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Five things international program coordinators and other stakeholders can do to help international students become more employable

Abstract

After more than ten years of dealing with international education and employability issues as a student, researcher, and international program coordinator, I would like to summarize my observations based on the case of projects in the city of Tampere, Finland as a reference. I will focus on two questions: why it is important to help international students become more employable and what aspects require special attention of international program coordinators in this respect.

Key words: international graduates, employability

In the context of increasing financial burden on higher education (HE) and its consequent commercialization, the graduates' labour market success is increasingly viewed as the source of HEI's attractiveness for potential (fee-paying) students (Grotkowska et al., 2016). Besides, many students nowadays choose international education as an 'academic gate' to immigration and thus pay special attention to the opportunities of staying on and getting a job in the host country. In Finland, for instance, around two thirds of students choose to stay (CIMO, 2012). Hence, it would be expedient to use this motivation from the beginning to attract the students to study in your program showing the prospects of employment, via alumni testimonials and the support that they would get throughout the studies.

Employing international graduates is recognized to bring a number of benefits including access to host and home country professional networks, cross-cultural competences, foreign language skills and the ability to help local companies enter the international markets (Morris-Lange & Brands, 2015). Therefore, especially in the context of ageing population, the international students' retention in the host country after graduation is high on policy agenda (Shumilova & Cai, 2016). Some local and

national governments (e.g. some states in the U.S., Denmark, Czech Republic and Finland) have already introduced the internationalisation and employability-related performance indicators to their HE funding models. However, the HE research shows that international graduates tend to be more vulnerable both when returning home and staying in the host labour markets, especially in the non-English-speaking ones. This vulnerability is reflected in the need to deal with the challenges of acculturation, language barriers, discrimination and limited access to professional networks (Crockett & Hays, 2011; Shumilova et al., 2012). Hence, the available career support services usually require some tailoring for the international students.

The analysis of the ways of acquiring a job among international graduates in Finland indicates that the university career services were least helpful (only 3% of students benefited from them). Similarly, only 10% of students got their jobs via internships, 7% via thesis or project work with the company and 6% via help of teaching staff at the faculty (Shumilova, et al., 2012). The rest got their jobs by directly applying to the job vacancies and using personal networks. Further research shows that international graduate employability is affected by at least four categories of factors: higher education institutional, individual, contextual and factors related to employers' perspectives (Shumilova Y. & Cai. Y., 2015). In this case, it is often the aggregate of factors and stakeholders' efforts that contributes to smooth HE to work transition. We believe, that despite the low percentage of students attributing their career success to the use of university career services or internships, it does not mean that universities should stop offering work placements or career guidance. Rather they should join the forces with other stakeholders to maximize the available support services.

For instance, in the selected case of the city of Tampere a number of international employability enhancement initiatives are already in place, including work-based training (e.g., internships facilitated by international program coordinators during the studies and by the employment agency after graduation), language and other Lifelong Learning courses, career counselling, and job fairs. Furthermore, the stakeholders in Tampere including three HEIs and the Tampere Regional Development Agency have cooperated to set up a Tampere Ambassadors network and the Mentoring program for international students. Below I present an algorithm of using all these services in an efficient way.

First, in our joint degree Erasmus Mundus Master program in Research and Innovation in Higher Education (MARIHE) we started with designating a unit/person that will be responsible for the employability aspect of the program. Second, when the students arrive, a career day is organized for them where the possible career paths

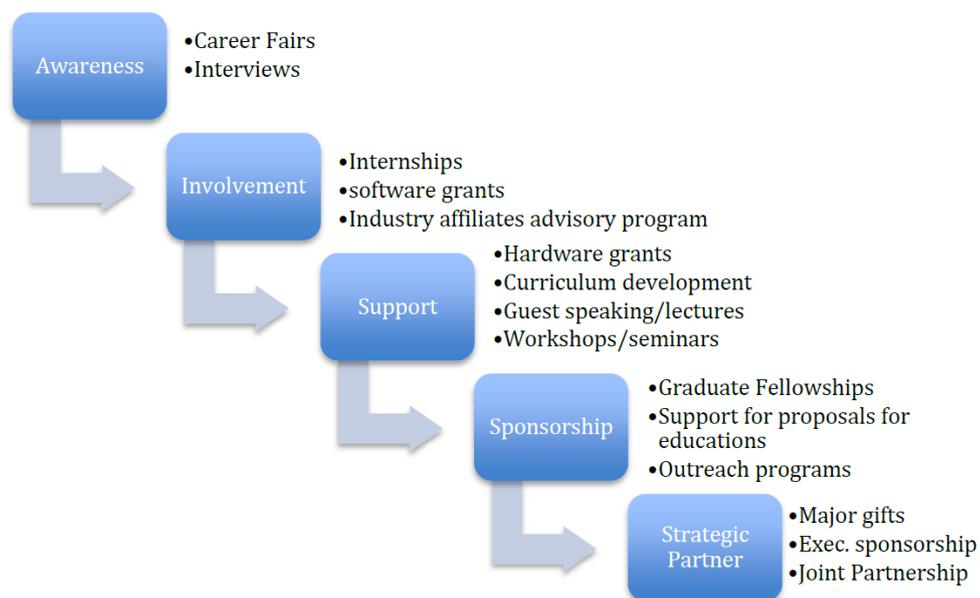
are discussed with testimonials from alumni and a discussion of their career and career support expectations. Interestingly, the career support expectations ranged from none at all to expectations of help with networking and sharing the information on job and PhD opportunities, on the required skills for these jobs and conferences in the field. It should be noted, that after creating the MARIHE student and alumni group in social media the process of sharing the career-related information became self-managed. However, it is still important that the employability-responsible person joins the group.

Third, even though the internship was not officially required, in our program we introduced it as a compulsory part of the curriculum between first and second year of studies and provided full support in finding internship hosts. The students greatly appreciated this opportunity, although they suggested that the minimum length of internship could be changed from six weeks to at least eight. They also hoped that there would be more specific internship task descriptions provided. In line with this, I find the *Consultancy team* approach adopted at Monterrey Institute of Technology, Mexico to be useful (Burkle, 2008). In such approach students, working in teams, joined a range of companies with the intention of identifying a real problem, analysing it, and offering a solution, instead of waiting for the internship host to come up with some task. The acquired consultancy skills might later help the graduates become freelancers or fully self-employed and the developed solutions can be used by companies.

Fourth, an alternative to organizing an internship could be the mentoring program. However, such programs are better organized at the inter-institutional or municipal level in order to avoid the duplication of efforts by program coordinators in their search for mentors. A mentoring program for students requires about four facilitated group meetings with students and employers and five personal mentor-mentee meetings over a semester. During this time, the mentees have a chance to discuss with their mentors and group participants any questions about career planning, job hunting and work life. The Mentoring program proved to be successful if not directly in terms of increased employment rates (which is not the main goal of the project) but rather in terms of growing professional networks, improved inter-cultural communication and employability skills. On the part of the employers (mentors) the main expected outcome is a better understanding of the added value the foreign talents might bring and the challenges they are facing. The interviews with the mentors indicate that they also get a better understanding of their own culture, as many things in their working culture are taken for granted and only become obvious in comparison that the mentees were able to provide.

Hence, organizing internships and mentoring programs can be a mutually beneficial process for both students and employers and can be used as a step for HEIs to build strategic partnerships with companies. In this case, the program coordinators should have a longer term perspective of not only sending students for internships or mentorship, but, for instance, co-designing the university courses, and jointly developing real-life topics for the thesis work to help students become more prepared for the world of work. This example from the Hewlett-Packard presentation clearly shows the stages of developing strategic partnerships between HEIs and companies:

Figure 1.2 Levels of Engagement Activities



Source: adapted from Hewlett-Packard presentational material (n.d)

In the case of Tampere city, Tampere Regional Development Agency (Tredea) took on the role of an umbrella organization in linking the international talents to the local companies and enhancing the mutual awareness of these actors. For this purpose, Tredea created Talent Tampere and Tampere All Bright Ambassador Networks inviting anyone who wanted to promote the city and help local businesses internationalise to join for free. The members of the networks get access to the networking events, company visits, newsletters and special-interest meetings, e.g. promoting cooperation with a certain region. All ambassadors' profiles are featured on the network [web-site](#). The benefits of this initiative lie not only in bringing the international talents and employers together, but also in helping the talents network with each other. One spin-off of such cooperation is that international experts started a 'reverse mentorship' program in which they offer mentoring to Finnish companies on how to expand their business abroad.

As a way of conclusion, it is important to highlight that the efforts directed at enhancing the employability of international students are an investment that pays off. Helping out the students link with the employers will bring back some benefits to all the stakeholders involved in the long-term perspective. The HEIs will make their international programs more attractive by showing higher employment rates of their graduates. In addition, they might get new project/research funding thanks to international graduates who were hired to become researchers or project coordinators – as, for instance, these graduates would be able to build international Consortia to apply for grants with partners from their home countries. The local businesses will get help with marketing their services abroad. The local economy will also benefit from retaining the highly skilled foreign talent, as international graduates are often more entrepreneurial, due to the coping strategies that they had to develop in the host country.

The case of Tampere City in Finland offers some good practices to facilitate the retention of foreign talent: 1) designating an employability/alumni relations-responsible coordinator at the program level; 2) organizing a career day; 3) organizing internships and/or 4) mentoring programs for students; 5) building a Talent Tampere and Tampere Ambassador Networks as a platform to link companies and international experts – are a few examples to follow. As students indicate in their feedbacks on these initiatives, their main added value is in the facilitated networking. Eventually, it is not so much *what* you know, that is important these days, rather *who* you know and I agree that a platform for networking is the missing link on the way from higher education studies to the world of work/business, especially in the context of international education. And while most of these steps seem obvious, the question is: who would take responsibility to invest time and resources in implementing them?

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Tampere AllBright! Ambassador Network website.
<https://talent tampere.fi/ambassadors/ambassador>