

Different approaches to fees for international students

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Some Nordic countries do not charge fees for international students, but others have introduced them. How will these different approaches impact on recruitment and internationalisation?

All Nordic countries offer free higher education to their citizens. Traditionally, international students have also been able to study for free in this region but in 2006 Denmark introduced tuition fees for international students coming from outside the European Union and the European Economic Area.

Then in 2011, the Swedish educational authorities also introduced this type of fee. The same measure was suggested by the central authorities in Finland and Norway, although abandoned after some public debate.

In the Nordic countries of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden, higher education is basically publicly funded. In Denmark, Finland and Norway, some 95% of investment in tertiary education comes from public sources, according to the OECD report *Education at a Glance 2014*. In line with Nordic welfare state ideology, the opportunity to enter higher education should be equal for all citizens.

This line of thinking extends to many other areas of society, such as health. As a consequence, tax income accounts for a fairly high proportion of the gross domestic product in these countries. The Nordic countries are advanced societies with high employment rates and a high standard of living. Nevertheless, they are fairly small scale, geographically remote and the languages might be hard to crack.

The absence of tuition fees in public higher education institutions has served as an impetus to attract students from abroad. As more programmes and courses in English have been established and more exchange agreements have been developed, more international students have taken advantage of the opportunity to study for free.

International students

In Norway, the number of international students has roughly tripled since the turn of the millennium – a rapid increase which is also true for the number of PhD students and academic staff.

About every third PhD is completed by a foreign citizen and the students come from a wide range of countries – the majority from Europe; but others from outside the European Higher Education Area are also highly represented. In Norway, for instance, the largest groups of incoming students currently arrive from Sweden, Russia, Germany and China.

A large proportion of these students participate in organised exchange programmes and many Europeans enrol in the EU Erasmus programme. There are also a number of bilateral agreements with foreign universities, as well as programmes aimed at students from developing countries and certain partner countries.

In part, this growth is an intentional development, and the result of policies to internationalise education. The creation of more courses taught in English and various scholarship schemes are examples of instruments of this policy.

Changes in the funding of higher education in the form of the introduction of incentive-based financing, in

which production credits and scientific publishing matter more, have also contributed to the institutions' efforts to attract international students more actively than in the past.

The development is also related to labour and other forms of migration patterns; a number of students with foreign citizenship have basically come to Norway for reasons other than enrolling in higher education.

Introduction of fees

This backdrop also explains why the suggestion by central authorities in both Finland and Norway to introduce tuition fees for students outside the EU has led to public debate. This measure was perceived by students, politicians and some institutional leaders as likely to cause a decrease in the number of international students from outside Europe – as had happened in Denmark and Sweden after introducing fees.

Hence it was seen as undermining long-term efforts to enable higher education to benefit from a more international community of students. Nevertheless, the number of exchange students from Europe in Sweden has increased quite rapidly over recent years.

Some institutions in more remote regions in the Nordic countries have become rather dependent on recruiting international students and feared that the reform could have drastic financial consequences.

The rector of the University of Oslo, the largest and most prestigious university in Norway, also argued that such a reform would lead to less diversity and lower quality in the student body if the numbers of international students from outside the European Economic Community in general, and from developing countries in particular, were to decline.

The student unions in Finland and Norway feared that the introduction of tuition fees for international students would lead eventually to the introduction of fees for national students as well.

The Norwegian National Federation of Enterprises, however, argued that it was unfair that taxpayers should pay for the educational and social benefits of visiting students. Yet others claimed the competition for international students could increase the quality of teaching and make institutions more internationally competitive.

Ideological split

These different points of view on the introduction of tuition fees are symptomatic of the different opinions in contemporary Nordic society which are split between the idea of a welfare state higher education model on the one hand, and more neo-liberal approaches on the other.

We doubt that countries such as Finland and Norway, given the social and cultural features of the two countries, will be able to attract a competitive body of international students if they introduce fees as Sweden and Denmark have done.

In time to come, however, it will be interesting to monitor what distinguishes the recruitment patterns of international students in the different Nordic countries due to their various approaches to fees for foreign students.

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COMMENTS

Now I know we can all agree to disagree on how fees might change the game, but I think the authors are skating on thin ice here: "We doubt that countries such as Finland and Norway, given the social and cultural features of the two countries, will be able to attract a competitive body of international students if they introduce fees as Sweden and Denmark have done." I wonder which particular social and cultural features they might be referring to.

Markus Laitinen on the *University World News* Facebook page

I was wondering the same thing. If they mean institutional culture, I think that the main obstacle will be having expertise at attracting students beyond the natural pull of the country/institution.

Norwegian institutions don't even have very developed promotion departments for their national market! So it would take them quite a while to build (or import) the expertise to recruit international students from outside the EU. I don't believe that it will be a problem for the big and well-known institutions, but the smaller, less-known ones would have a hard time attracting students in their current state.

Enzo Nicolás Rossi on the *University World News* Facebook page

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