

OILING THE WHEELS OF THE HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST



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Higher Education is one of the great successes of the welfare state as Finland. What was once the privilege of a few has become a middle-class entitlement, thanks mainly to government support. Recently, Higher education, in Finland also, suffers from Baumol 's disease- the tendency of cost to soar in labour-intensive sectors with stagnant productivity. Whereas the prices of cars, computers and much else have fallen dramatically, universities and other higher education institutions HEIs, by now protected by public sector funding and the premium employers place on degrees, have been able to charge ever more of the same service. At the same time Finnish HEIs are getting a step forward to try finding the position in the international market of education in general by charging the non-EU students a minimum fees of 4000 €.

Education and developing human capacities lie at the heart of some Gulf countries plans for sustainable, knowledge-oriented economies. Investing in the human factor is at the core for all gulf countries strategies, they are looking for the best practices from all around the world. This statement is also based on my own experiences when I had the privilege to organize two official visits of high level Omani delegations to Finland and Sweden, and I had the chance to attract almost 100 Omani students to Tampere for summer studies where the Omani ministry of HE covers all the related costs to Tampere University of applied Sciences.

Let s see from an historical perspective of the recent global growth of International University Branches IUB Campuses.

Nearly a century ago in 1921, the New York-based fashion institute, Parsons, became one of the first postsecondary educational institutions to open a campus in a foreign country when it created a new school in Paris to provide educational opportunities in the world's fashion capital. Just over 30 years later, Johns Hopkins University created a campus in Bologna, Italy offering graduate programme in international relations. On the other side of the Atlantic, Florida State University established a branch campus in the Panama Canal Zone to serve the American citizens assisting in the development of the canal.

The 1980 was the first significant surge in the number of IUBCs, mostly focused on U.S institutions in Japan (Chambers and Cummings, 1990.). There was an interest at that time in strengthening ties between the world's two largest economies.

The next period of growth occurred in 1990's, when there began a diversification in the number of home and host countries. In 1990, the French Fashion University of Esmod opened a campus in Norway, which may have been the first non-American institution to open an University Branch campus. Following this move, colleges and universities in a number of nations, including Australia, Canada, Chile, Ireland, Italy, Mexico, Sweden, and the United Kingdom, began creating IUBCs. Moreover, the destination of the host countries moved into the developing worlds including nations in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and South America. By the start of 21st century, there were approximately 50 branch campuses in operations (Verbik & Merkley, 2006).

The 2000s were a gold rush period for IUBCs. The number of such institutions grew from about 50 to nearly 200 (C-BERT, 2013). Much of this growth was concentrated in Asia and the Middle East, in nations such as China, Singapore, Malaysia, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates. The growth was driven by a desire among institutions to pursue new resources, expand their global reputations, and internationalize their educational programs (Lane & Kinser, 2011.)

Top Five Exporting Countries			Top Five Importing Countries	
Country	Exporting Institutions	International Branches	Country	International Branches
Unites States	46	82	United Arab Emirates	34
United Kingdom	16	24	China	32
Australia	13	17	Singapore	15
France	7	14	Qatar	11
India	7	9	Malaysia	6

Source: Top Exporting and Importing Countries / Cross-Border Education Research Team, December 2013)

With references to above mentioned information on the import-export processes, the number of IUBC is remaining small relative to the overall number of higher education institutions. Finland does not figure among these active nations in higher education. In the recent last three years, some Finnish higher education institutions starting to explore the possibilities of entering the international education market, using the PISA reputation which many years ago, attracted several education institutions representatives to visit the schools and HEIs in Finland.

It is important to note that the ministry of education and culture in Finland is very active in the last two years in supporting the Finnish HEIs to promote their educational product and services abroad. Also important to follow the national discussion on the possibility of selling Finnish degree to non-EU students.

In my opinion, Finland has more chances to be positioned in the global market of higher education if the following recommendations will be taken in considerations:

- 1- Develop more study programs and full degrees in English language

- 2- Attract the talents to the Finnish HEIs as students as well as academic teaching foreigner staff by developing the Doctoral schools and offering university positions with a transparent and democratic selection process. I think, Finland has already a good infrastructure and possibilities but needs to be promoted. As example, Canada has a system of research Chairs, which are prestigious university research professorships across a variety of disciplines. The Canada research Chair program invests approximately 260 millions € per year to attract and retain some of the world's most accomplished and promising minds to Canadian universities. There are currently 1,743 filled Canada Research Chair positions at 76 universities across the country, including 19 Canadian Excellence Research Chairs and 21 Centres of Excellence for commercialization and research.
- 3- Promote the concept of Higher education Diplomats (Ambassadors of Higher Education) working hand in hand with the Finnish embassies abroad.
- 4- Finnish HEIs could gain more financial external resources on a sustainable basis if they will focus on capacity building in education and researches according to the needs and respecting the national priorities of the partner countries in the Gulf region, Mediterranean region, Africa, Ex-Soviet countries....The focus on the institutional development in the education will be a strong asset.
- 5- The Network of the existing Finnish Institutes abroad could take part in promoting the Finnish HEIs and research Institution's products and services and offer more courses of Finnish languages for the selected talents and new faculties.
- 6- The Finnish education providers need to have the courage to take the risks and responsibilities by themselves.
- 7- The education export process could be seen as a way of being an active player in Internationalization of higher education. Based on my discussion with many representatives of the Dutch universities represented abroad, the reasons of having an International branches are not mainly financial but more strategic decision to be International Higher Education actor supporting their countries and the regional exporting industries.
- 8- It would seem obvious that those who teach at a HEI, the academic staff, are the key to any academic institution's internationalization strategy. After all, the faculty are the people who teach the classes, create the curricula for franchised programs, engage in collaborative research with overseas colleagues, welcome international students into their classrooms, publish in international journal, and the like. In deed, without the full, active, and enthusiastic participation of the competent academic, internationalization or export education efforts are doomed to fail.
- 9- Tampere region has a brilliant possibilities to get a leading role in the internationalization of Higher education but some elements of attractiveness need to be developed. Tampere region should have own international strategy that support the national one but speaking and acting with one voice Principle.

I hope that Finland will keep its leading role in global responsibility for which is internationally respected and try to avoid joining the Club of education "imperialist", knowing that the oil based-economy is on the way to find an alternative to it and the oil price, now a days is highly fluctuated.