

Conflicts, Status Competition, and Different Rationales for Mobility: A Finnish Experience on Some Neglected Issues in International Education

Aaro Ollikainen

IN THE FIRST issue of *Frontiers*, Hans de Wit concluded his article by stating that research on institutional internationalization strategies has been insufficient in Europe (de Wit IYY5, 51). While this undoubtedly is true, interest in strategies on the departmental level has been virtually nonexistent. This is peculiar, since the university is inherently a "bottom-heavy" organization in which a great deal of autonomy is delegated to (or taken over by) the departments and individual academics (see Clark 1984b).

Researchers are often annoyed by the fact that while research on internationalization is growing in scope, it is still largely survey-based, theoretically thin, and pragmatically oriented. There are very few attempts at exploring the rationales and processes of international educational cooperation in the microcosms of academic working communities. Yet, the need for analytically more substantial, more qualitative and intensive, "anthropologically oriented" research has been recognized (see Baumgratz 1995, 442). In addition, nothing like a "critical research tradition" has so far emerged in the study of international education. The prevailing motives and means of universities and various organizations promoting internationalization of higher education have not been questioned.

In this paper, I try to open a new area for research by exploring some meanings attached to international educational and scientific cooperation on the departmental level. The article is based on findings from an interview based research project conducted at the University of Turku, Finland. However, I am convinced that the themes introduced are not peculiar to Finnish universities. After all, many structures and properties of universities are globally uniform. They are also subject to

some transnational forces, such as the education policies of the European Community and other intergovernmental organizations.

The interviewees were either liaison officers of the ECs ERASMUS program in the departments, or persons who were otherwise delegated responsibility for student mobility and international contacts. The quotations presented below are translated from their original Finnish by myself.

Internationalization of Finnish Higher Education

The last decade or so has seen a rapid process of internationalization in Finnish higher education. As elsewhere in Western Europe, the European Community has been the prime actor in the expansion of student and staff mobility. Although Finland entered the EC from the beginning of 1995, we participated already as an EFTA country in the mobility programs ERASMUS (from 1991) and COMETT 11 (from 1990). Finland's participation in these programs has been enthusiastic: it has been approximated that 20-25 percent of currently enrolling students will undertake a part of their studies abroad. During recent years, the growth in mobility of Finnish under- graduates has been faster than anywhere else in Europe. The overall picture has been darkened by a grave imbalance in inward and outward student flows. This situation is improving, however, as foreign students become increasingly interested in Finnish universities, as well as in Finnish society and culture in general.

The drive for internationalization has been characterized by euphoria, in which critical tones concerning the means and rationale behind internationalization have been few and far between. The "historically international nature" of universities, as well as their role in promoting peaceful coexistence and friendly international relations, have been repeated over and over again. However, among teachers and researchers there is some-perhaps wise---suspicion regarding the frenzy to increase mobility.

In addition, internationalization has been closely linked to developing the higher education system in the regime of "management by results." For example, internationalization (staff and student

exchanges, participation as a coordinator and as a partner in international programs) has been employed by the Ministry of Education as one criterion for allocating so-called "performance funds" to the institutions of higher education. Small as these allocations have so far been (0.5-4 percent of the total funding of the universities), they carry a significant status and publicity value to institutions and departments rewarded. The Ministry is currently planning to proceed to funding by results on a more comprehensive basis.

The new discourse of effectiveness and results has to be seen in a wider national context. As one result of the grave economic depression of the early 1990s in Finland, the funding of universities was diminished in the first couple of years of the decade. This has led to an enhanced and bitter competition over scarce resources among the institutions.

Not surprisingly, universities have taken internationalization as one weapon in this struggle for survival and prosperity. They try desperately to convince the Ministry of Education and other major funders of their "international reputation and significance" in their annual reports, other documents, and academic speeches of various kinds. "Internationalize or die" has become the slogan of the 1990s. As we will see later, this competitive climate has spread to the departmental level. But let us first observe some different rationales for internationalization.

The Relation of Internationalization to Teaching vs. Research

All of our interviewees considered internationalization-in one form or other-valuable. However, there were two clear rationales for international cooperation to be distinguished: research based and student mobility based. In the former view, all international contacts were regarded as spinoffs of research. These people were often active researchers with light reaching loads. They took it for granted that student exchange is to be treated as one form of scientific cooperation among others and that the benefits accruing to the student-as well as to sending and receiving institutions-are purely academic in nature. In many medical and natural sciences, it was customary that all mobile

students were integrated in research projects in the receiving institution. The interviewees; were under the impression that mobile students seek the tutoring of a top authority in their own specific field of interest. Not surprisingly, students who were about to start their M.A. dissertation were given priority in recruiting.

In these departments, the emphasis of mobility was on postgraduate students. The outgoing undergraduates were viewed as "the best of the lot, which was a reason to believe that they would continue their studies into postgraduate degrees: "As regards undergraduate studies, we are not interested in internationalization: we give good undergraduate teaching here. As for postgraduate students, mobility has become an imperative, perhaps even too much. . ."

On the other hand, in departments where there was no significant tradition of international research cooperation, student exchange was regarded as part of the university's core operations in its own fight. Here the expected benefits to students were also wider, covering some nonacademic ends, such as "personality development" and linguistic improvement.

However, teaching was perceived as "less international" than research. According to several interviewees, the impact of international contacts to curriculum content was "Implicit": latest research results and new scientific practices find their way to teaching from staff exchanges and conference travel without specific planning.

Perhaps the most important influence of internationalization on teaching was that incoming students must or should be taught in foreign languages (mainly English). Views on the importance of foreign language teaching varied greatly. Some were of the opinion that teaching in English gives valuable linguistic benefits to Finnish students, too. Here a strongly instrumental attitude to foreign students was prevalent: they could be used to put pressure on teachers" to teach in English. As for more skeptical respondents, they saw that teaching in foreign languages is not necessary and that foreign students should be offered only a sufficient amount of personal instruction in English.

Another-equally instrumental-rationale for recruiting foreign students was the desire to get more exchange opportunities to Finnish students in the EC programs based on reciprocity. Although most of the

interviewees mentioned the need to attract more foreigners, only a few of them saw incoming exchange students as having a positive impact on the cultural or academic climate of the department. All in all, the internationalization of teaching was regarded as an external pressure to the university, as internationality of research was endogenous. Cooperation had in some cases spread from joint research projects to student exchange, while the opposite was never the case.

Internationalization as a Status Asset

In addition to academic and personal/cultural development, international contacts were regarded as valuable in providing the staff involved, a welcome break from the daily routines. One further benefit from internationalization was the enhancement of the status and external image of the department. Some interviewees confessed spontaneously that this was an important rationale for internationalization. They expressed a fear that a department without international contacts would be at a disadvantage concerning the allocation of resources and possibly even face the threat of closing down or amalgamation to other units: "... It certainly does have an instrumental value, too, I think that Finnish institutions will not fare well in the competition just by staying strictly domestic..."

However, the status value of internationalization was revealed perhaps most clearly through the interviewees' enthusiasm to stress the international character of their respective disciplines. Almost all respondents from literary studies to theoretical physics wanted to point out how their field is and always has been "inherently international."

It is obvious that enhanced status was the prevalent reason for international activities also in those departments, where no clear reason for striving for internationalization could be pointed out. On the contrary, international contacts were seen as causing a great deal of extra work, in some cases even interfering with the research and teaching activities of the person concerned. Peculiarly, staff and especially student exchanges were regarded as somehow valuable in themselves, as carrying a positive "absolute value." The approach to internationalization was visibly unplanned and reactive in these cases.

Interestingly, professional skills or labor market qualifications were not mentioned spontaneously by any of the interviewees. This is puzzling, when one remembers the prevalent labor market orientation behind most of the EC programs. This was, however, not the logic of student mobility absorbed by

the academics. Rather, the staff was trying to consolidate the new active pursuit for internationalization with the traditional logic of universities, international contacts resulting "functionally" from research needs.

It can be concluded, therefore, that internationalization of Finnish higher education currently takes place in a cross-pressure of two models. On the one hand there is the "old school," who believe in research-driven cooperation and take a skeptical-or even amused-view to new "programmed internationalism" or "fashionable internationalism."

On the other hand there are those who believe strongly in the centrally coordinated cooperation, boosted by the European Community. They see the institutionalized approach of large networks and growing student flows as more efficient and predictable.

Only time will show how the relation of these two models will develop. Yet one thing is certain: the variety of different meanings, needs, and hopes attached to internationalization in the universities will pose great demands on the dialogue between different parties involved, between teachers and researchers and the international coordinators. It is this dialogue-or rather the lack of it-that we turn to now.

Conflicts between Different Personnel Groups

The interviewees often remarked that international activities of the department have recently grown more coordinated and planned, thanks to the infrastructure of international operations. The overall attitude toward hired international coordinators and secretaries was positive. Yet there are some conflicts between central administrative offices of the university and the departments.

Some teachers and researchers were irritated by the "structural power that central administration holds over the departments, due to the resources and information it controls. In addition, quite a few of them complained that deadlines are too tight and that too much time is wasted in reporting plans and activities to the international office. "The administration" was also seen as wasting resources that should be designated to teaching and research. This was linked to lack of manpower in the departments. One professor-who was also a member of the university's executive board for international affairs-commented critically: "The administration certainly isn't up to its tasks here. They develop their own-self-generated-events for themselves. The administrative personnel attends these events and meetings and doesn't even distribute information to us. This is insane from the point of view of the whole: the university is after all an institution of highest academic education and

research, not an institution devoted to administration. This matter should be taken under serious discussion at once: the situation is deteriorating from day to day."

The prevalent view was that the creation of international contacts must be left either to departments as a whole or to individual academics. An informal contact between two researchers was still seen as the cornerstone of all international operations. As for the role of central administration, some recognized its help as useful in the search for funding, assistance in administrative work, and dissemination of information. A more critical view was taken by those who argued that "the administration" would be of greatest help in keeping out of the way!

From the point of view of centralized, strategic planning of international operations, the situation is not encouraging. Although it is understandable that in written strategies of internationalization-drafted by the international offices-giving greater resources to administration is recommended, some teachers and researchers see the order of priorities quite differently. Only two of our interviewees thought that some administrative organ is the most important developer of international cooperation.

Discussion and Two Theoretical Standpoints

Drawing a clear overall picture of the meanings attached to internationalization is not easy. On the departmental level, several, even counteracting forces characterized the situation. In the faculty of mathematics and natural sciences, for example, several persons assured that their discipline is international by its very nature: via its globally uniform research topics and methodologies. Yet international cooperation had somehow "intensified" or "become more coordinated" over recent years. Hence, the potential of the discipline for international cooperation could somehow be taken advantage of better than before. However, now the funding available for internationalization was diminishing and bureaucratic obstacles were proliferating.

Burton Clark (1984a, 1984b) has described the peculiarities of university as an organization with his Master Matrix Model. According to Clark, teachers and researchers are simultaneously members of several systems (of a professional group, of a specific organization, of the research community of their own specialization). Academics are tied by numerous reference groups and institutions. Some of these are local, others global, some formal, others completely informal.

As a result of these cross-tensions, resulting from multiple loyalties, the university as an organization is a battlefield of several overlapping interest groups. In Clark's opinion, the university is much like a federation: it is characterized by several hierarchically ordered layers, which nevertheless interpenetrate and blend into each other. In addition, decision making on one level has to take into account the others. The crucial question is achieving a coherent, strategic action while respecting the relative autonomy and sovereignty of each level.

As a more abstract example, Pierre Bourdieu's concept field can meaningfully be used to describe internationalization of an academic organization. Put bluntly, all human life can, according to Bourdieu, be described as series of competitions for prestige or other alms. This competition takes place on different fields, which are hierarchically ordered "battlegrounds" of different people, equipped with different strategies and portfolios of different forms of capital. In addition to economic capital, people possess, for example, varying amounts of linguistic capital (prestigious modes of speech) and social capital (advantageous social networks and acquaintances). These forms of capital are also interchangeable on "rates of exchange" that vary from one field to another. The forms of capital and the working logic of the field define each other.

For "the game to be played," the "players," have to recognize well enough both the rules applied and the relative value of each form of capital on that specific field. They cooperate in upholding trust in the game. However, players simultaneously also battle over the legitimate definitions of rules and the relative values of forms of capital (see, for example, Bourdieu 1993, 72-77; Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992, 13-14, 94-115).

These theoretical views help to understand the variety of meanings and interests attached to international educational cooperation. One very clear aspect of internationalization was its role in boosting the status of the department concerned. Departments and individual academics compete with their "Internationalization," although the nature of international cooperation and resulting benefits to participating persons and units would be perceived differently. At the same time, teachers and researchers strive to establish their own "mode of internationalization" as the legitimate one. Yet everyone cooperates in upholding the belief that internationalization in one form or another is desirable.

It should be clear that these struggles of definition do not take place only among academics. As has already been mentioned, one of the main rationales of the EC international programs has been to enhance future mobility of labor

force and the university graduates' job prospects. The idea is to train a growing cadre of employees, who have experience in living in another European country. It is expected that this will gradually lubricate the moving of labor force in the single market. However, most academics have not adopted this logic for the programs. Rather, the programs were treated as vehicles for achieving academic excellence through mobility.

To add to the confusion, both Finnish and international studies show that neither of these reasons is the most important one for mobile students. On the contrary, the most prominent reasons for participating in exchange are hopes for linguistic improvement and desire to live in another country and thus become acquainted with its people. These are also commonly regarded as the most worthwhile benefits afterwards (see, for example, Opper, Teichler & Carlson 1990, 204; Teichler & Steube 1991, 333, 342; Maiworm, Steube & Teichler 1991, 162-163). It is clear, that these cross-cutting interests pose great challenges for future cooperation.

References

- Baumgratz, Gisela. 1995. Language, Culture and Global Competence: An Essay on Ambiguity. *European journal of Education* 30 (4), pp. 437-448.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1993. *Sociology in Question*. London: Sage Publications.
- Bourdieu, Pierre, & Wacquant, Loic. 1992. *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Clark, Burton. 1984a. Higher Education Systems: Organizational Conditions of Policy Formation and Implementation. In Prernfors, Rune (ed.). *Higher Education Organization. Conditions for Policy Implementation*. Stockholm: Almqvist & Wicksell International.
- Clark, Burton. 1984b. The Organizational Conception. In Clark, Burton (ed.). *Perspectives on Higher Education. Eight Disciplinary and Comparative Views*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- de Wit, Hans. 1995. Education and Globalization in Europe: Current Trends and Future Developments. *Frontiers* 1 (1), pp. 28-53.
- Dineen, Donal A. 1992. Europeanisation of Irish Universities. *Higher Education* 24 (3), pp. 391-411.
- Maiworm, Friedheim; Steube, Wolfgang; & Teichler, Ulrich. 1991. *Learning in Europe. The ERASMUS Experience*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Opper, Susan; Teichler, Ulrich; & Carlson, Jerry. 1990. *Impacts of Study Abroad Programmes on Students and Graduates*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Teichler, Ulrich, & Steube, Wolfgang. 1991. The Logics of Study Abroad Programmes and Their Impacts. *Higher Education* 21 (3), pp. 325-350.