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Mahmoodi, K.; Kallio-Gerlander, J. & Ahonen, J. 2019. A study programme for highly educated immigrants at Business Academy. Teoksessa K. Mahmoodi & J. Stenroos-Vuorio (toim.) Korkeasti koulutetut maahanmuuttajat BisnesAkatemiassa. Turun ammattikorkeakoulun raportteja 253. Turku: Turun ammattikorkeakoulu, 19 - 24.

URL: <http://julkaisut.turkuamk.fi/isbn9789522167088.pdf>

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To cite this, use the original publication:

Mahmoodi, K.; Kallio-Gerlander, J. & Ahonen, J. 2019. A study programme for highly educated immigrants at Business Academy. In K. Mahmoodi & J. Stenroos-Vuorio (eds) Korkeasti koulutetut maahanmuuttajat BisnesAkatemiassa. Reports from Turku University of Applied Sciences 253. Turku: Turku University of Applied Sciences, 19 - 24.

URL: <http://julkaisut.turkuamk.fi/isbn9789522167088.pdf>

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A study programme for highly educated immigrants at Business Academy

Kosar Mahmoodi, Jaana Kallio-Gerlander and Jarmo Ahonen

Global mobility is constantly increasing and, at the same time, acquires new forms. Finland has also become internationalized as the number of immigrants has nearly doubled in the 21st century Finland. Simultaneously, the baby boomers are retiring. In future, Finland will not manage without foreign labour. Finland needs to be able to attract skilled labour and make use of the labour potential of the immigration population that already lives in Finland.

This article introduces a study programme for highly educated immigrants, MaBA (Immigrants at Business Academy), which is developed by Turku University of Applied Sciences (TUAS) and funded by the Ministry of Education and Culture in Finland. The MaBA study programme aims to upgrade the degrees that immigrants have obtained earlier to respond to today's needs in Finland. In this article, the term *immigrant* refers to first-generation immigrants who have settled in Finland and have not completed elementary education in Finland.

Approximately 40 % of immigrants hold higher education degree

Immigrants are generally seen as a homogeneous group with only one integration model. However, there are many immigrants who have completed higher education studies and, therefore, a single integration model does not fit all. In order to succeed in a changing world, Finland needs to plan how to integrate and update the education of highly educated immigrants. It is a fact that immigrants must be more sys-

tematically involved in working life in order to effectively integrate them into the Finnish society.

The employment potential among immigrants is high. The age structure in the immigrant population who have moved to Finland compared to local population is rather young. In addition, two out of five hold a higher education degree. Only a quarter of these degrees have been completed in Finland (Nieminen et al. 2015, 36–37) and most of these immigrants have been taught in English. Despite the high education level, the employment rate of immigrants is lower than that of the local population (Nieminen et al. 2015, 30; 71).

The main obstacles to the employment of immigrants are poor knowledge of the Finnish working life, lack of contacts with business communities, incompatibility of the completed degree with the Finnish qualifications, poor language skills and employers' prejudices (e.g. Vehaskari 2010, 19–22, Yijälä & Nyman 2017, 112). According to Vehaskari's (2010, 22) study of the employment of educated immigrants, employers fail to see what else an immigrant has to offer if their language skills are regarded as insufficient by the employer. Work-based learning for immigrants at Finnish higher education institutions ensure contacts with working life. With this approach, employers' prejudices will diminish and the employment opportunities for immigrants increase enormously.

Study programme implemented in collaboration with companies

Based on these important facts, Turku University of Applied Sciences designed and implemented a Bachelor's Degree Programme in Business Administration for highly educated immigrants. During the study programme, students gain practical entrepreneurial skills and a good understanding of the Finnish working life.

The MaBA study programme is supported by the special grant for the integration of asylum seekers and immigrants granted by the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture. This grant is intended for projects that foster the cultural and social integration in Finland. The purpose of the MaBA project is to promote the employment of highly qualified immigrants and to facilitate their acceptance as full-fledged members of the Finnish society. The project also aims to provide fast and efficient

education for immigrants with previous studies (in technical or commercial fields) in cooperation with companies in Southwest Finland.

The MaBA project is implemented by using the Business Academy concept, which has been developed and implemented by TUAS since 2011. Instead of traditional lecture based teaching, Business Academy studies utilize blended learning to combine distance and classroom teaching, seminars, learning in projects and online environments, as well as visits and meetings with representatives of industrial life.

MaBA trains immigrants with higher education background to suit regional labour market

The first MaBA study programme started in January 2018. In the beginning of the programme, the studies were mostly conducted in English; however, as the studies progressed, the share of the Finnish language used in studies has increased continuously. Improving Finnish skills, especially professional language skills, plays an important role in the study programme.

After completing the programme, students will have received a Finnish degree and gained strong competences to run their own business or alternatively be employed by companies. In addition, as a result of the MaBA project, an operational model of a fast track study programme for highly educated immigrants is created within a sector with a good employment rate (Valtonen 2018). Furthermore, another result of the project is a network of cooperation companies that have the ability to employ immigrants and also work together with immigrant entrepreneurs.

The impact of the study programme on the employment and integration of immigrants into the Finnish society is significant. Successful integration increases the mental well-being of immigrants by reducing frustration and preventing exclusion. Integrated and active immigrants promote social cohesion in society. In addition to promoting a good integration model, this helps reduce polarization and inequality in society.

A bachelor's degree in business administration, in total 210 ECTS, consists of basic and professional studies, optional studies, practical training periods and a thesis.

Those students who were accepted to the study programme have previously completed at least 100 ECTS of higher education studies. Based on their previous studies, each student will have an individual study plan that specifies the studies which need to be completed.

The study programme lasts for one and a half years. The students form two teams, both of which have their own teacher coach. Each team builds their own learning plan. There are no ready fixed timetables. The Finnish language training is integrated into the studies since the beginning. The development of the Finnish language skills is monitored on a regular basis through skill level tests, which have shown that the students have made progress in their professional language skills effectively in a short time.

The MaBA project staff have a rich international work experience, with many of them having prior experience of working with immigrants living in Finland.

Conclusions

In the MaBA study programme, both Finnish students and students with a foreign background work together, which will improve the ability of both parties to work in a multicultural environment. The cooperative approach as a learning method elicits the sense of community between the students. Project based assignments with companies also generate the sense of involvement and meaningfulness and this approach helps participants create strong connections to the Finnish working life and Finnish society. The students in the MaBA study programme contribute to generating a model that encourages other immigrants to supplement their studies and also consider entrepreneurship. The integration of highly educated immigrants into the Finnish society is extremely important and economically profitable as a whole.

Turku University of Applied Sciences (TUAS), located in Southwest Finland, is a community of 10 000 experts – a technical university of the future and a developer of well-being that operates under the slogan #ExcellenceInAction. TUAS graduates are practice-oriented professionals with top competencies. TUAS offers bachelor's and master's degree programmes in a range of different fields, as well as an opportunity to update one's know-how at Open University of Applied Sciences and get new energy and direction for one's current job through continuing professional education offered to both organizations and individuals. The majority of TUAS students come from Southwest Finland and most of them also get employed in the region.

Innopeda[®], developed by TUAS, is a pedagogical approach aiming at providing students with those skills and competences that are needed in the current and future working life. Innopeda[®] is based on experimentation, sharing knowledge and know-how, and combining different perspectives. The innovation pedagogical approach connects teaching, research and development, and working life cooperation.

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