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Openings and Discussion

Internationalisation and Its Discontents

Anuhya Bobba

"To further increase the number of international higher education students, we will create more incentives for them to stay in Finland after graduation," affirms the government programme of the Petteri Orpo cabinet (VNK 2023, 99). While this objective appears uncomplicated and even welcome in its premise, the career outcomes and experiences of international students illustrate a different story. Furthermore, it is equally important to consider the economic, political, and social context in which internationalisation is pursued, and the consequences it imparts for Finnish and international persons alike.

First, this paper will examine the impact of neoliberal reform on Finnish universities, with a special emphasis placed on the segmentation of the academic workforce and the competitive atmosphere that is left in the wake for students and staff. Here, I will also consider the broader labour market conditions faced by international students. The paper will then address the shortcomings of internationalisation policies in the facilitation of a multilingual university and workplace. Finally,

the paper will consider how these dynamics influence the broader discourse on internationalisation and the future of Finnish higher education.

Since the 1980s, internationalisation has been a key policy objective for Finnish higher education, which aims to prepare Finland for the challenges brought about by globalisation. In a world marked by "cross-border competition for jobs, expertise, investments, and companies," the latest proposal for internationalisation policies views education and research as essential to a healthy, competitive economy, in addition to the traditional purpose of "learning and knowledge" (OKM 2018, 3). In response, guidelines by the Ministry of Education and Culture emphasize that Finnish universities must evolve to attract international researchers and students, establish international collaboration and mobility as an essential part of study and work, and export Finnish research globally. Taina Saarinen (2012) describes how nascent internationalisation efforts revolved around staff and student exchange programs, and eventually shifted to the development of English-language degree programs from the 1990s onward. These efforts have greatly increased the number of international researchers and students in Finland as well as mobility to and from Finnish universities.

However, broader concerns exist in relation to the neoliberal reform of the Finnish university sys-

tem, which has produced different forms of precarious employment and an environment that is largely antithetical to academic collaboration. As a result, Finnish and non-Finnish students and staff alike compete to secure increasingly limited opportunities. Various reports display that international students, especially those from non-EU/EEA countries, often have poor employment prospects (e.g. YLE 2023a; 2024). This inadvertently affects their ability to "stay in Finland after graduation" (VNK 2023, 99). Additionally, while internationalisation policies prioritise English-language academic programs and research, practical implications for the university as a site of study and work are often overlooked. The combination of precarious employment conditions, competition for resources, and implementation difficulties further complicates the experiences of international students and the university community as a whole, which places under scrutiny internationalisation efforts broadly.

Neoliberalisation of Finnish Universities

Since the 1990s, Finnish universities started to pursue a "market-oriented" approach to higher education in the form of a performance-based system, in which principles of "entrepreneurialism, managerialism, competition, funding by results, continuous assessment [and] contracting and fighting for external funding" assumed precedence (Rinne 2004, 129; as cited in Kauppinen & Kaidesoja 2013, 27). This shift occurred in the broader context of an economic depression that transpired in the same decade, which policymakers interpreted as a failure of the welfare state and produced an ideological shift that prioritised labour market flexibility, public sector privatisation, and market deregulation instead (Ahlqvist & Moisio 2013; Kantola & Kananen 2013). The Universities Act of 2009 serves as a pivotal moment to this end. Consequently, Finnish universities departed from

a more state-controlled model and evolved into semi-autonomous institutions as either public corporations or private foundations, largely a result of "arguments of competitiveness and concerns over falling behind in the global competition of knowledge economies" (Poutanen 2023, 628–629). Under these reforms, university personnel were rendered private sector employees, subject to a "flexibilisation of contracts" and related layoffs (Martin & Prokkola 2017, 148). This in turn has created a divide between employees that shuffle between precarious, fixed-term contracts and those able to secure the sparsely available number of permanent contracts (Khan 2022, 109; Nikunen 2012, 273). The reforms have also worked to attract more skilled workers in the form of international students and staff to Finnish universities with the use of financial incentives, which I will describe later.

What is important to note here is that the transformation of the Finnish university system, and more broadly the objective of internationalisation, "is not just about recruiting international staff but about increasing competition in the academic labour market" (Martin & Prokkola 2017, 148). This intensification of competition not only reshapes academic career trajectories but also fractures solidarity within the university community. In her auto-ethnographic exploration of the alienation experienced by an international doctoral student in competition-oriented academia, Jawaria Khan (2022, 117) powerfully remarks,

"I have observed the lack of solidarity among academics in Finnish universities: between the Finns and the internationals, the ones with funding and the ones without, the ones with offices and those without, the ones who speak Finnish and those who do not, the ones in projects and teams and the ones who are not, the ones who teach and those who do not."

Her observations point to a deeper fragmentation within academia, one shaped by structural forces that operate on multiple levels. On the one hand,

labour market protections of Finnish students and researchers are subject to concerted attack by neoliberal reform of the university and the welfare state more broadly. As a result, Finnish students and researchers, previously shielded from market forces, now face a career path marked by increased flexibility. On the other hand, international students and researchers encounter difficulties to secure a future in Finland, separated from the former by a restrictive border apparatus that facilitates differential access to secure employment and welfare – which I will describe in the next section.

Labour Market Conditions of International Students

International students in Finland, particularly those from non-EU/EEA countries, face considerable barriers to find stable employment. These barriers are further exacerbated by the financial demands tied to residence permit requirements, which compel many to seek precarious employment. In order to meet the financial preconditions of the residence permit for studies, presently 9,600 euros per year, non-EU/EEA students often seek renumerated work that is "primarily accessed in the low-paid service sector" and are "placed in a legal position where they are flexible enough to accept insecure short-time contracts" (Maury 2021, 47). Furthermore, the study permit, classified as a temporary B permit, does not afford access to social services, which "limits autonomy and intensifies insecurity and precarity for non-citizens" (Könönen 2017, 65). For doctoral students that are third-country nationals, a continuous A permit is awarded for research, if you hold a second-cycle degree. If studies are unfunded, this permit also requires proof of money, from 12,360 to 14,520 euros per year dependent on one's place of residence in Finland. Social services can be conditionally accessed with this permit. Accordingly, the border apparatus imparts "different levels of access to the

domains of Finnish society" based on the permit awarded, while the labour market mediates and structures "the environment and social reality in which integration happens" for international students and staff (Ndomo 2023, 74).

Equally important to consider is that broad terms such as "international students and staff," "skilled workers," or more broadly "immigrants" cannot properly elaborate neither the class, gender, and racial differences nor the bureaucratic, geopolitical, legal, and extra-legal processes of differentiation that produce unequal exposure to precarious conditions in work and life (Gilmore 2007, 28; Martin & Prokkola 2017, 145). Annika Forsander (2003, 68) describes how Finnish employers depreciate educational certifications acquired abroad, namely from "countries considered to be less important in the global hierarchy," and accordingly the "labour market status of refugees and of those who immigrated from developing countries was shown to be weakest." Additionally, job opportunities in Finland are rarely accessible on formal channels, with approximately 75 percent of vacancies never advertised publicly (Jämsén & Keltanen 2017). As such, career advancement heavily relies on personal networks in Finland. This dependence on informal recruitment practices can perpetuate exclusionary outcomes, particularly for those with "non-European" names or qualifications, which employers are less likely to consider their applications positively – "even when they possess identical human-capital credentials as the mainstream candidate" (Ahmad 2020a; 2020b, 675).

Furthermore, while international students and staff are eagerly recruited by Finnish universities, Reeta Vairimaa (2021) importantly writes:

"Students from an immigrant background make up a relatively small fraction of the student population compared to their share of the total population. The same can be said of the disabled,

and children of poor and working-class families. Indeed, as an institution of higher learning, the university comes across as quite white and middle class."

This indicates that barriers to education and later employment are not limited to international students, but also affect students who may already identify as Finnish. These dynamics underscore the need to critically examine how structural processes that impart unequal outcomes delimit internationalisation efforts. Wei Lu and Tayla Everson Härkälä (2024) describe "a lack of information about the labour market, unfamiliarity with recruitment practices, limited connections to industries, and language barriers (specifically, the Finnish language)" as key barriers faced by international students in Finland. These difficulties expose the broader cracks in the implementation of internationalisation policies. Provided that this section has covered the first three, I will focus on the latter in the next section.

On the Question of Language

Finnish internationalisation prescriptions place a premium on English-language programs and research, the present-day *lingua franca* of the academic world. Yet, at the level of the individual unit or department, this does not necessarily translate as clear specifications on how to facilitate a multilingual university or workplace. A study by the Finnish Institute for Educational Research (FIER) on the implementation of internationalisation practices (Weimer et al. 2019, 11) notes that "unclear language policies result in tensions in the working environment, especially for international staff members." In the absence of an institutional strategy that addresses multilingualism, the issue of language often arises in an antagonistic, disorganized manner, especially on the individual-to-individual basis. Workplace inaccessibility can manifest in various ways, or as one participant to the study explains,

"Finnish as the administrative language restricts the participation of international personnel" (ibid., 41).

These "tensions" are also evident in the student body, best encapsulated by the complaint filed in 2021 by students at Aalto University over "the dominance of English" at the institution (YLE 2023b). In the media, a news report recently explained, "English is replacing native languages at Finnish universities" (YLE 2025). These appear to reflect a concern delineated in the aforementioned report by FIER: the increased prevalence of English may gradually erode Finnish as a scientific language (Weimer et. al. 2019, 43). More broadly, at the societal level, a survey conducted by Kantar Public expressed that a majority of Finns are "opposed to English becoming a 'common language' in Finland" (YLE 2023c). While some may locate this antagonism singularly in the influx of international students and staff, or even foreigners writ large, it is structurally produced. Lauren Martin and Eeva-Kaisa Prokkola (2017, 148) describe that

"The Ministry of Education compensates departments for completed degrees and the publication of research: a non-citizen's Doctoral Degree compensation is fifty percent higher than a Finnish one, and publications are compensated based on a three-tiered scale that privileges English over Finnish-language ISI journals."

While the compensation model has been updated, nonetheless, the prioritisation of English is a structural demand of internationalisation policies and their financial incentives. Any consequence that is imparted onto Finnish-language research will be of a structurally determined nature as well. Provided that "the global competition of knowledge economies" that engendered policies of internationalisation and neoliberalism will no sooner dissipate, what would be important to consider is how to facilitate a study and work environment that can cater to the needs of Finnish and non-Finnish persons alike (Poutanen 2023, 628–629).

"A Domino Effect"

This paper aims to clarify how our experiences are deeply interconnected, Finnish or international, particularly within the context of a globalized university system that fosters competition. Consider, for instance, the introduction of international student tuition fees in Finland in 2018. This calls to mind a comment from a public official after Norway decided to end free tuition for international students: "[W]e're concerned that this is the first step in a process where more and more people will have to pay for higher education in Norway – it's a domino effect" (Hogan 2023). This concern is increasingly relevant in Finland, where the Ministry of Finance has proposed tuition fees for Finnish students (YLE 2022). The "domino effect," whatever form it may take, may initially affect non-EU/EAA students, precarious workers from the Global South, or persons from low-income households, but it is more likely than not to extend to everyone. In this context, might we consider an alternative to competition – imagining a politics of solidarity and relatedness that aims a critical eye to broader transformations in the capitalist political economy?

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