 15. Education Overview. Retrieved December 19, 2008, from:

<http://www.austrade.gov.au/Education/default.aspx>

Centre for International Mobility (CIMO). 2008, November 11th. OPM:n lausuntopyyntö korkeakoulujen kansainvälistymisstrategiasta 2009–2015 - Kansainvälisen henkilöväihdon keskus CIMOn lausunto. Retrieved November 29th, 2008 from:

<http://www.cimo.fi/dman/Document.phx/~public/Lehdistopalvelu/Ilmoitukset/CIMO-kk-kv-strategia.pdf>

Commonwealth Consolidated Acts. 1988. Higher Education Funding Act 1988. Retrieved December 11, 2008, from:

http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/legis/cth/consol_act/hefa1988221/

Fineran, L. 2008, September 10. Take education lead from Finland: Rudd. Retrieved December 19, 2008, from: September 10th, 2008

http://www.goldcoast.com.au/article/2008/09/10/16094_gold-coast-news.html

Gumperz, J. (Ed.). 1982. Language and Social Identity. New York: Cambridge University Press

Helsingin Sanomat. 2008, August 15. Tuition fees for foreign students to be introduced on trial basis in 2010. Retrieved December 19, 2008, from:

<http://www.hs.fi/english/article/Tuition+fees+for+foreign+students+to+be+introduced+on+trial+basis+in+2010/1135238644147>

Koivukangas, O. 2003. Foreigners in Finland. Virtual Finland. Retrieved December 15, 2008, from:
<http://virtual.finland.fi/netcomm/news/showarticle.asp?intNWSAID=25787>

Lustig, M., & Koester, J. 1996. Intercultural Competence: interpersonal communication across cultures. New York: Harper Collins

Mau, M. 2005, March. The Information Society and the Welfare State: The Finnish Model (review). Enterprise & Society. 6 (1). pp. 173-174

McKissack, A., Chang, J., Ewing, R. & Rahman, J. 2008. [Structural effects of a sustained rise in the terms of trade](#). Australian Treasury.

Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs. (2006). Australian Directions in Indigenous Education 2006-2008. Retrieved December 13, 2008, from:
http://www.mceetya.edu.au/verve/_resources/Australian_Directions_in_Indigenous_Education_2005-2008.pdf

National Archives of Australia. (n.d.). Gough Whitlam. Australia's Prime Ministers. Retrieved December 11, 2008, from:
<http://primeministers.naa.gov.au/meetpm.asp?pageName=inoffice&pmId=21>

Nottingham Trent University. 2008. Information about undergraduate courses for students from the rest of the world. Retrieved December 19, 2008 from:
<http://www.ntu.ac.uk/apps/applyingfees/prospective.cfm?p=4&s=12&t=3>

Studies in Australia. 2008. Why study in Australia?. Retrieved December 19, 2008 from: http://www.studiesinaustralia.com/why_study_in_australia

University of Jyväskylä. 2008b. International Masters Programmes. Retrieved December 15, 2008 from: <http://www.jyu.fi/en/study/programmes/masters>

University of Jyväskylä. 2008a. Monikulttuurisuus ja vuorovaikutus - osaamiskeskus. Faculty of Humanities. Retrieved December 19th, 2008 from:
<http://www.jyu.fi/hum/tiedekunta/henkilosto/tyoryhmat/monikulttuurisuus>

University of Western Australia. 2008. Fees. Retrieved December 19th, 2008 from: <http://www.studyat.uwa.edu.au/undergrad/international/fees>

Vesikansa, J. 2008. Finnish industry: constantly adapting to a changing world. Virtual Finland. Retrieved December 19, 2008, from:
<http://virtual.finland.fi/netcomm/news/showarticle.asp?intNWSAID=28308>

Willis, A-M. 1993. Illusions of identity: the art of nation. Sydney: Hale & Iremonger

Yeend, P. 2000, September. Welfare Review. Parliament of Australia. Parliamentary Library. Retrieved December 19, 2008, from:
<http://www.aph.gov.au/library/INTGUIDE/sp/welfarebrief.htm#3.%C2%A0%20Welfare%20reviews%20and%20reforms%20-%20history>