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COOPERATION AND CONTINUOUS DEVELOPMENT: APPLICATION PROCESS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF ADMISSION OFFICERS

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Over the years, there has been a wide variety of admission criteria among universities of applied sciences (UAS) in Finland when selecting students outside of Finland. At the beginning, UASs had their own applications and used only their own exams. In the early 2000s, the first forms of cooperation began when the Finnish Polytechnic Network for East and Southeast Asia started to organise entrance exams in eight countries. This cooperation lasted from 2001 to 2009 (Marten 2009, 55). During that time UASs also organised exams for individual applicants in Finnish embassies abroad, where the UAS sent the exam materials and the personnel of the embassies supervised the exams. Before 2007, applicants applied for degree programmes conducted in English in separate applications. If they wanted to apply e.g. to six options, they filled in six different paper applications.

The biggest problems in the early days were the lack of information on the possibilities to take the exam outside Finland and dealing with practical issues concerning the exam. The admission officers could not give guaranteed information to the applicants early enough on whether they could take the exam in their home or neighbouring country, or if the applicants had to travel all the way to Finland to participate in the compulsory entrance exam. The scheduling was also a problem, because in many cases the exam was exactly the same as it was in Finland. This meant that the only time it could be done was the exact time the exam was held also in Finland. In some cases, the same exam could not be held because of the overly different time zones, the lack of personnel or lack of expertise in the embassies; in such cases the programmes faced difficulties on how to consider the results equal to those of the exams made in Finland. Of course, measures were taken to change the exams so that they measured the same skills; for example, the interview could be replaced with an essay on the same issue.

THE JOINT APPLICATION SYSTEM ENABLES COOPERATION BETWEEN THE ADMISSIONS OFFICES

The cooperation between the admissions offices of UASs in Finland has been strong since the Finnish-taught programmes were gathered to the national

joint application system in 2003. When English-taught bachelor's programmes joined the national joint application system in 2007 (admissions.fi, VKYH-system), it was easy to widen the cooperation. That is when admission officers started using the same national online database for applications administered by the National Board of Education, Finland. From then on, admission officers have formed common guidelines and instructions together, and national admission criteria for UASs is also drafted every year. For example, admission officers have created several data sheets of different countries' education systems so that every UAS would check the high school certificates and decide the eligibility equally. In 2009–2011, national admission criteria were developed in the group comprising the Finnish National Agency for Education, admissions offices and representatives of degree programmes. At some point, the responsibility for drawing up the national admission criteria was assigned to the working committee of UASs' heads of student services and field-specific admission criteria work groups. The Rectors' Conference of Finnish Universities of Applied Sciences, Arene, confirms the national admission criteria yearly.

During 2007–2008, applicants could be exempted from the entrance examination language test if they provided a certificate of their language skills (i.e. IELTS, TOEFL) with certain minimum requirements. In addition to the senior school certificate, an applicant who applied with a non-Finnish qualification and was not a citizen of an EU/EEA country provided proof of their English language skills by the end of the application period to obtain invitation for exams during the years 2009–2016. In 2017, the English language certificate requirement was abandoned (English language skills are assessed as a part of the exams) because of tuition fees, and partly due to the fact that English certificates can be forged; in some countries, several verification systems are even involved in corruption, for example. In 2016, a year before the tuition fees were enacted, the Finnish National Agency for Education charged €100 from applicants outside the EU/EEA for administrative costs. This practice was in use for only one year. It required a lot of new features in the system and work for UASs' admission offices.

In the joint application, the first-preference UAS checks applications and makes the eligibility decision for all the applicant's UAS study options. The new application system (studyinfo.fi) where all the Finnish education institutions' education were gathered together came into being in 2015. At that point, some UASs put their programmes taught in English into direct applications. This was the first time that the national cooperation in English-taught programmes began to crack.

VARIETY INCREASES

During 2017–2018, UASs started to hold their English-taught programmes for both application periods during the spring (January and March application periods). This was done mainly because the Finnish applicants seemed to apply later in the spring when all the Finnish-taught programmes were also offered. At the moment there is a large variety of applications in UASs for English-taught programmes. Some UASs are also piloting the continuing application period, where an application can be made whenever it suits the applicant during the whole year. The admissions can be made e.g. based on the online interview organised by the UAS in question. The education still begins once or twice a year from the beginning of the academic term. It is interesting to see how this will develop. It seems that all this takes more effort than the results promise.

According to the changes in the laws, in 2017 higher education institutions had to start charging tuition fees from non-EU/EEA citizens when applying for English-taught programmes. New features had to be created in the application system, e.g. tuition fee obligation marking, attachment requests for proving citizenship/resident permit status, and scholarship applications. There is a lot of variation regarding the amount of tuition fees, scholarship schemes, etc. One positive thing is that UASs have published information about their tuition fees, scholarship amounts and granting processes for applicants. However, every higher education institution may have different fees, various kinds of rules regarding payments, deadlines, dates for showing resident permit status, etc. Therefore, it is very difficult for an applicant to create an overall picture of the processes in Finland.

After the implementation of tuition fees in higher education institutions, the atmosphere of cooperation has seemed to change. Higher education institutions began favouring direct applications because every UAS would like to get the best students who could afford to pay the tuition fees. The idea seems to be that when the applicant is guided directly to the direct application, they do not gain information of the other possibilities to study in Finland. However, it would be prudent to understand how small a country Finland is among the other countries offering English-taught higher education programmes. When one then adds the fact that universities in Finland overall offer annual scholarships to cover the student's living expenses, thereby making them more tempting than UAS programmes in Finland, it leaves UASs in a situation where it is not profitable to act alone. It is important to see the whole picture from the applicants' perspective and understand that a UAS will have more benefits and cost-effectiveness in cooperation than if it had to deal with it all by itself.

COOPERATION SMOOTHENS AND UNIFIES PRACTICES OF STUDENT SELECTION

When FINNIPS entrance exams were organised for the first time in 2010, all the guidelines, documents and arrangements seemed laborious at first, but then we noticed how much less the applicants sent enquiries, how much easier it was to get information on the exams, how much better organised the exams were and how much better students we gained. Nowadays, part of the international marketing of the UASs' degree programmes is also made via the FINNIPS cooperation, so we can just lay back and wait for the applications to arrive. It may not quite be like that, however, but the cooperation is organised so well that we can count on everything going as planned, and if some problems arise, it does not take long for those to be fixed. It is easy to guide applicants when all of the network's UASs act in the same way, such as using the same form for invitation letters for the exams, for example. This cooperation offers us UASs the website, the marketing, the scheduling, the exam venues, the exam arrangements, the invitation letters, different types of expert trainings and the statistics yearly. It goes without saying that the member UASs have to do their part, but with the guidance of the FINNIPS coordinator, everything goes smoothly. And most importantly, every part of the yearly process is constantly measured and developed.

The benefits of this FINNIPS cooperation for the applicants are as vital as the benefits for the cooperating UASs. The common international marketing gives us more funds altogether to participate in the student fairs worldwide, especially in the countries where the exams are organised. This helps prospective applicants to have face-to-face contact with the FINNIPS and UASs already before applying. It is important to have this kind of touch when trying to decide what country offers the most attractive opportunities from the applicant's perspective. FINNIPS also offers prime instructions and well-organised exams to the applicants. When UASs work together with the common guidelines, the transparency increases the applicant's trust on the UASs. As well as information on Finland and living in Finland, the network offers truthful information on the costs of living and tuition fees. It is very difficult for people to understand, especially in third world countries, how expensive studying and living in Finland truly is. There is no sense in denying this fact when recruiting the students.

CURRENT DEVELOPMENT SCHEMES

One of the biggest benefits for UASs and applicants is that participating in the entrance exams engages the applicant to the UAS. This may be the reason why these applicants often choose to confirm the offered study place, arrive in Finland when the financial issues are cleared, begin their studies and, most importantly, study well and graduate. This provides a huge advantage compared to the paper-based admissions, where the students are selected solely on the basis of their school certificates. The paper-based admission is not the most expedient way to select students for English-taught bachelor's programmes. There is always the possibility that foreign degree certificates are forged, and comparing different countries' certificates is very difficult in any case because of differences in grading scales and evaluation criteria.

At the moment (January 2019), the proposal for the new decree regarding the joint application is undergoing a round of consultation. The fear is that cooperation between UASs will be shattered even more with this new decree, because its purpose is to remove the prioritisation of study options from the January joint application. It enables an applicant to receive up to six study place offers, and UASs will have no idea which study place the applicant will accept. It is possible that the applicant will explore the study options, their contents, tuition fees, etc. only at this point. The current system, with the prioritisation, has forced applicants to make up their minds already by the time they have filled in the application. The new implementation, on the other hand, will delay the applicant's resident permit process and arrival in Finland. The UASs' selections from a waiting list will not be conducted until late July, which is too late for the applicants' resident permit process. Though it remains to be seen, we are ready to make an effort for this good cooperation to continue.

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