

Guidelines for internationalisation

HOW TO PROMOTE INTERNATIONALISATION AMONGST ADOLESCENTS AND YOUNG ADULTS

Finland cannot succeed without internationalisation. It requires people to introduce Finland to the world and bring back the expertise that the country needs. The foundation for this is established at a young age. However, too few are likely to be able to experience international exchange, for example. The Finnish National Agency for Education (EDUFI) wants to initiate discussion on internationalisation, raise societal awareness of its significance, and increase mobility.

EDUFI invited education providers and societal influencers from various sectors to verbalise the benefits of internationalisation and also the reasons why it is essential to invest in it. This overview summarises the guidelines for young people's internationalisation highlighted in the discussions. It also provides background information on the current state of internationalisation.

Internationalisation refers both to activities through which international expertise is acquired – such as international exchanges and practical training abroad, and international experiences in Finland – but above all to the skills, competence and networks obtained through these experiences.

Four guidelines for internationalisation

1. **Young people need encouragement to experiment and experience; currently, there is no time or flexibility for a student exchange**

The benefits of internationalisation amongst young people are widely recognised in society and encouraged in speeches and objectives. Yet, practical obstacles such as the rigid framework of studies and performance pressures still hinder it. An international exchange successfully integrated into a degree at a sufficiently early stage does not slow down or prevent graduation within the target time.

2. **Instead of measuring efficiency and results unilaterally, diverse skills must also be valued; currently, performance pressures do not encourage people to broaden their experiences**

When measuring success in studies, we should not only value efficiency but also strive towards the best long-term interests of individuals, organisations, and society. Young people's internationalisation is a profitable investment in the future.

3. **The societal atmosphere should encourage internationalisation, not be detrimental to it; currently, speeches and reality are in conflict**

The world appears to many young people as threats and crises. Their worries and anxiety are completely justified. Nevertheless, we need open dialogue on whether our society wants to be receptive and internationally oriented. Do we want to be part of the international labour market and attract talent to Finland? Do we want to be involved in resolving global challenges and influence the world's development?

4. **Internationalisation should be discussed with young people in an encouraging way that does not increase pressure, but currently this is not being achieved**

Young people face an immense amount of pressure from different directions. An international exchange should not sound like an obligation, but rather an opportunity to express ourselves and to gain time for exploration and finding the right direction. An exchange period often boosts confidence, curiosity and trust in personal abilities. The decisions made by politicians and education providers do matter, but young people's choices are also influenced by the way we speak, the terms we use and examples we provide.

Current state: Summary of internationalisation trends

In autumn 2023, the EDUFI commissioned an analysis of the current state of internationalisation. The analysis was carried out by the EDUFI's partner Kaskas. Based on the analysis, three discussions were held with education providers and two with societal influencers. The analysis examined the social debate on internationalisation amongst adolescents and young adults, the most prominent voices and narratives.

Analysis of the current state

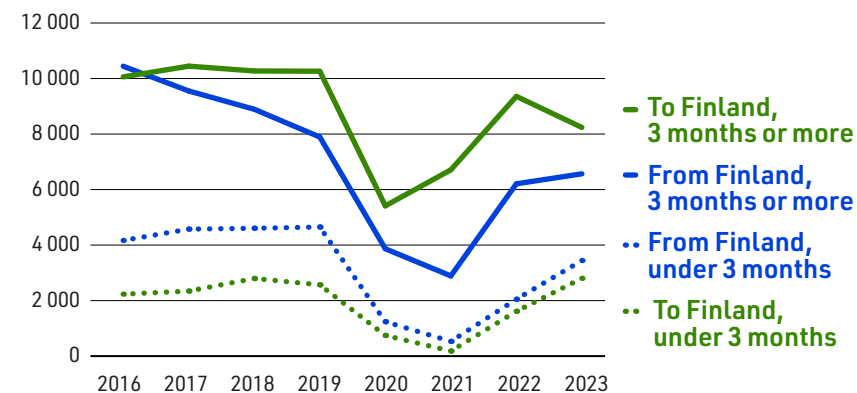
Four stakeholder group representatives were interviewed for the analysis, representing general upper secondary education, vocational education and training, and higher education. An interview was also held with one researcher.

In addition to the interviews, the Meltwater analysis examined the writings of the major Finnish media outlets and discussions on social media platform X on the topic. The analysis covered over the course of one year (September 2022 – September 2023).

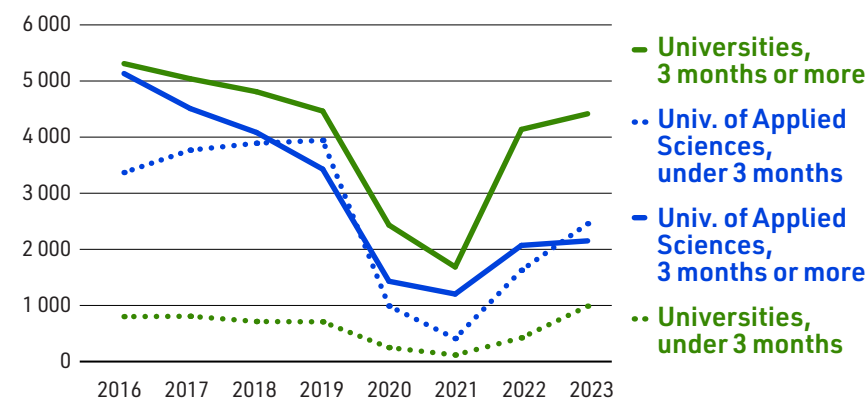
The perspectives on internationalisation that emerged from the interviews and Meltwater analysis were supplemented with recent studies and surveys (for example Opetushallituksen kansainvälisen toiminnan vaikuttavuus alueellisen tasa-arvon näkökulmasta -selvitys 2023, Youth Barometer 2022, Sitra's root cause analysis: Life management and mental health amongst young people 2019, Erasmus+ impact study 2018). Eight trends concerning internationalisation were identified from this material.

Statistics show that the popularity of international mobility periods amongst students is far from the peak years. The annual number of people going abroad was in decline even before the pandemic. This was the case in both upper secondary education and higher education.

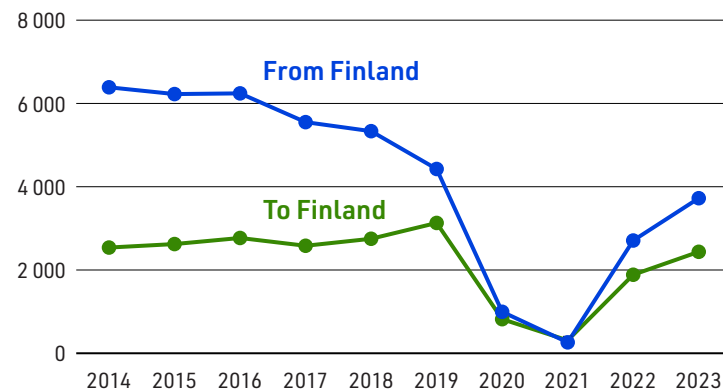
INTERNATIONAL MOBILITY PERIODS OF HIGHER EDUCATION STUDENTS



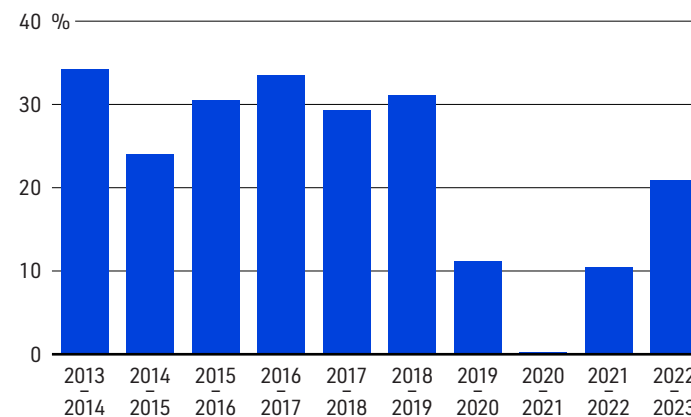
INTERNATIONAL MOBILITY PERIODS OF HIGHER EDUCATION STUDENTS FROM FINLAND



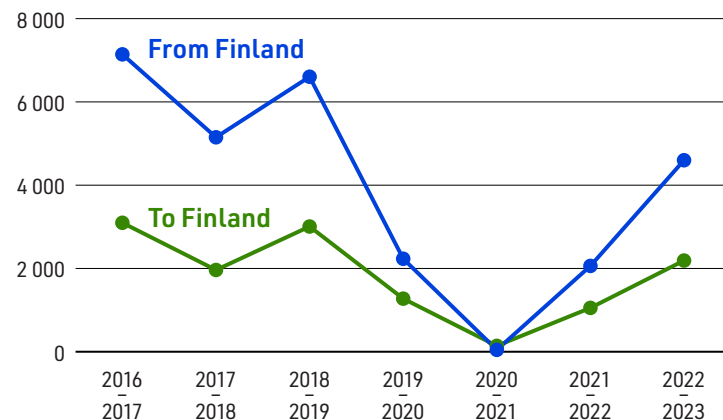
STUDENT MOBILITY PERIODS OF STUDENTS IN VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING (VET)



STUDENT MOBILITY FROM FINLAND IN GENERAL UPPER SECONDARY SCHOOLS RELATIVE TO THE NUMBER OF FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS



STUDENT MOBILITY IN GENERAL UPPER SECONDARY SCHOOLS



The popularity of international mobility periods amongst students is far from the peak years

Eight trends of internationalisation

1. Internationalisation is associated with regional and institutional inequality

The interviewees felt that educational institutions do not have equal opportunities to organise internationalisation activities. The activity levels of institutions vary considerably. According to a review by EDUFI (in Finnish), there is less involvement in international activities especially in small rural municipalities and in areas of declining population.

Educational institutions and organisations that have adopted internationalisation as part of their strategy are better able to invite pupils and students to internationalise. An organisation needs support from its management in order to incorporate internationalisation into its everyday operations and development. The more active an organisation is in terms of internationalisation, the more likely young people benefit from it.

2. Also, inequality between young people makes internationalisation more difficult

In addition to the inequalities between organisations and education providers, both the interviews and the Erasmus+ impact study (2018) revealed that young people lack equal opportunities to internationalise.

Those most likely to go on international exchange are educated, live in cities and have a stable financial background. For example, learners who are socio-economically disadvantaged or non-native speakers do not have the same opportunities. Financial reasons are the biggest obstacle to a student exchange.

However, it is not just a question of finances. Almost all the interviewees emphasised that internationalisation requires other support as well. The likelihood of internationalisation is increased by factors such as the international experiences of close circles, like family or friends, and encouragement at educational institution.

The equal realisation of internationalisation requires commitment from management and broad involvement of staff in promoting internationalisation, for example by encouraging

participation in exchange programmes. Learners must be supported and the benefits of internationalisation justified, considering the different starting points of individuals.

3. International expertise requires more than just financial support

According to the interviewees and surveys conducted by EDUFI, better support is needed for collaboration between educational providers, institutions and teachers. Although funding for international mobility is considered essential, assistance is also needed with other activities.

The interviewees would like to see more cooperation between actors who promote internationalisation. For example, peer support, networking, coaching and resource allocation would facilitate the initiation and promotion of these activities within an organisation. The responsibility for participating in the activities does not lie with the individual, educational institution or municipality.

Internationalisation must be elevated to a cross-cutting value to the entire organisation so that everyone will commit to promoting it. The senior management, in particular, plays a key role in integrating internationalisation into strategies and work plans. The management needs statistics on mobility, justifications for the budget and demonstrations of effectiveness in order to make internationalisation easier to justify.

4. A sense of hurry and growing pressures reduce the willingness to internationalise

Many interviewees emphasised that general upper secondary education, vocational education and training and higher education has become increasingly stressful. This observation is reinforced by recent research and reports (Youth Barometer 2022, Sitra's root cause analysis: Life management and mental health amongst young people 2019), according to which rush, performance pressures and the demand for efficiency extend all the way to school and increasingly younger age groups.

Some adolescents and young adults find it difficult to combine internationalisation with their study schedules due to a tight curriculum and inflexibility. The interviewees stated, for example, that curricula and the Erasmus+ programme are not properly compatible. It may be difficult to appropriately time or integrate an exchange period into studies.

The interviewees also highlighted the reform of the higher education application procedure and, in particular, the emphasis on grades in student selection, which has reduced the interest of successful students in exchange programmes, particularly as a result of added pressure. Instead of an exchange period, students focus on studying and achieving sufficiently good grades.

5. Individual benefits are emphasised in the assessment of the effectiveness of internationalisation

According to the interviewees, more attention should be paid to the regional and societal impacts of internationalisation. For example, the personal benefits for adolescents and young adults are emphasised in the dialogue concerning exchange programmes, while their effects at the structural and societal level are insufficiently addressed. It is difficult to define these types of benefits accurately and demonstrate causal relationships.

Some interviewees also mentioned the importance of internationalisation for Finland's competitiveness, national economy and the success of companies. These have not been highlighted enough. International competence makes Finland more welcoming, for example to foreign labour. The broad impact of internationalisation should be stressed for those, in particular, who influence the international activities and resources of organisations and educational institutions. This would ensure that these activities are promoted and developed in the long-term.

The interviewees also hoped that the competence and understanding of decision-makers on the possibilities of internationalisation, benefits of diversity and necessary practical

measures to promoting them would be further supported and strengthened.

6. Employers value international skills of employees

A large number of Finnish employers report difficulties in finding the competence they require. Similarly, the interviewees described a transformation of work that is changing roles, skill requirements and work environments. Continuous learning is increasingly needed. All the interviewees said that internationalisation increases work and career opportunities.

The interviews highlighted how important it is to understand different styles of interaction and diversity in an increasingly internationalising world. For example, the interviewees felt that the development of artificial intelligence will reduce the significance of language skills. Instead, working-age people must be able to be flexible, adapt and cope in various operating environments. These skills can be particularly obtained through and with internalisation.

According to the interviewees and several studies (see, for example Ayala-Orozco et al., 2018, De Bakker, Rasche, & Ponte, 2019, Global Sustainable Development Report, 2023), solving global sustainability crises requires that we consider the challenges from different angles and include various stakeholders in decision-making. International experiences help us communicate across cultural boundaries and form relationships with different people.

7. Internationalisation is too narrowly understood, as something separate from society

The interviewees considered it important not to view internationalisation merely as mobility or isolated activities, but as an integral part of an organisation's daily operations. Other dimensions of internationalisation, such as encountering diversity, ecological and social responsibility, and human rights issues, have

an essential impact on international mobility.

Internationalisation should also not be treated as separate from societal discourse. All the interviewees were concerned about the current atmosphere of attitudes and discussion as well as about racist remarks. These were seen as major challenges for internationalisation.

According to the interviewees, the key element in strengthening international mobility is to expand the definition of internationalisation as well as link it to the themes of sustainable development and social discourse in an organisation's daily operations.

8. Diversity sets new requirements for internationalisation

According to consulting firm MDI's calculations (2023), the number of pupils in most municipalities will fall sharply in the coming years. A declining population has a direct and accelerating impact on the volume of international mobility. The population of the largest urban areas continues to grow, reinforced by increasing immigration.

All interviews brought up the growth of diversity and the new needs it brings, which place demands on education providers and educational institutions in discussions concerning internationalisation. The change requires significant measures to increase the quality of education, guidance and flexibility.

The interviewees wondered whether organisations are genuinely ready for this change. If the aim is to continue to ensure that every learner has an opportunity to develop their internationalisation skills, the benefits and effects of internationalisation must be discussed from a very wide range of perspectives.

Young people lack equal opportunities to internationalise

Erasmus+ impact study (2018)

Steps to promoting internationalisation

Based on the discussions with the education providers, the Finnish National Agency for Education established steps to promote internationalisation in educational institutions and organisations. The list is intended to be used by those leading internationalisation activities and those working in various ways to promote it.

Engage the management. The management's commitment guarantees the required financial and human resources for promoting internationalisation. Internationalisation is an everyday activity and long-term work that requires networking and partners.

The budget reflects organisation's values. Funding must be allocated to internationalisation. Budget entries reveal what is valued and therefore prioritised.

Make plans for internationalisation. Internationalisation must be present not only in the curricula, but also in the institution's strategy and work plans.

Encourage staff to take action. It is easier for staff to commit to promoting internationalisation when the work is consistent and transparent.

Gather and share peer stories. Stories from students and alumni resonate because peers share insights and concretise benefits in a language familiar to adolescents and young adults.

Support the international competence of staff. In addition to peers, staff is close to young people every day. Therefore, ensure that staff possess sufficient skills and tools.

Think what is essential to young people. Working life skills and opportunities to develop are not necessarily the most important incentives for a young person to participate in student exchange.

Make information available. Internationalisation cannot occur if adolescents and young adults are unaware of their opportunities. So focus on the accessibility of information and reaching young people. Avoid using alienating and difficult-to-understand terminology of programmes and funding channels.

Integrate internationalisation into studies. A well-planned and timely student exchange does not delay graduation, which is something that students often worry about.

Take student's different circumstances into consideration. Some students work alongside their studies and others have families. Short exchange programmes or virtual internationalisation may lower the threshold to internationalise.

Provide information on mobility support. Socio-economic background and financial situation can pose significant obstacles to internationalisation. However, additional support is available to everyone who needs it.

Sources for the analysis of the current state

Interviews

The analysis of the current situation was carried out by Kaskas, a communication partner of the Finnish National Agency for Education in Autumn 2023. Four stakeholder group representatives were interviewed as part of the analysis, selected together with the Agency.

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The project in brief

The Finnish National Agency for Education (EDUFI) has recognised that the popularity of exchange studies has decreased. EDUFI wants to create a diverse and effective atmosphere for social discourse on the significance of skills gained through internationalisation, so that decision-makers and societal influencers would commit to promoting it when allocating resources.

EDUFI commissioned an analysis of the social debate on internationalisation amongst adolescents and young adults, the most prominent voices and narratives. The analysis examined the topics related to internationalisation in which the Finnish National Agency for Education can participate in the discussion.

In the next phase of the project, EDUFI invited education providers from various education sectors to dialogues and societal influencers from various fields to forums to discuss the benefits of internationalisation amongst young people and the measures required. A total of three dialogues and two forums were held. The project was implemented during the years 2023–2024.



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