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The Implementation of Tuition Fees and Scholarship Criteria at Vaasa University of Applied Sciences

For the first time in the history of education in Finland and after a long debate, tuition fees were introduced for students coming from outside the European Union and the European Economic Area (EU/EEA) in 2017. This was preceded by a tuition fee pilot between 2010 and 2014, which only concerned a few Master's degree programmes in selected higher education institutions (HEIs). In addition, an interesting experiment was carried out in 2016 when application handling fees were introduced. However, application handling fees were also short-lived and were only implemented once in 2016. As opposed to tuition fees, application handling fees were charged from all applicants despite their nationality if their background education was completed outside the EU/EEA education system. Another main difference was that the application handling fee was actually collected by the National Board of Education, not by the HEIs themselves (studyinfo.fi website).

Currently, tuition fees in Finland vary from EUR 4000 to 20 000 per academic year, depending on the programme and the institution. The minimum fee set by the Finnish government is EUR 1500 per academic year, but beyond this HEIs can use their own discretion to determine the level of the fee. A tuition fee is collected from non-EU/EEA students on the degree programmes conducted in English. Therefore, studying on degree programmes taught in Finnish and Swedish are still free of charge for all students regardless of their nationality. In addition, on the degree programmes conducted in English, non-EU/EEA applicants can be exempt from the fee in certain circumstances (studyinfinland.fi website).

There is also a great variety in scholarship criteria between different institutions. In most higher education institutions, the level of scholarship is affected by the student's academic performance (studyinfinland.fi website).

Setting up tuition fees at Vaasa University of Applied Sciences

Finland has enjoyed a reputation as a high-quality education provider throughout the years, and positive PISA scores have helped pave the way to success. Therefore, it is no wonder that the stakes were high and tuition fees aroused lots of debate nationwide, bringing up both positive and negative aspects to the topic. Critics suggested that we would face a significant drop in applications to our international degree programmes, signalling an end to the internationalisation that had skyrocketed

over in recent years. On the other side of the debate, there were optimists who said that we could finally profit from our higher education through education export (OECD/PISA website).

At Vaasa University of Applied Sciences (UAS), the debate largely reflected the nationwide debate on a miniature scale. Vaasa UAS currently offers three degree programmes conducted in English, of which two are at Bachelor's level and one at Master's. For a relatively small organisation, the impact of such a tremendous change can be devastating – or it can create new ways of thinking. Creative thinking is becoming more and more important as resources in higher education are being cut. Vaasa UAS tends to take a practical approach, and it can be flexible when it needs to be. Therefore, we started to create possible outcome scenarios and considered how we could affect them.

The first step was to determine the level of tuition fee for non-EU/EEA students. As mentioned earlier, there was a great variety in tuition fees depending on the programme and institution. This, combined with the fact that we had no prior experience of collecting fees, did not make the decision any easier.

Previous studies also showed that the introduction of tuition fees had reduced the number of international students in Sweden and Denmark, both of which are good benchmarks when comparing the Finnish education structure. In Sweden, for example, the number of applicants to Master's degree programmes decreased by 73 per cent in 2011, compared to autumn 2010. The Danish experience was rather similar. In 2005, non-EU students made up more than 36 per cent of the total number of international students, while in 2011 they comprised only 15 per cent of the total number. In both Sweden and Denmark the numbers have slightly increased after the first shock but are still significantly lower than they were before the introduction of tuition fees (sweden.se/blogs; West, 2013).

Bearing this in mind, we considered that it would initially be more important to have our international degree programmes full in the autumn than trying to achieve more profit at the expense of having fewer students. Another aim of competitive pricing was to ensure that in the future we would still produce skilled experts in the Vaasa region for the needs of the labour market. Demand in the Vaasa region is especially high due to the energy cluster, which consists of 140 companies that employ around 10,000 people. The board eventually decided to set an affordable price tag – EUR 4000 for Bachelor's degrees and EUR 5000 for Master's degree programmes (vaasaregion.fi website).

Determining scholarships

When the tuition fee for the international degree programmes was decided, it was time to focus on the scholarship criteria. By taking a quick look at HEI websites in Finland, it is easy to see that there are two bottom lines in setting the scholarship criteria: the first is the type of the scholarship, which can be a fee waiver or a full grant, and the second is that in most HEIs, academic performance affects the level of scholarship. When talking about academic performance, 55 ECTS credits per academic year is usually set as the minimum requirement. This is due to the reason that a large share of government funding for HEIs is granted on the basis of students achieving at least 55 credits per year.

This brings us to the conclusion that in order to stand out from the majority of higher education providers with largely similar scholarship criteria, you have to make unique and innovative decisions. Thus, the Vaasa UAS board decided to grant a scholarship of EUR 5000 for all non-EU/EEA students who have to pay tuition fees and who reach the milestone of 55 ECTS per academic year. The same amount applies to both Bachelor's and Master's degree students.

At Vaasa UAS, the board only set a framework for the scholarship criteria. Therefore, free rein was given to the design of the scholarship criteria and it was eventually made at the grassroots level in cooperation between the study services unit, the international office and the directors of the education units. The whole process took approximately six months, and after a few meetings and a few drafts, the final product was introduced to the management board and was agreed as such.

First-year students can receive the scholarship in two instalments of EUR 2500; the first one after the autumn semester and the second one after the spring semester. For second- and third-year students, the scholarship is paid in full after the academic year, provided that the student has completed the required number of credits. Fourth-year students can apply for a scholarship upon graduation. The scholarship covers 100 to 125 per cent of the tuition costs, making it the most generous offer for international degree students in Finland at present. Additionally, in accordance with the Aliens Act, non-EU/EEA students have to cover all living costs in Finland during their studies.

Student recruitment – a road to success

The student recruitment process plays a key role in the success of the admission process. In addition to FINNIPS marketing, which mainly promotes the whole network, it was obvious that we would need to conduct marketing of our own. Marketing aimed at students already residing in Finland was

well planned, but the problem was how to reach potential candidates outside Finland and inform them about our offer.

With the help of skilful and dedicated teachers, international students already studying at Vaasa UAS were engaged in the marketing campaign. Marketing efforts were targeted in particular at China, Russia and Vietnam. Students visited their own home institutions and made presentations about Vaasa UAS. Social media channels were also widely used; some of the marketing pages were even translated into Chinese, Russian and Vietnamese languages.

We also made sure that information on the scholarship criteria and the tuition fee was available for applicants well before the start of the next application period on our website and on the studyinfo.fi website. This made it easier for an applicant to compare criteria between different UASs.

In conclusion, it can be stated that the marketing campaign did really well and together with the reasonable tuition fee and generous scholarship offer, the number of non-EU/EEA applicants increased significantly in spring 2017 when compared to the previous application period in 2016. On the International Business Programme, the increase was 72.7 per cent, while the Information Technology programme saw a 10.8 per cent increase (Education Statistics Finland website).

After the 2017/18 academic year, we will have more information and experience. We will be more capable of evaluating whether the decisions made were right or if something needs to be changed. We believe that we are now in a good position to continue our work towards better solutions in the future, which we see as being full of potential.

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