Globalisation and education: case demonstration and lessons learned from Finland’s education export

David Delahunty
Department of Culture and Arts,
Oulu University of Applied Sciences,
Oulu 90250, Finland
Email: david.delahunty@oamk.fi

Kongkiti Phusavat*
Center for Advanced Study in Industrial Technology,
Faculty of Engineering,
Kasetsart University,
Bangkok 10900, Thailand
Email: fengkkp@ku.ac.th
*Corresponding author

Pekka Kess and Hanna Kropsu-Vehkapera
Department of Industrial Engineering and Management,
Faculty of Technology,
University of Oulu,
Oulu 90014, Finland
Email: Pekka.Kess@oulu.fi
Email: Hanna.Kropsu-Vehkapera@oulu.fi

Achmad Nizar Hidayanto
Faculty of Computer Science,
Universitas Indonesia,
Depok 16424, Indonesia
Email: nizar@cs.ui.ac.id

Abstract: Globalised education has become an emergent trend over the past decade. Recently, Finland has decided to promote and export its education’s expertise, experience, and know-how through the sale of educational expertise, products, and services. This study describes a comprehensive case of one Finnish education export project involving the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA), and the University of Oulu, City of Oulu, Finland. This description comprises of a record of the main issues and obstacles faced throughout the pilot, the factors identified by respondents concerning the successful conclusion of the projects, and the factors which participants identified as being responsible for overcoming these same obstacles, and issues.

Keywords: globalised education; education export; pilot project; management in education.

Biographical notes: David Delahunty earned his master degree from Faculty of Education, Oulu University, Finland. He has extensive experiences in working with the schools from Bangkok Metropolitan Administration during the pilot project between BMA and Oulu University which he was the key person. He is considered as an expert in education management and international studies in education. He is currently working at Oulu University of Applied Science in the areas of education, pedagogical development, and training.

Kongkiti Phusavat is the Professor at the Faculty of Engineering, Kasetsart University. He received his doctoral degree from Virginia Tech’s Department of Industrial and Systems Engineering, USA. His research areas include productivity and quality management, and acquisition logistics. He served as an advisor in education for Bangkok Metropolitan Administration from 2013 to 2016.

Pekka Kess is a Professor at the Department of Industrial Engineering and Management, University of Oulu, Finland. His research interests include knowledge management and e-learning. He has extensive industrial experiences from chemical, steel, electronics and software companies. He has also worked on several R&D and education-related projects sponsored by the European Commission.

Hanna Kropsu-Vehkapera is a Professor at the Department of Industrial Engineering and Management, University of Oulu, Finland. Her research interests include new product design and development, product data management and knowledge management. Previously, she has worked for several leading firms in Finland and has travelled to many countries for her research.

Achmad Nizar Hidayanto is the Head of Information Systems/Information Technology Department, Faculty of Computer Science, Universitas Indonesia. He received his PhD in Computer Science from Universitas Indonesia. His research interests are related to information systems/information technology, e-Learning, technology adoption, enterprise systems, and information retrieval.

1 Introduction

Globalisation and education are discussed within the contexts of economic assistance (e.g., scholarships/fellowships, and training offered by the US Agency for International Development, and the Japanese International Cooperation Agency), and have gradually moved towards more commercial development (e.g., recruitment of international students to study abroad in the principal English-speaking countries). International students have also provided numerous firms with a source of knowledge, and innovation over the past few decades (Dobni and Klassen, 2015). Recently, due to Finland’s historical high scores in international standardised examinations, Finland’s educational excellence has received a great deal of international recognition, which has resulted in a clear Finnish policy initiative in exploring, and attempting to monetise Finnish educational expertise,
As Juntunen (2014) indicates, the term education export has been adopted in Finland concerning potential commercial opportunities for Finnish enterprises, and universities in providing training services, selling software for pedagogical improvement, and so on. Cai et al. (2012) identify the UK, the USA, and Australia as the three leading countries with respect to educational export, based on their intrinsic advantages, and focus on recruitment policy. The Finnish Consulting Group (2012) include these same three countries as being market leaders in global education, while also considering New Zealand as a fourth. It should be noted that the understanding of educational export and its calculation in these countries differs greatly from the Finnish understanding. Indeed, in these countries ‘educational import’ may be a more suitable term, as the focus in these countries is on student recruitment with the related direct, and indirect spending ensuing from foreign students pursuing tertiary qualifications in those countries accounting for the most significant revenue source of the education export sector in these countries.

The Australian conception of educational export comprises of ‘on-shore’ and ‘offshore’ elements. The onshore component comprises of costs associated with studying in Australia, or as the Australia Bureau of Statistics (ABS) refers to this income ‘education-related personal travel’. Interestingly, 96.4% of Australia’s educational export income during 2013–2014, accrued from students that reside either long-term or short-term in Australia (Australian Government, 2014). Similarly, in New Zealand, the sum of NZD 2.8 billion estimated to have accrued through education export in 2014, was based on data concerning fees paid by International students, and living costs incurred by these students while studying in New Zealand (New Zealand Education, 2014).

Regarding the USA, research conducted by the National Association of Foreign Student Advisers (2015), shows that an estimated 886,052 international students and their families at universities and colleges supported 340,000 jobs and contributed $26.8 billion to the US economy during the 2013–2014 academic year. In the UK a report published by HM Government (2013) estimated that the overall value of educational exports to the UK in 2011 was £17.5 billion, with ‘onshore’ student spending, and other non-academic related expenses accounting for a significant proportion of this figure. Student spending and related expenses were reported as accounting for 44% of the total education export value for the UK in 2010, and this percentage is expected to be maintained in the future.

Based on the Finnish Education export strategies provided by the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture, the broad Finnish understanding of educational export can be defined as the sale of educational services to foreign-based businesses or individual persons, in the private sectors, or public sector representatives or organisations, which can also include any training which is ‘tailored’ to the customer’s needs which is held in Finland, wherein the customer, or entity responsible for payment is foreign (see Ministry of Education and Culture, 2010; Ministry of Education and Culture, 2013). This explanation has resulted in as Schatz (2016) points out a large and incoherent offering of educational products and services, with the Finnish understanding of educational export incorporating everything from educational tourism, to teacher training and consultancy services. Additionally, in contrast with the mentioned countries, the figures regarding the extent, calculation, and monetary value of Finnish educational export are sorely lacking.
2 Finnish education export background

The publicity over Finland’s consistent success in international testing comparisons, most noticeably in the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), has unquestionably resulted in increased international interest in Finnish education. In 2010, with the background of the collapse of the Finnish flagship, Nokia, and the knock-on effects which echoed throughout the Finnish economy, the Finnish government were creatively searching for new sectors which could provide employment and identified Finnish education as being one sector possible sector with great potential. Thus, the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture (2010), established a working group tasked with outlining Finland’s future objective of being ‘one of the world’s foremost education-based economies grounded on the quality of its education system’ (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2010, p.5).

In 2013, after government approval of a state-run, and state-funded network whose role was in supporting the internationalisation of Finnish companies (incorporating educational export) referred to as Team Finland, the Finnish Ministry of Education and Science set up a second working group tasked with developing an action plan to promote education exports. This plan emphasised, ‘innovation, new technology, and knowledge led services while improving networking, forming an educational export cluster and activating higher education institutes as exporters’ (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2013, pp.19–20).

In 2016, the ‘Education export roadmap 2016–2019’ (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2016), Finland’s latest education export strategy was published, setting out an itemised itinerary listing 60 specific goals, and measures that would be achieved between the years of 2016 and 2019, and the specific agency responsible for ensuring that each of these goals and measures are met. The main emphasis of this publication was on reiterating the government’s commitment to education export, to emphasise the promotion of the Finnish education brand and to outline the key agencies, and methods that would be employed to meet these goals. In the same year, an unprecedented event was also announced when the first ever Finnish Ambassador for education export was appointed (H.E. Ambassador Marianne Huusko), whose full-time focus is on the development of education export (Ministry for Foreign Affairs Finland, 2016).

3 Thai educational background (the need for education export)

As Thanalerdsopit et al. (2014) point out, Thailand is a developing country which needs to constantly improve its education system. This constant improvement is critical, as education is seen by Tran (2013) and the World Economic Forum (2015), as being a country’s foundation for economic and social development, in addition to long-term competitiveness. Additionally, unlike other Asian countries such as Japan, Singapore, Hong Kong, China, S. Korea and Taipei which have all successfully made the transition from middle to high income economies (Tran, 2013), Thailand has found itself unable to escape from this middle income trap. Flaaen et al. (2013, p.1) defines this term as ‘a development stage that characterises countries that are squeezed between low-wage producers and highly skilled and fast-moving innovators’. Education is still seen by Thailand as being the solution to escaping from this trap, and making the transition to a high income economy.
Thailand has achieved some impressive successes in increasing participation and expansion at all levels of education in Thailand, while also having made great strides towards achieving the Education for All (EFA) goals (UNESCO, 2011; UNESCO, 2014; Thai national commission for UNESCO, 2015). The United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF, 2015) also recognises the commitments made by Thailand tasked with realising the right to education for all children in Thailand with specific reference made to the role of the 1999 Thai Education Act, and a Cabinet declaration in 2005 guaranteeing, and reaffirmed the non-discriminatory right of all children to a quality education. Additionally, a 2011 report by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) shows the net enrolment rate for primary school children (6 to 11 years) increasing from 81.4% in 2000, to 90.05% in 2009. Similarly, the net enrolment rate for secondary school-age children (12 to 17 years) increased from 55.4% in 2000 to 72.22% in 2009 (UNESCO, 2011).

Despite various regulations and policy initiatives, Thai student performance as measured by various international assessments has shown a continuous decline (UNICEF, 2015). While there have been many attempts to address this decline through the improvement of teacher training, and better use of ICT (Rassameethes, 2012; Hallinger and Bryant, 2013; Kadono, 2014), it appears that these measures have not been comprehensive enough in solving the problems of poor student performance, while Hallinger (2011) established that progress in implementing these reforms to a degree that impacts students across Thailand has been slow. Education in Thailand faces additional challenges, as UNESCO (2011) state that one of the main reasons for poor outcomes for Thai students is a lack of quality educators, due to poor recruitment. Research conducted by Rivkin et al. (2005) and Chingos (2013) also suggest that the large class sizes prevalent in Thai schools may also be detrimental to student learning, as small class sizes may be more effective at closing achievement gaps, given proper teacher training.

PISA test-assessments indicate that the learning achievements of 15-year-old Thai students are significantly behind their counterparts from other countries. The results had shown slight improvements between 2000 and 2012, as can be observed in Figure 1.

**Figure 1**  Thai students’ mean PISA test scores 2000–2012
However, the most recently published PISA 2015 (sponsored by Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development or OECD) results indicate that Thailand’s scores have dropped across all three rankings: with scores of 415 in Math, 421 in Science, and 409 in reading, which are considerably below the corresponding OECD averages of 490 for Math, 493 for Science, and 493 for reading.

4 Project conception, goals and format

In 2013, with the aim of improving educational attainment, the Deputy Governor of Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA), initiated a pilot project based on the data gathered and analysed from 435 BMA schools. A correlation was found between achievement and teachers experience, with one specific issue identified being a marked drop in student achievement when students are taught by teachers with 5–20 years of experience. Student’s enrolled in classes being taught by teachers with 1–5 years’ experience displaying high achievement, with achievement levels then declining until the teacher has 20+ years of experience. These results are consistent with research conducted by Rivkin et al. (2005) concerning correlations between student achievement and teacher experience. Based on this research, it was discovered that each additional year of experience, particularly during the first five years correlated to increased student achievement, with achievement then steadily declining, before peaking again when the teacher has 20 or more years of experience.

A need for teacher and administrator training was identified based on this investigation, and as previous attempts at the domestic level were unsuccessful in addressing this problem, Finland’s strengths in this area were perceived by BMA as being a possible solution to this issue. Consequently, the Finnish Ambassador at the time met with the Deputy Governor of BMA, and the wheels were set in motion concerning a collaboration between the two countries regarding in-service training for BMA teachers, and administrators.

The University of Oulu was contacted and agreed to act as the in-service training provider. Based on the specified goals, and targeted outcomes of the proposed training it was decided that the training would be structured over several workshops to be held in both Thailand and Finland. These workshops consisted of an initial combined workshop for both teachers and administrators, conducted by experts provided by the University of Oulu which took place in Bangkok. Separate workshops specifically tailored to the goals and outcomes of the teacher, and administrator groups training were organised, and conducted in Finland.

5 Objectives

This study consists of several objectives. The first objective is to analyse the educational export’s pilot project that took place between BMA and the Extension School of Oulu University (hereafter referred to as TOPIK) during 2014–2016, from the stakeholders’ perspectives by means of an action research approach. Another objective is to discuss the main issues and obstacles observed by participants concerning the successful conclusion of this pilot project, and the main factors they identified as being responsible for
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overcoming these and other obstacles and issues, thus ensuring the successful completion of the projects.

While education export has gained a lot of attention in Finland, Cai et al. (2012) and Airola (2014) point out that in Finland there is neither much literature nor research in the field of education export yet. Past research on Finnish education research has concentrated on some form of analysis of separate strategies proposed by the Ministry of Education and Culture, and other relevant documentation (see Schatz, 2015), or investigations conducted on behalf of entities concerned with educational export, its potential, target markets, products etc. (see for example: Finnish Consulting Group, 2012; Council of Tampere Region, 2011; Delahunty, 2016).

Thus, the benefits of this study include a contribution to the current body of research on educational export, while also addressing a gap in the current understanding and knowledge of the field, through the sharing of a comprehensive record of practical issues faced, including stakeholder observations, and perspectives of the issues, and solutions encountered during an actual pilot project (Brown and Frame, 2016). Moreover, this paper also addresses a gap in the current research by providing observations, recommendations, and insights to those currently engaged in, or planning to engage in educational export.

6 Methodology

This study applies an action research approach to achieve these objectives. Carr and Kemmis (1986) and Koshy (2010) summarise the goals of action research as being the improvement of practice, the improvement of the understanding of practice, and the improvement of the situation in which the practice takes place. In action research, as Koshy (2010) relates, the role of the researcher is in recognising problems, or in identifying a problem and bringing it to the attention of the stakeholders. Reason and Bradbury (2001) relate that the epistemological assumption underlying the purpose of academic research, and discourse is not merely to describe, understand and explain the world, but also to change it. Thus, action research is used in real situations rather than in experimental studies, since its primary focus is on solving existing, and future issues and problems, while also producing practical knowledge, which fit seamlessly with the goals of this research.

Kemmis and McTaggart (2000) describe action research as a cyclical process consisting of self-reflective cycles of; planning a change, acting and observing the process and consequences of the change, reflecting on these processes and consequences, re-planning, acting and observing, reflecting, and so on. To avoid, and prepare for obstacles and issues, feedback and expert advice was sought from, and provided by the local partner at all stages of the project process. This ensured that the previous stages of planning and observing were relevant, with additional feedback and confirmation, again being sought on all proposed changes, before steps were taken in moving onto the final process of assessment, and starting over again.

Marshall and Rossman (2006) propose that qualitative researchers typically rely on one, or a combination of four fundamental methods for gathering information: (a) participating in the setting, (b) observing directly, (c) interviewing in depth, and (d) analysing documents and material culture. In line with the action research process, the first three of these methods were utilised to varying degrees in gathering information,
with an emphasis placed on the researchers’ observations and participation in the setting, and in-depth interviews, with supporting documentation used where relevant.

Interview data was collected through several ‘in-person’ (Plano, 2008), semi-structured interviews were conducted with several teachers, school directors, and executives at BMA’s Department of Education in Bangkok, while face to face interviews were conducted in Finland with the three key persons involved in the conception of, planning of, and execution of the projects from the Finnish side. A semi-structured approach was adopted as recommended by James et al. (2008) as the overall goal of the interviews was to collect responses, and opinions from the participants, rather than short prepared answers. The interviewee also has an active, reflexive, and constitutive role in the process of knowledge construction, thus the flexibility offered by this semi-structured approach was important, as emphasis is placed, as Mason (2004) points out, on the responses elicited from the interaction between the researchers, and the interviewees, rather than the answers given.

All interviews were transcribed. Interviewee’s accounts of their own perspectives, perceptions, experiences, understandings, interpretations and interactions were combined with other relevant documentation, and data, including the researchers’ own perspectives and field notes, and a thematic analysis was conducted to identify and confirm emergent themes.

7 Findings

This was BMA’s first time conducting business directly with an international entity, and Oulu University, while being experienced in international educational projects, had very limited knowledge of BMA. Additionally, Thai business, and communication culture, and ways of conducting business were an unknown entity to the Finnish side, while the same held true for the BMA knowledge of Finnish cultures, protocols, and ways of conducting business. Thus, when these factors are considered, it was inevitable that there was always going to be a variety of obstacles that would need to be overcome throughout the course of the projects.

The main obstacles and challenges identified by participants during the projects will be addressed in this section. Additionally, it should be remembered that there is an overriding obstacle and challenge present in every project involving educational export, as the ‘selling’ of education and pedagogy are very sensitive areas, and there are many of ethical and moral issues associated with education export, however, these ethical and moral issues are not the remit of this paper. These findings are essential for Finland’s future education export, which deals with globalisation and education, and can be summarised as given in following sub-sections.

7.1 Communication gap

While there is no doubt that there are a multitude of cultural aspects, and business practices that could be included under communications issues, and the focus of this research is not on providing an intensive analysis of these aspects and practices. Thus, for the purposes of this research, the main communication issues prevalent in this project can be broken down into the means of communication, the style of communication and the language of communication.
The first issue concerning communication was that virtually all correspondence was handled through email, which was not seen as being the most appropriate tool for the job at hand. The importance of face to face communication and direct contact is emphasised by Andersen et al. (2003), who relate that communicators should be able to recognise each other’s needs, by paying both close attention to what partners say, or do, and perhaps more importantly what they do not say, or do. Email, while a useful tool, if used exclusively is by no means the best tool for this form of communication.

Another prevalent underlying issue concerned the dissimilar cultural communication styles of the partners. Hall and Hall (1990) differentiate cultures into either high context cultures or low context cultures based on their communication style, or what are perceived as being typical communication patterns of various nationalities. In low context cultures, information is generally compartmentalised and controlled, and this information is used as command and control, commonly resulting in information blockage. Low context cultures, such as Finland expect that most information will be transmitted in the message and communication is direct, and precise. In contrast, in high context cultures such as Thailand, the listener is expected to be able to read between the lines to understand the hidden meaning.

The third aspect, concerning communication relates to the (lack of) English skills of participants. Education First (2016) rank the average Thai as having very low English proficiency. The lack of English proficiency (e.g., translations and interpretations) was identified as an issue during the initial workshop in Bangkok where the presumption that the BMA participants would have sufficient English language skills to understand and engage in the training would prove not to be the case. Additionally, another factor concerning the language abilities of the participants concerned the structure and format of the workshops. This structure and format would have been approached much differently if TOPIK were aware of the poor English skills of the participants at the very early stages of the project planning, with an emphasis being placed on observation rather than lectures, and more reliance on hands-on experiences such as field trips, and visits, etc.

7.2 Confusion of payment terms, documents, and organisational procedures

The lack of cooperation among actors, in addition to the lack of clarity and direction in Finnish organisational policies, has created a danger of, as Schatz (2015, p.333) notes, ‘a vicious circle of uncertainty between sellers and customers’. This vicious circle was nowhere more apparent that in the issues concerning contacts and documentation required by both sides, and the relative importance, and emphasis placed on these by the Thai, and Finnish entities.

On the Finnish side, the lack of capacity and flexibility needed to conduct international educational projects by an organisation such as a University was raised to by a number of interviewees. From the university’s perspective, a legal document, a contract, or Educational agreement as it was sometimes referred to, was stated as being an unequivocal necessity by the university administration for the projects to continue, and follow the university protocols, and be accepted into the system as a university project. However, from the Thai partner’s perspective, the need for such a document was viewed as being superfluous, as it is not required as part of public procurement. Thus, the necessity for such a contract or related documentation was not seen as a pressing matter by BMA, and no contract was signed before the project’s commencement.
Interviews revealed, that for BMA, typical public procurement of products and services, including international trips, involves the Department of Education, the Department of the Budget, and the Office of the Permanent Secretary. Each department has its own procedures and protocols that need to be followed, and specific documentation is needed to approve each specific step. The Department of Education deals with project proposals, while the Department of the Budget needs to ensure that the proposal is in line with the overall plans of BMA, with respect to health and human services-education. The Office of the Permanent Secretary arranges the necessary paperwork concerning making an official passport request for all participants who would visit Finland. It is important to note that BMA is in the public domain, therefore teachers and school administrators are classified as being government officers. As a service purchaser, BMA insisted that the payments and dates would have to be structured in accordance with its protocols.

From the service provider, when providing a comprehensive training package which deals with various entities within the university, and the City of Oulu, two main issues emerged. The willingness of the faculty staff to participate in the workshops, and difficulties in transferring funds between departments at the University, due to university protocols, and bureaucracy.

In Finnish universities, in accordance with the General collective agreement for universities the total annual working time of teaching and research staff in universities totals 1,600 hours, which requires that a work plan should be completed in advance for the full working year, in cooperation with the supervisor and employer (The Union for University Teachers and Researchers in Finland, 2015). Since allowance cannot be made for these types of projects, (as they very rarely happen with such notice), educational export projects cannot be included in an employee’s work-plan, therefore employees are not legally obligated to participate or assist in these projects. Compensation can be separately agreed with the employer, but the employee is under no obligation to participate, and in some many cases lecturers can demand exorbitant consultant fees, or demand that extra holidays, etc. are granted. Few departments or faculties within the University had operational procedures in place concerning such matters, as none were previously needed as there is no university policy concerning educational export. However, allowances have now been made for this type of circumstance occurring in the future at the departmental level.

Concerning the difficulties in transferring funds to departments and faculties within the university, interviewees noted that due to the complexity of university bureaucracy, protocols, and systems, it is generally considered as easier to transfer funds to an external firm for services, rather than to another department within the University. Interviewee’s also related that as these procedures are inherently complicated, departments specifically try to avoid the involvement of other departments concerning payments, and focus on handling (where possible) all details at the departmental level, as it is viewed as an easier solution rather than having to deal with the bureaucracy.

7.3 Lack of payment clarity on value-added tax

Value Added Tax (VAT), was one of the key issues concerning payment, and indeed is still a recurring issue when Thai government entities are the purchaser of Finnish education export services or goods. From the BMA viewpoint, it was related that the purchasing of a service (or a product) from another public entity should not have
included VAT, with the reason being that public/governmental entities in Thailand are not required to pay tax, and if for example, this transaction would have been with a private firm in Thailand, VAT would not have been an issue. From TOPIK’s perspective, interviews indicated, that in line with business practices in Finland, and common University practice, the initial proposal sent to BMA was not inclusive of this VAT (@24%), as it was assumed that BMA would be aware that VAT would have to be added to this amount. Finnish companies and organisations are legally required to include this VAT charge in the final total of the cost of the services, to be paid by the consumer and then remitted to the state (Finnish Tax Administration, 2013). Thus, TOPIK expected that the final sum to be paid was the originally quoted sum, plus VAT. However, as related from the BMA perspective, VAT was not seen as applicable to a Government-to-Government contract, while additionally, it is common practice in Thailand that the quoted amount is viewed as being the final sum to be paid. Interviews conducted with the BMA representatives explained that for this pilot project, the quoted sum (exclusive of VAT) was then applied for, and approved in the following year’s fiscal budget. As BMA is a public agency, its budget had already been allocated for that year, the sudden addition of 24% on top of the final amount was quite unforeseen, as all funds had already been allocated, and the need to find this 24% ‘extra payment’ was unprecedented.

Upon further investigation, the relevant VAT legislature is decidedly grey and can be open to a number of interpretations. According to VAT experts from the Finnish Tax Administration (Vero) either article 69d, or article 65 of Finnish VAT law 30.12.1993/1501 could be seen as being applicable in this circumstance, whereas additionally various European Union VAT laws were also seen as being applicable: Article 69d (Finlex, 2015) relates to short-term events such as seminars which take place over fewer than five days, and in which the participants’ role is seen as that of an observer, not an active participant, and in this case the goods or services are seen as being sold in Finland, and the seller has a legal obligation to collect VAT on behalf of the Finnish government. So, it can be presumed that article 69d is not applicable.

The general rule of article 65 is if the service or good can be perceived as being a long-term service and whether the services are specifically customised for the customer. In these circumstances, the seller is obliged to seek clarification on whether they are obliged to register for VAT payments in the customers’ country of origin. The seller has no legal responsibility to collect VAT on goods or services sold in Finland or outside, on behalf of the Finnish government, as the general taxation rules of the country of the buyer should apply. This seems to be the standard suggested practice adopted by Finnish educational exporters, as if a company or individual can provide a VAT number from another country that all prices will be VAT exempt. However, this is working on the assumption that the customer is a private entity. It is important to note that the governmental entities (e.g., BMA) are not able to provide the VAT number since they are a tax collector and have a tax-exempt status.

Based on the European Union (2015) concerning cross-border VAT payments; If you provide services to customers outside the EU, you normally do not charge VAT (but if the service is used in another EU country, that country can decide to levy the VAT), though you may still deduct the VAT you yourself have paid on your related expenses (goods/services bought in specifically to make those sales). While article 44 of the COUNCIL DIRECTIVE 2006/112/EC of 28 November 2006, on the common system of value added tax states that: ‘The place of supply of services to a taxable person acting as such shall be the place where that person has established his business. However, if those
services are provided to a fixed establishment of the taxable person located in a place other than the place where he has established his business, the place of supply of those services shall be the place where that fixed establishment is located. In the absence of such place of establishment or fixed establishment, the place of supply of services shall be the place where the taxable person who receives such services has his permanent address or usually resides’ (European Union, 2006).

It can be clearly seen that the issues concerning VAT and the applicable laws related to VAT and educational export are unclear. Potential misunderstanding related to VAT involving international entities is considerable, and thus perhaps understandably a ‘better safe than sorry’ policy seems to exist concerning the inclusion of VAT, as legal, and financial repercussions concerning mistaken interpretations are severe. This issue has resulted in (and indeed continues to result in) misunderstandings and misinterpretations which are beneficial for neither entity concerned. These misunderstandings and misinterpretations can have costly legal, and financial implications if interpreted incorrectly, and are detrimental to the trust built amongst entities and long-term sustainability of educational export projects.

8 Discussion on overcoming these obstacles

As stated this was a pilot project, between BMA and TOPIK, which was considered as being a major educational export. During the interviews, the overriding factors identified as being paramount in overcoming the three issues of; communication, payments/documents/procedures, and VAT, can be listed as in following sub-sections.

8.1 Persons with the necessary authority were involved from the project’s conception (authority/power/seniority)

Interviews revealed that the main factor perceived as being responsible for overriding seemingly insurmountable difficulties, both during the planning as well as the execution stage, was that persons with sufficient power and authority were involved in the process, in addition to being the persons that were originally contacted. For instance, on the Oulu side the person responsible for the projects had enough authority to forego some of the practicalities and protocols that were supposed to be followed, while additionally and more importantly, this person was also in the position of being the decision maker, and was responsible for the decision to proceed with the project. Someone in a lower position of authority or responsibility would not have been able to take either this risk or be flexible regarding procedures and protocols.

8.2 Stakeholder involvement

The role of the relevant ambassadors also deserves a great deal of consideration in any future projects concerned with educational export. The Finnish ambassador to Thailand at the time had a major role in promoting, and supporting the projects from their very conception to completion, while the involvement of the Thai Ambassador to Finland at the later stages of the project processes, also served to solidify relationships, not only between BMA and TOPIK, but also between Finland and Thailand, as the projects were raised to a diplomatic level.
As Hardy et al. (1998) explain, inter-organisational relationships and cooperation can be built on either trust or power, and when new relationships between different organisations are considered, the norms and values concerning what constitutes trustworthy behaviour often differs markedly between partners. From both BMA, and the University of Oulu’s perspectives, the ambassadors’ presence as a diplomatic entity, and the subsequent elevation of the projects to an international level was invaluable in ensuring that the proper protocols and processes were observed, and that everything was above board and legal.

8.3 Local knowledge

Interviews revealed that from both the Finnish, and Thai perspectives, the importance of, and involvement of as a local partner and coordinator was also key. Not only did the local coordinator have the necessary connections, skill and expertise to negotiate what is an incredibly complex bureaucratic process, and provide the University of Oulu with guidance and advice on the steps and procedures that needed to be followed, while also acting as an interpreter, a liaison, a translator, and a guide between BMA and TOPIK.

The local partner and coordinator was instrumental during the initial correspondences and planning of the programs, in addition to the workshops in both Bangkok and Oulu, as the English levels of the BMA employees were virtually non-existent in most cases, and this project would most likely not have been possible without this assistance.

As Hall (1998) points out, humans are guided by two forms of information, manifest, and tacit, or nonverbal information which can only be acquired by growing up, or being in different environments. Cultural communications are deep and complex, and importance should be placed on releasing the right responses over sending the right messages, and the local coordinators role as a possessor of both forms of information, was vital in ensuring that these responses were indeed sent and received, and that misunderstanding were kept to a minimum. Essentially, future education export by Finland should focus on identifying and working with local partners. This should not be limited to personal contacts and connection, and that the language barrier (both verbal and non-verbal) should be considered with respect to minimising the communication gap. It is quite clear from the interviews that this is an overwhelming factor in ensuring the long-term success of Finnish education export services.

8.4 Building trusts through relationships, flexibility, and quick responses

Hardy et al. (1998) describe trust as an outcome of a communicative procedure in which shared meanings either exist or are created through a mutual relationship involving all partners while maintaining that in the absence of this relationship the creation of trust is unlikely. Thus, in the absence of any previous relationship between the entities, the importance of individual relationships and the trust fashioned due to these relationships was a prevailing trend throughout the project process.

From TOPIK’s perspective, there was no existing relationship initially. However, there was a history of reciprocal relationships between the Thai coordinator and a University of Oulu professor, who also had very close links with TOPIK. All persons interviewed indicated that their involvement at the early stages was vital in providing a level of trust and assurance. Additionally, trust was not only needed between the seller
and buyer, and the flexibility and willingness of TOPIK’s partners to accommodate a number of changes also resulted in an increase in the level of trust at the local level.

Trust was especially important as it contributed to the willingness of both parties to deal with one another for the first time. Hofstede (2001) generally describes Finnish people as having a high uncertainty avoidance index, meaning that they are used to adhering to strict codes of behavior and rules. This uncertainty avoidance often leads to an inherent reluctance to take risks, which may explain why education export has not experienced a lot of expected successes. This inherent reluctance was demonstrably present at the institutional level; however, a person in a position of responsibility indicated that he was indeed willing to take a risk, as these types of risks needed to be taken to learn the business of educational export, as well as to build relationships, trust, and networks.

Hall and Hall (1990) recognise that cultural differences (in this case between Finland and Thailand) in information flows are often the greatest stumbling blocks to understanding, and identified two differing perceptions of time: Monochromic and Polychromic. Monochromic cultures are concerned with paying attention to a single task at a time, taking deadlines seriously, and adhering religiously to plans. It could safely be said that Finland fits the profile of a monochromic country. Thailand, on the other hand, fits the profile of a polychromic culture, as many tasks are done at once, people consider time commitments as an objective to be achieved (if possible), and have a strong tendency to build lifetime relationships.

Another aspect that became abundantly clear throughout the interviews, and that was paramount in the project’s success, was the speed with which replies were received, and with which possible misunderstandings and miscommunications were addressed. The speed in answering requests, and in addressing potential issues can additionally be looked on as being important, as it builds trust, it reduces the risk of misunderstandings and miscommunications escalating, while additionally establishing a relationship.

9 Implications on Finland’s education export

The pilot project between BMA and University of Oulu lasted for three years, from 2014 to 2016. Based on the interviews, there were various challenges that needed to be addressed, which can be traced to intercultural communication and ways of doing business. A great deal of importance is placed on paying attention to a country’s protocols, and bureaucracy, however, international, or intercultural communicators must also be aware of the face, or socially situated identity, and ensure that no face is lost by either side. This form of cultural sensitivity and understanding is essential for building any relationship with, or in doing business with people and cultures with different beliefs, perceptions and worldviews. Persons or entities from Finland involved with education export cannot overlook this issue, notwithstanding their perceived skills and capabilities.

Cai et al. (2012) observe that many Finnish higher education entities do not feel as if they are ready for educational export. This is due to the lack of experience in marketing and coordinating in exporting education, and insufficient motivation and commitment. Indeed, a lack of motivation and commitment was identified by interviewees as being evident at the University administrative level, and the Universities reluctance to implement clear strategies, allocate additional resources into the promotion of and execution of educational export projects, or indeed in allowing any flexibility concerning the handling of such projects.
Finland is now competing with the traditional powerhouses of education (e.g., UK, USA, Australia and New Zealand). While Finland does indeed have a great number of strengths and opportunities concerning education export, these strengths are not unique, and the prevailing passive approach to educational export being practiced by Finnish agencies needs to be addressed. Additionally, detailed assistance, and instructions concerning practical and legal issues which are subject to a variety of interpretations, such as VAT should be provided to organisations and companies concerned with engaging in educational export by the appropriate entities. These issues in addition to potentially placing Finnish entities at a distinct competitive disadvantage with its main competitors in any bidding process, (as they do not include an extra 24% VAT in their costing estimates) also have the potential to create mistrust, and scepticism if not handled correctly.

10 Conclusions

The main conclusions gained from this research are that throughout these, and other educational export related projects, when doing business with and communicating with contrasting cultures, that there will inevitably be a variety of issues, obstacles, misconceptions, and misunderstandings that will need to be overcome. It is important that these issues are quickly identified, respected and taken into consideration when engaging in any form of international business, particularly business that is education related, and that ethnocentric views, and orientations are recognised and addressed. Rigid structures and bureaucracies do not encourage trust, quick responses or flexibility, which are all seen as being key from the buyer’s perspective. Power, authority, and relationships are present, and intrinsic in all types of business and social situations; nevertheless, the roles of power, authority and relationships were seen as being particularly instrumental in pilot projects concerning educational export, as no previous knowledge of the culture, or indeed of how different bureaucracies or ways of doing business are conducted within these cultures. Having persons on both sides with the requisite power and connections, in addition to the required local cultural and business knowledge of a local partner, or coordinator can help mitigate, and potentially overcome the identified obstacles relating to educational export.

References


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Globalisation and education


