

Välilmaa, Jussi; Weimer, Leasa

## The trends of internationalization in Finnish higher education

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# ZEITSCHRIFT FÜR PÄDAGOGIK

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■ *Thementeil*

**Internationalisierung, Diversität,  
Hochschule**

■ *Allgemeiner Teil*

Deutschland als Bildungsexportland

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erziehungswissenschaftlicher Ansatz eines kritisch-  
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*Jussi Välimaa/Leasa Weimer*

# The Trends of Internationalization in Finnish Higher Education

**Abstract:** This article discusses the main trends of internationalization in Finnish higher education at the national level and analyzes the International Degree Programs (IDPs) at the institutional level. The article focuses on challenges of international student integration into the Finnish society and the tuition pilot program for international degree students. Empirically this study is based on the evaluation of IDPs organized by the Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council and the dissertation of Leasa Weimer on tuition fees for international students in Finland.

**Keywords:** International Degree Programs, Finnish Higher Education, Tuition, Internationalization, Evaluation

## 1. Introduction

In Finland, the internationalization of higher education has become one of the national higher education policy goals. The Ministry of Education and Culture (MEC) published the “Strategy for the Internationalisation of Higher Education Institutions in Finland 2009–2015”, and in this document the rationale for internationalization is explained:

The attractiveness of Finland as a business, work and living environment must be increased. Internationalisation of higher education, research and innovation systems is at the core of societal renewal. Moreover, internationalisation of higher education institutions promotes diversity in the society and business community, international networking, competitiveness and innovativeness, as well as improves the well-being, competence and education of the citizens.

Furthermore, the strategy states that “the aim is to create in Finland an internationally strong and attractive higher education institution and research community that promotes society’s ability to function in an open international environment, supports the balanced development of a multicultural society and participates actively in solving global problems.”

These societal goals will be achieved when higher education institutions (HEIs) “define the focus areas of their international activities as part of their overall strategies on the basis of the aims of the national strategy.” According to the national higher education policy makers,

International cooperation is the best way to improve quality, remove overlapping activities and pool Finnish and foreign resources for joint projects. Our own high-

level competence is a necessary condition when seeking interaction with leading global centres and actors. [Furthermore], HEIs are key to the internationalisation of the economy and society. They attract a highly educated labour force and foreign investments. By international networking higher education institutions consolidate the development potential of their region, their overall competence level, available resources, competitiveness and innovation ability as well as make business life in the region more varied. (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2009, p. 15)

On the basis of these quotations it is evident that Finnish higher education policy makers perceive the internationalization of higher education as a crucial aim and process to improve the quality of Finnish higher education – and the competitiveness of Finnish society. The strategy of internationalization is, however, only one of the policy documents which show that higher education, research and innovative capacity are seen as crucial for the development of the future Finnish nation state (see Nokkala, 2007). The purpose of the strategy of internationalization is, therefore, instrumental because it emphasizes the narrative that internationalization will help the Finnish society, businesses and HEIs to be more competitive in the global context. In this sense, the higher education policy makers employ a political-economic motive for the internationalization of higher education which parallels the discourse for higher educational reforms at the supranational European level. Since joining the EU in 1995, Finland is among the first to respond to educational reforms (such as Bologna Process, 2000 Lisbon Agenda, 2006 and 2011 Modernization Agendas) suggested by the supranational level (Ahola & Mesikämmen, 2003).

Within the internationalization vision, Finnish HEIs are expected to have a strategic approach to planning their international activities. Internationalization should be related to the strategies of HEIs which, in turn, should follow the general guidelines of the national internationalization strategy. This kind of procedure is normal practice in the Finnish higher education context where the MEC creates the overarching strategic vision and HEIs are expected to find their place in this national strategy. However, the relationship between HEIs and MEC is based on negotiation rather than on mechanical implementation of national policies because Finnish (and Nordic) HEIs enjoy a high degree of institutional autonomy even though they are mainly funded by the nation state (65% of the total funding). In Finland, this autonomy is both secured in the Finnish Constitution and guaranteed by laws governing universities (*Universities Act 558/2009*) and polytechnics (*Polytechnics Act 351/2003*). In this context, it is only natural that the institutions themselves take full responsibility for the quality of education and research and develop institutional strategies – including internationalization strategies – which help them to reach their goals. In the Finnish social context of trust, the steering of the national higher education system is based on performance agreements and on a national funding formula. In this cultural context, it is, again, natural for the institutions and academics to take the agreements and national policy goals seriously because they are related to each other through funding mechanisms.



The Finnish system of higher education consists of two sectors: universities and polytechnics, which prefer to be called universities of applied sciences (UAS). The number of universities has been reduced from 18 to 14 public universities through three merger operations (see Ursin, Aittola, Henderson & Välimaa, 2010). The 27 UAS will be reduced to 18 by year 2020 (Välimaa, 2011). The main differences between universities and UAS are the following: only universities award doctoral degrees and only universities are supposed to conduct fundamental research, whereas UAS focus on research on development activities. In addition, UAS have only eight fields of teaching, whereas universities cover all disciplines. These facts also are related to the International Degree Programs (IDPs) because MA programs are offered mainly by universities and BA programs mainly by UAS (see below). In addition to these two sectors, there are six university centers which are hybrid organizations consisting of university and UAS teaching activities. The Finnish system of education reached mass higher education levels during the 1970s and today a starting place is offered to more than 70% of the age cohort. However, the number of international students has remained low as will be shown below. Studying is free of charge with the exception of some IDPs which were selected to participate in a five year tuition pilot program (see below).

From early 1990s to current time, the internationalization strategy shifted from sending Finnish students abroad to receiving international students in Finland (Weimer, 2013). International cooperation in the 1990s corresponded to Finland joining the EU and resulted in more domestic students studying in other European countries. The main motive was academic and cultural. At the turn of the century, however, the national perspective changed and the Finnish borders opened up to receive more international students. Figure 1 illustrates the growth of international degree students in Finland from 2000–2010 showing a clear trend of expansion of international students in Finnish

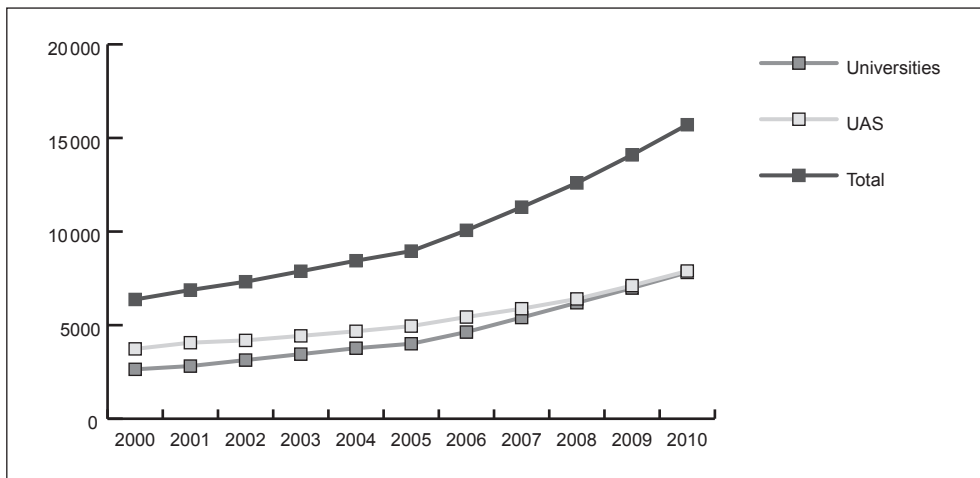


Fig. 1: International degree student growth in Finland, 2000–2010. Center for International Mobility CIMO (2011). Key Figures: Internationalization in Finnish Higher Education

higher education. The number of students nearly tripled over the 10-year period, while the number of students in universities and UAS were almost equally distributed in 2010. The national drive for internationalization efforts led to the development of more IDPs allowing for a greater capacity of international degree students. At the same time, as the number of international students increased, the national conversation began to question the financial implications of this growth (Weimer, 2013).

This article discusses the main trends of internationalization in Finnish higher education, specifically honing in on the growth of international students and IDPs. After a detailed description of the IDPs, policy implications are discussed including the challenges of international student integration and the tuition pilot program for international degree students. Empirically this study is based on the evaluation of IDPs organized by the Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council (FINHEEC) and the dissertation of Leasa Weimer (2013) on tuition fees for international students in Finland.

### 1.1 Method

The number of IDPs in Finland is approximate because there is no national register. There is, however, an unofficial register maintained by CIMO that is internally consistent and therefore shows a trend of changes (see Figure 1). The problem is, however, that some HEIs make no difference between international degree students and exchange students. Furthermore, the number of IDPs is a moving target as new programs are established and discontinued in Finnish HEIs all the time. Thus, we use the data which was collected in the evaluation of Bachelor and Master level IDPs in Finnish higher education organized by the Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council (FINHEEC) (see Välilmaa et al., 2013). The data was collected in three steps in order to have both a comprehensive picture of the national situation of IDPs and a more profound understanding of the realities of IDPs at the institutional level. First, a questionnaire (with open-ended questions) was sent to all HEI managers on March 2012 focusing on the institutional level of internationalization. The response rate was 100%. Second, in May 2012 a structured survey questionnaire was sent with the intention of gathering data from a program level perspective. The questionnaires were completed by IDP managers with a response rate of 66%, which is a good response rate in social science research, but only a mediocre response in FINHEEC evaluations. Third, two teams of evaluators conducted site visits in October 2012 to four Finnish HEIs where 113 interviews were collected. The persons interviewed represented the following groups of people: HEI management, IDP managers, IDP teachers and students, service staff members and representatives of stakeholders.

Using this data gives a sound empirical basis for argumentation on a topic where there are no other reliable sources of data. However, it is also problematic because the data was collected for the purposes of an evaluation by FINHEEC. For this reason some of the answers of the IDP managers may be biased because it is possible that they would wanted to give a positive picture of their programs.

Additional data comes from a larger doctoral dissertation project analyzing the tuition fee pilot program in Finland (Weimer, 2013). This study employed a qualitative research design including 25 semi-structured interviews and policy document analysis to ensure triangulation. The purposeful sample included key individuals at the national level, university administration, academic staff (professors), university staff, and representatives of the national student union.

## 2. On International Students and Teachers

This section offers an overview of the quantity and focus of IDP students and teachers. Descriptive details shed light on who studies in Finland, what fields of study are most popular, and who the teachers are in these programs.

### 2.1 *The Fields of Study*

According to the FINHEEC data there were 399 IDPs in Finnish HEIs in 2012.<sup>1</sup> Universities offered 257 IDPs with a majority of them being MA degree programs (251) and UAS offered 142 IDPs with a majority of them being BA degree programs (106). The MA programs in UAS differ from university MA programs because they are further education programs focused on students who have at least three years of work experience whereas University MA degree programs are meant for ‘normal’ students (Välilmaa et al., 2013).

The most popular fields of study in Finnish IDPs are technology and business, although humanities is favored 2% more than business in universities (see Table 1). In UAS, health (normally nursing) is the third most popular field of study, whereas medical education in universities is the least attractive field of study. In an international comparative perspective, Finnish master’s level programs follow the international trend because the majority of European English-taught programs are offered in business and economics (28%) and in engineering and technology (21%) like in Finland. However,

University Type	Technol.	Humanit.	Education	Social Science	Business	Science	Health & Medicine	Total
University	80 (32%)	50 (20%)	7 (3%)	19 (8%)	45 (18%)	40 (16%)	16 (6%)	257
UAS	43 (30%)	9 (6%)	0	5 (4%)	62 (44%)	0	23 (16%)	142
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>123</b>	<b>59</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>107</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>399</b>

Tab. 1: *Fields of study by university type; percentage is calculated in relation to type of university, not to the total number of IDPs (source: Välilmaa et al., 2013)*

1 This number does not consist of PhD level and non-degree programs.

internationally untypical is the fact that science IDPs are two times more popular in Finland than in Europe and the fact that social science IDPs are about 50% less popular in Finland than what is the case internationally (see Brenn-White & van Rest, 2012).

## 2.2 Managers, Teachers and Students in IDPs

### IDP Managers

IDP managers, who are responsible for implementing and managing the IDP, are vital to the program's quality. Most IDP managers at the university level reported having a doctorate degree, while at the UAS level most managers earned a master's degree as their highest educational level. This comes as no surprise, as the general structure of degree offerings at universities versus UAS are similar to this trend. Only six IDP managers reported their highest education as a bachelor's degree and 19 IDP managers reported their educational level as "other" (see Figure 2).

It is assumed that most IDP managers are Finnish because they report their mother tongue as either Finnish (79%) or Swedish (8%), the two official languages in Finland. Only 18 IDP managers (7%) reported English as their native language.

IDP managers report having a myriad of international experiences. For those IDP managers working in universities, publishing in international journals and conducting research with international colleagues was the most reported. More than half of university IDP program managers reported working in a company or organization outside of Finland and teaching in a country outside of Finland, whereas the most common international experience of IDP managers working in UAS was teaching in a country other than Finland. More than half of UAS IDP managers reported working in an international company or organization in Finland and publishing in international journals.

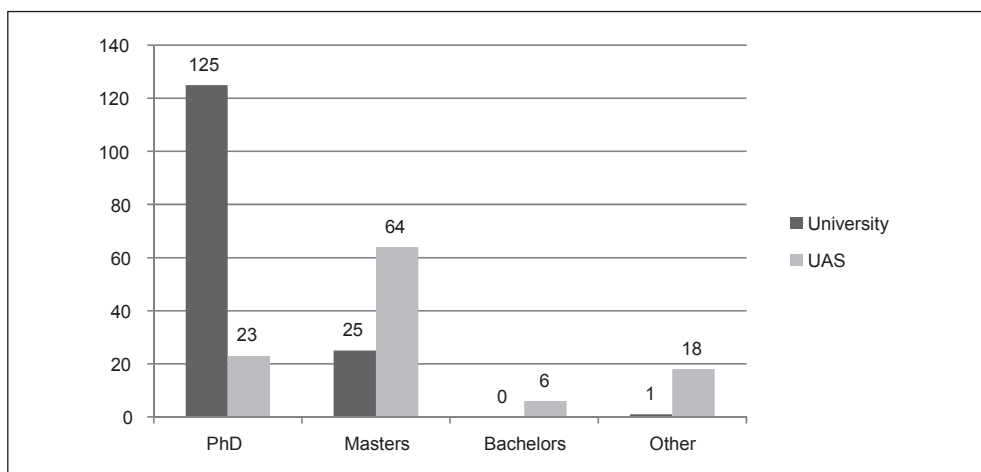


Fig. 2: The degrees of IDP managers in universities and UAS (source: Välilmaa et al., 2013)

Language	Number of IDP managers	Percent
Arabic	2	1 %
Dutch	1	0 %
English	18	7 %
Finnish	207	79 %
German	3	1 %
Portuguese	3	1 %
Spanish	2	1 %
Swedish	22	8 %
Urdu	1	0 %
Other	3	1 %
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>262</b>	

Tab. 2: Mother tongue of the IDP program managers (source: Välimaa et al., 2013)

International Experience	Uni Type	Total Percent
a) Working in an international company/organization in Finland	University	46 %
	UAS	56 %
	<b>Total</b>	<b>50 %</b>
b) Working in a company/organization outside of Finland	University	58 %
	UAS	43 %
	<b>Total</b>	<b>52 %</b>
c) Teaching in a country other than Finland	University	70 %
	UAS	64 %
	<b>Total</b>	<b>68 %</b>
d) Publishing in an international journal (language other than Finnish)	University	91 %
	UAS	52 %
	<b>Total</b>	<b>75 %</b>
e) Research with international colleagues	University	91 %
	UAS	48 %
	<b>Total</b>	<b>73 %</b>

Tab. 3: IDP Program manager international experience (source: Välimaa et al., 2013)

### Teachers in IDPs

It is rational to assume that the quality of an IDP also depends on the quality of teaching, thus it is important to consider the teacher demographics. However, the exact number of IDP teachers is approximate due to the nature of their engagement, especially when considering visiting teachers. A number of IDPs are organized in cooperation with more than one department or faculty especially in universities. This may be one of the reasons why the exact number of IDP teachers in universities is unknown whereas in UAS it is much easier to calculate the exact number of teachers per each IDP. IDP managers reported that the number of international IDP teachers is 5174 persons. Unfortunately this number is not accurate, because it was possible to include only 86% of overall responses to this number. However, the Figure helps to show the overall number of teaching staff engaged in teaching in IDPs (Välilmaa et al., 2013).

IDP Teachers can be divided into four main categories: full-time, part-time and visiting or exchange teachers. The largest category in all HEIs is the full-time teacher (44%/universities, 41%/UAS). In UAS there are more part-time teachers (36%) compared to universities (25%), whereas universities use more visiting or exchange teachers (27%) than UAS (20%). This difference is related to the fact that universities are normally bigger than UAS and they have more research-based international cooperation which makes it easier to use more visiting researchers than UAS. The majority of IDP teachers are Finnish (70% in universities and 74% in UAS). Europeans are the second most important category with 18% of teachers followed by Asian (3.8%) and North American teachers (3.4%).

IDP managers consider the most valuable skills of university IDP teachers (very important) to be: subject knowledge (99%), English language proficiency (62%), research experience (58%) and teaching and pedagogical skills (44%). It is interesting that neither intercultural skills nor international experience were rated as highly valued by university IDP managers. In UAS the order of preference was somewhat different, as follows: subject knowledge (96%), working life experience (73%), teaching and pedagogical skills (68%), and English language proficiency (63%). Similarly, intercultural skills together with international experience were not regarded as very important for IDP teachers in UAS (Välilmaa et al., 2013).

However, IDP managers responded very positively when asked, “How do the skills of the current teaching staff meet the needs of the IDP?” This is probably related to the fact that when answering this question they were also evaluating how well they have succeeded in their recruitment. According to IDP managers in universities their teachers were meeting well or very well the needs of the subject knowledge (99%), English language proficiency (97%) and research experience (96%). In addition, 85% of the IDP teachers had good or very good intercultural skills. In UAS, in turn, IDP managers evaluated that their teachers had either good or very good subject knowledge (99%), working life experience (96%) and English language proficiency (91%). In addition, intercultural skills were also either good or very good (88%) (Välilmaa et al., 2013).

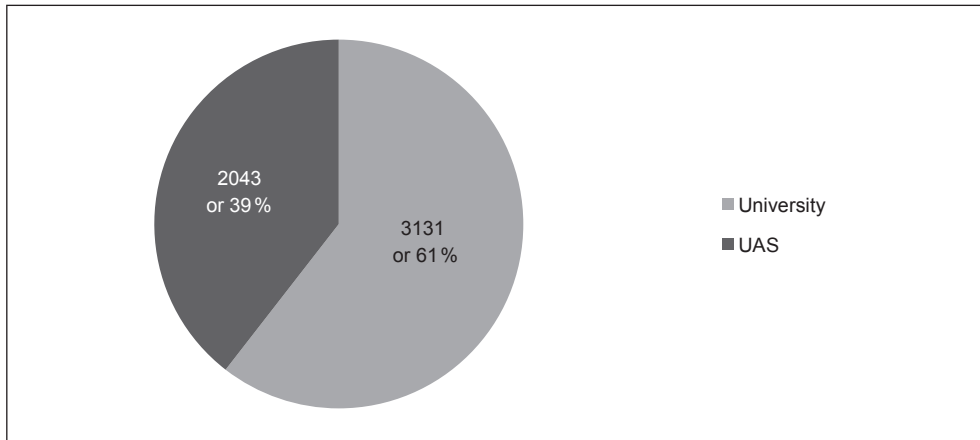


Fig. 3: Teaching staff in IDPs in Finnish universities and UAS (source: Välimaa et al., 2013)

### On Students

Universities and UAS reported a total of 12 999 students enrolled in IDPs representing 144 different nationalities in the 2012 Spring term (see Table 4). However, the numbers reported were not consistent from university to university and some HEIs had a clear difficulty in collecting the numbers. Some HEIs were unable to indicate the nationalities of international students and some HEIs included all international students (degree and non-degree) into the same category.

The top 20 nationalities represented in IDPs are presented in Table 5, with Finnish students being the largest number. Students from China and Russia are the two largest groups, together totaling about 16% of all international students. It is interesting to note that European countries send very few students to Finnish HEIs even though especially UAS teachers said in the interviews that they would like to have more IDP students from European countries. It should also be noted that the total number of students in Finnish HEIs is about 260 000 students (114 000/universities; 146 000/UAS) which means that the total number of IDP students is only about 5% of all students in 2012.

Type of University	Non-Finns	Finns	Total	Missing
University	3837	803	4640	850
UAS	6008	2351	8359	781
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>9845</b>	<b>3154</b>	<b>12 999</b>	<b>1631</b>

Tab. 4: Total number of students reported in IDPs (source: Välimaa et al., 2013)

Country	University	UAS	TOTAL
1. Finland	803	2352	3155
2. China	538	696	1234
3. Russia	260	638	898
4. Nepal	96	630	726
5. Vietnam	93	559	652
6. Nigeria	93	506	599
7. Bangladesh	97	264	361
8. Pakistan	242	100	342
9. Ethiopia	68	231	299
10. India	245	42	287
11. Kenya	16	225	241
12. Ghana	56	175	231
13. Iran	174	24	198
14. Germany	77	87	164
15. USA	83	77	160
16. Cameroon	42	102	144
17. Estonia	24	78	102
18. Spain	27	47	74
19. Poland	19	50	69
20. UK	18	46	64

Tab. 5: Top 20 nationalities represented in IDPs (source: Välilmaa et al., 2013)

### 3. Main Problems with IDPs and Students' Integration with Finnish Labor Market and Society

While the national rhetoric promotes internationalization as an instrument for Finland to be globally competitive by attracting the highly educated, there is a disconnect from what is actually occurring at the IDP level. "A clear misunderstanding seems to exist between the stakeholders of HEIs and the HEIs themselves; based on the feedback that we received, neither the stakeholders nor the HEIs see their role as essential for promoting the employability of foreigners who took part in an IDP programme" (Välilmaa et al., 2013, p. 88). This is especially true outside the capital area where international students have more opportunities for finding internships and jobs because of the size of its economic area.



On the basis of the interviews of business communities, international IDP students, and academic staff, the language is one of the main obstacles for students (and graduates) to integrate into the Finnish society and the labor force. While this argument serves as a perfect excuse not to speak about racism and more difficult issues, it also is a practical reason for not hiring international graduates in Finnish companies (Välimaa et al., 2013). The language of the labor market (Finnish) and the language of IDPs (English) does not facilitate the stay rate of international students in Finland after graduation. The data of the evaluation reveals that IDPs offer both compulsory and optional language training during the students' study period, but language training is not a high priority for IDP curriculum. Some of the language courses offered are not even focused on the labor force language, but rather on the language of studies: English. In addition, most IDPs are at the master's level which means that the students are enrolled for two years (on average). Even if there was a curricular emphasis on Finnish language training, two years may not guarantee a level of fluency that is expected in the labor force.

The political climate for international students is also a problematic issue because migration is a heated topic in the Finnish context. Owing to nationalistic traditions and current political debates migration – especially from outside of Europe – is seen as a problem by traditional conservative Finns, whereas culturally liberal Finns see migration, and especially the migration of highly skilled labor force – like students – as crucially important for the future of Finland. The strategy of internationalization is an example of the liberal perspective (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2009). From a societal perspective, the integration of IDP students is a real task for the Finnish society which is aging fast and needs talented labor force in an increasingly global market place. International students could be one of the strengths of and for the Finnish society – especially because many of them would like to stay in Finland (Välimaa et al., 2013).

#### 4. On Tuition Fees and the Debate on Tuition Fees in Finland

In the 2000s, a national discussion ensued considering the financial implications of the increase in international students. The question of, 'Who pays for the international degree students?' became a topic that was discussed and debated regularly. In Finland, the society pays for the cost of education through taxes. A national respondent explains, "There's always this [discussion] that there is no free education, that [someone pays] and if numbers of foreign students are growing then they [foreign students] should pay" (Weimer, 2013, p. 80). Thus, as the national discussion evolved and included the cost of HE and who is paying for it, the taboo topic of tuition was eventually brought into the conversation (Weimer, 2013). According to another respondent at the national level:

I think that the atmosphere in Finland has changed. Because we have more international students we talk more about the cost of internationalization and since we talk about the cost, somebody always asks, 'Who is paying for this?' The answer is, 'the taxpayers.' Then begins the discussion of whether this is right or wrong and then somebody introduces tuition fees into the discussion. (Weimer, 2013, p. 80)

In 2009, the *New University Act* included a five-year tuition pilot program (2010–2014, see Weimer, 2013). Starting a pilot program, often called an experiment, is a traditional Finnish policy procedure to introduce reforms in Finnish higher education through making a small scale reform and then expanding it into nationwide practice after a couple of years of experimentation (see Välilmaa, 2005). The pilot program was designed as an experiment to collect tuition fees from international degree students (non EU/EEA students) enrolled in select IDPs. Only 131 IDPs were eligible to participate in the pilot program. Out of the 131 IDPs, the management of 24 IDPs chose to participate and collect tuition fees. These IDPs made decisions on the tuition fee amount, student selection, and enrollment (Hölttä, Janssen & Kivisto, 2010). However, one caveat of participation was that the hosting university would have to offer a scholarship program in tandem with the tuition IDP. Many actors discussed how the scholarship program was a barrier to participating in the tuition pilot program.

With the advent of the pilot program, the national debate for and against tuition gained momentum. The rationales against tuition were largely led by the student union. These rationales included, but were not limited to, four rationales that aim to protect the social welfare system from neoliberal tendencies that privatize and move collective goals to individual responsibilities. Even though the tuition pilot program exclusively targets international students and not local students, there is fear that the tuition fee pilot program will gradually lead to tuition reform for local students as well. The actors call this the “gate theory”; once the gate opens for collecting tuition fees from international students, the gate will remain open and tuition fees will extend to EU and local Finnish students. In addition to this overarching rationale against tuition fees, actors argue that a tuition-free system supports international social justice by giving students from developing countries opportunities to participate in higher education. Also, the introduction of tuition fees contradicts national internationalization efforts because there will likely be a significant decrease in student numbers – like in Denmark and Sweden – when Finnish universities are made to compete with other HEIs in the market place of higher education (Weimer, 2013).

On the other side of the debate, actors use neoliberal discursive rationales that advocate for higher education as a private good. First, they view tuition as a proxy for quality and competition. There is an assumption that tuition (or market forces) leads to quality improvement (or efficiency), thus attracting more international students. In other words, “Consumer choice will foster competition between universities to result in more responsive, inclusive, and better quality teaching” (Naidoo, Shankar & Veer, 2011, p. 1145). In addition, respondents view tuition as an instrument to be more globally competitive in the higher education market. A university administrator explains, “We want to be more competitive in the global higher education market and tuition fees are one way to be more competitive” (Weimer, 2013, p. 118). Second, some actors believe that international students can be a source of revenue generation for universities thus helping current economic difficulties of Finnish universities. Third, they believe that the aging population in Finland will squeeze public funds, thus decreasing the state funding for higher education. Finally, in their discursive formation for tuition fees they

also discuss the taxpayers' burden of tuition-free higher education for international students and the need for a new national export.

## 5. Conclusion

Many scholars who write on internationalization explicate how the motivations behind internationalization have been changing from social/cultural and academic to economic and political (de Wit, 2002; Altbach & Knight, 2007; Knight, 2010). In Finland, the national rhetoric has become more economic and political as policy makers view international students as a source of revenue, highly skilled labor, and as a means to be globally competitive. "Nation-states have an increased interest in the role international students can play in economic development and competitive advantage" (Weimer, 2012, p. 84). Yet, at the institutional level and the IDP level, the reality does not measure up to these national expectations. The low number of IPDs participating in the tuition pilot program indicates that there is still resistance to the collection of tuition fees. The lack of Finnish language training indicates that IDP students are not necessarily being groomed to enter the Finnish labor market. The 'globally competitive' discourse is not implemented into practice at the IDP level.

As for higher education policy, a new funding model of universities rewards them on the basis of international staff members, students and degrees. In addition, international publishing is one of the key criteria for the funding of universities. Simultaneously, however, Finnish HEIs are struggling to become more international in their teaching and administrative practices in addition to the increased emphasis put on international cooperation in research. For all of these reasons it seems that the trend of internationalization will grow stronger in Finnish higher education because internationalization continues to be seen as an important policy instrument helping the Finnish national economy to become more globally competitive. Yet, the question remains whether the political-economic discourse can override the reality of the strong national consciousness that builds obstacles for international students interested in staying in Finland.

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