

Public Universities in Nordic countries: the Case of Finland (0206)

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The structures of the higher education systems are rather similar across Nordic countries even though there can be found variation in the terminology used. In all Nordic countries analysed in this presentation (Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden) we can find both universities with strong academic traditions in teaching and research and more vocationally oriented higher education institutions which may be called either as state colleges (in Denmark, Norway and Sweden) or universities of applied sciences (in Finland). Typical to Nordic countries is the strong position of the public authority both in the higher education legislation, in the political steering and the funding of higher education institutions (HEIs) (Rinne 2010). There may be found small private providers of higher education (most typically religious or business education schools in Denmark, Norway and Sweden), but these are not called as private HEIs but as independent ones. The concept of independent HEI is important because it tells that, officially, there are not two sectors of higher education (private vs. public) but national systems of higher education which are regulated by national legislation and funded predominantly by public monies –no matter whether they depend more on public funding (universities and state colleges) or less (independent HEIs). The independent HEIs also need to have their operating licences from the national ministries of education.

An important characteristic in all Nordic societies is social trust. In the field of higher education, this has meant that public authorities (normally ministries of culture and education or science) have given rather extensive institutional autonomy to all HEIs. In this societal context public authorities are respected, laws are obeyed and regulations implemented instead of negotiated (Valimaa 2012).

As for the value basis of higher education, equality of educational opportunities can be defined as one of the most fundamental principles in Nordic countries. The Nordic definitions of equality are supported by educational and social policies which aim to make sure that students from different socio-economic backgrounds should have equal opportunities to find their way to higher education and to reach equally high level of education indifferent of the higher education institutions they attend (cf. Espinoza 2007). This principle means first, that

Nordic societies support students from families with different socio-economic backgrounds. Second, as higher education policy actions this may mean quotas for students from different backgrounds. Third, it also means that Nordic societies do not aim to create status hierarchies between or between among universities or between universities and state colleges, or between independent and public HEIs.

However, it seems that these traditional policies are challenged by contemporary social realities with increasing global competition in higher education, the digitalisation of social and cultural life and industrial production. At the system level, there are political pressures to create status hierarchies among universities and between universities and state colleges. As for policies promoting equal educational opportunities, one of the main challenges is this: should international students be included in the traditional definition? Together with the globalization of higher education both Sweden and Denmark have decided to collect tuition fees from students coming outside of the European Union, whereas Finland and Norway have only discussed the matter but not decided not to follow the policy of Sweden and Denmark. This means that the interpretations of equal educational opportunities have been discussed in all Nordic countries even though they have lead to different political solutions. These differences suggest, in turn, that there may also differences between Nordic countries and their systems of higher education.

The aim of this presentation is, first, to analyse the challenges for equality of educational opportunities in a global perspective where nation states need to redefine the equality of higher education for their citizens and international mobile students. The analysis focuses on Nordic countries which have had a strong tradition of equality in educational opportunities, but which have chosen different paths as regards their policies on international mobile students. Finland is especially interesting case in this regard because national government has just decided to introduce tuition fees for international students coming outside European Union. Second, the presentation will reflect on the strong role of public higher education and public authorities in Nordic countries using Finland as a case to illustrate the nature of Nordic definition of higher education.

References

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