

MIGRATION DECISIONS OF SKILLED MIGRANTS: *International degree students in an offbeat destination*

Abstract

This paper discusses the position of international students in the research on skilled migration based on interview data from Helsinki, Finland. The literature tends to depict students as gainers of human capital, and their role as skilled workers has received less attention. However, the findings of this study challenge the conceptual separation of student and labour migration. Moreover, much of the literature on international student migration focuses on popular, English-speaking destination countries such as the United States. This paper enhances the understanding of student mobility in exploring the migration motives of international students in the case of a less common destination.

Keywords

International students • skilled migration • immigration • Helsinki • Finland

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1 Introduction

The globalisation of higher education and the growing numbers of international students have made international student migration (ISM) an everyday phenomenon. Migration scholars have, therefore, become interested in the movements of international students, who have also emerged as a target group in studies on skilled migration. Whereas earlier research investigated the mobility of transnational elites (e.g. Beaverstock 2002, 2005), scholars have recently started to discuss the “middling” types of skilled transnational migrants (Conradson & Latham 2005a). It is not only the corporate elite that is mobile: international mobility nowadays is also common among the middle classes. In fact, Favell, Feldblum and Smith (2007) argue that international students comprise a key group in skilled migration. Interestingly, the theoretical aspects of skilled migration and ISM tend to be discussed separately. Skilled migrants are often linked with economic competitiveness (Beaverstock 2002; Saxenian 2002), whereas international students are discussed in the context of the educational system (Cai & Kivistö 2011; Findlay *et al.* 2012). Moreover, skilled migrants are commonly described as “professionals with a university degree” (Iredale 2001: 8), whereas the attributes of international students have attracted less attention. International students are typically classified as degree students studying outside of their home country, but what else makes them an interesting target group in the research on skilled migration? Baláž and Williams (2004: 218) contrast student and labour migration, arguing that whereas mobile professionals engage in work-related tasks, “students are the only group who migrate primarily in order to enhance their human capital”. It seems that international students are still conceptually

separated from “real” skilled migrants in the academic literature. It is often assumed that when students engage in working life, they are likely to be employed in the service sector (Raghuram 2013).

From the policy perspective, international students are seen as future skilled workers in some countries. For example, in Australia ISM has been linked with skilled migration in the easing of the conditions governing the granting of permanent residency for those who have attained their degree in the country (Robertson 2011). Furthermore, recent research on international students in Denmark (Mosneaga & Winther 2013) focuses on the study-to-work transition. However, there are few studies on the education levels and work experience of international students. It is, therefore, relevant to ask whether international students are any different from skilled labour migrants.

Another gap in the literature on ISM concerns the variety of destination countries. Although it is true that noticeable flows of student migrants head to English-speaking countries (OECD 2011), there are also those who choose more offbeat destinations. The numbers of English-language study programmes are rising in many non-English-speaking countries, which give international students more destination options. On the theoretical level, one might ask what drives the migration decisions of international students in choosing non-traditional destinations.

Receiving countries tend to consider international students attractive as migrants because they add to the pool of talented workers (Ziguras & Law 2006). In the case of Finland, the need for international workers and students is one of the main issues

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addressed in the innovation and competitiveness strategies covering the Helsinki metropolitan area (Culminatum 2009; Laurila 2005). In fact, Finland is suffering from brain drain as the incoming immigrant population is less highly educated than the native population (Dumont & Lemaître 2005). According to the Academy of Finland, the Finnish research system is characterised by a low level of international engagement, and there is an urgent need to increase the international appeal of the research system. In 2006, only 3 per cent of Finland's research personnel were foreign-born (Academy of Finland 2010). Furthermore, Finland has no world-famous universities, although the University of Helsinki was ranked 73rd in the world in 2012 (Center for World-Class Universities of Shanghai Jiao Tong University 2012).

Finnish universities had almost 6,200 foreign degree students in 2008, the majority of them coming from Europe and Asia (Ministry of Education 2009). The number of international students has risen noticeably: between 2000 and 2009, foreign enrolments grew by 126 per cent (OECD 2011). In numbers, the University of Helsinki and Aalto University (established in 2010 through the merger of Helsinki University of Technology, Helsinki School of Economics and the University of Art and Design Helsinki) are the most popular choices among foreign degree students (Ministry of Education 2009). According to its new strategy, the University of Helsinki aims to be among the top 50 universities of the world. One way of pursuing this is to increase the numbers of international students to comprise 15 per cent of new Master's degree students and 25 per cent of new doctoral students (University of Helsinki 2012). The Aalto University strategy (Aalto University 2012: 5) states: "With regard to internationalisation, competitiveness of universities relies to a great extent on their ability to attract the best students and researchers".

When universities refer to attracting the "best students", the question arises of exactly who these students are and what motivates them to study abroad. The objectives of this paper are, first, to compare the characteristics of international students with those of skilled migrants as identified in the literature; and second, to analyse the motives for ISM in the case of Helsinki, Finland and reflect these motives against those found in previous studies focusing on more traditional, English-speaking destinations. The ambiguities in defining the international student have been brought up in recent discussions (King & Raghuram 2013). In this paper, international students are defined as degree students with a non-Finnish nationality. Hence, the focus is on degree mobility, which resembles "traditional" migration more closely than shorter term programmes, such as Erasmus exchange.

2 Skilled migration and international students

Skilled migrants have been a subject of research since the late 1980s (Scott 2006). Interest in the movement of skilled workers around the globe has risen as their significance for economic growth is increasingly acknowledged (Bontje & Musterd 2009). There are perceptible differences between skilled migrants and the migrants who were a part of earlier waves of work-related immigration. Whereas the earlier labour immigrants tended to be uneducated manual labourers, skilled migrants could be described as educated professionals (Iredale 2001).

The literature links skilled migrants with the economic growth and competence of cities in the global economy. In Silicon Valley, for instance, they create jobs and wealth in the region, and also integrate California into the global economy through their long-distance social and economic linkages (Saxenian 2002). Beaverstock (2002) uses

the network approach in describing skilled international migration as a key "flow" bringing highly specific knowledge, skills and networks into global cities. Furthermore, Findlay *et al.* (1996: 49) argue that skilled migrants "are both consequence and part-cause of global city formation". They note in their study on expatriates in Hong Kong that the pool of skilled migrants in the city may well attract inward investment, which in turn could attract more international migration.

Most of the earlier research on skilled migrants focused on expatriates working in the fields of banking, law and accountancy. However, the need has arisen to specify the target groups. It is argued that the focus in earlier research on global elites is too narrow to encompass the full spectrum of skilled migration. According to Beaverstock (2005: 246), traditional expats are transforming into "nomadic workers" because transnational companies prefer short-term and non-permanent circulation over permanent migration. Furthermore, international migration has become a normal middle-class activity (Conradson & Latham 2005a). As Scott (2006: 1106) puts it, "it is clear that skilled migration has become more diverse than the professional expatriate model alone can explain". The development of communication technologies and affordable modes of travel has made international migration available to a larger group than the global elite. Moreover, the globalisation of higher education has increased the flow of professionals around the world (Collins 2008; Stalker 2000: 108).

The "new" population of skilled migrants comprises not only expatriates and businessmen but also students. Ewers (2007: 121), for example, defines highly skilled labour "by occupation as business professionals, high-tech workers and engineers, medical workers, students and scholars, NGO (non-governmental) workers and entrepreneurs". Defending the place of international students in the research on skilled migration, Favell, Feldblum and Smith (2007: 16) even refer to them as "the quintessential avatars of globalization". As a generation for whom international mobility is a natural part of life, international students are a relevant target group in the research on skilled migration.

Although international students are accepted as migrants, there is little discussion about their characteristics. If established skilled migrants are defined as having a university degree and a demanding job, where does that leave students? Their educational or working experience is seldom discussed. A rare example is Liu-Farrer's (2009) study on Chinese students in Japan. She argues that international education is a major channel of labour migration and in the case of Chinese students in Japan, she stresses their input in the low-wage labour market.

In practice, it seems that international students are seen as future skilled migrants. According to Iredale (2001), many skilled migrants are former international students whose local degree allows them to stay in the host country. Furthermore, a recent study from Finland (Shumilova, Cai & Pekkola 2012) reports that 78 per cent of international graduates from 2009 to 2010 were still in the country in the beginning of 2012, and 72 per cent of them were employed. However, little is known about the educational and working careers of international students. What characteristics identify them as skilled migrants?

3 International student migration

There were almost 3.7 million international students in the world in 2009, the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, Germany and France being the major recipients in absolute terms. The

proportion of international students in tertiary education was over 10 per cent in Australia, Austria, New Zealand, Switzerland and the United Kingdom, and around four per cent in Finland (OECD 2011).

An essential question for researchers concerns what motivates the migration decisions of international students. Baláž and Williams (2004) highlight the acquisition of human capital such as language skills in their study of Slovaks who studied in the UK. However, they also note that students' latent objectives may differ in that some might use studying in another country as a platform for more permanent migration, whereas others may wish to experience different cultures. Baláž and Williams' study focuses on short-term international studies such as Erasmus exchange and language courses; however, in the case of degree students who migrate for a longer period, usually at least 2 years, the motives may differ.

Hazen and Alberts (2006) found from their focus-group interviews and questionnaire responses that professional and academic factors were the most influential in the migration decisions of international degree students at the University of Minnesota in the United States. More specifically, 72 per cent of the questionnaire respondents mentioned better educational opportunities in the United States as a reason for migrating. Interestingly, the second most commonly cited reason was the "desire to experience a new culture", which was mentioned by nearly half of the respondents.

The results of a recent study based on survey data and interviews with UK students enrolled in foreign universities (Findlay *et al.* 2012) support the emphasis on professional and academic reasons. The most frequently cited reason for studying abroad was to attend a world-class institution. In fact, Findlay *et al.* (2012: 118) argue that "the search for 'world class' education has taken on new significance", as their respondents typically chose their destination after browsing university ranking lists. It was important for them that the institution they chose was "recognised".

According to another study, the key factors governing the choice of destination among South Koreans studying in New Zealand were the costs, the environment and the quality of education (Collins 2008). However, Collins argues that, in practice, the migration was driven by information received through social networks: all of the South Koreans who were interviewed had been influenced by other South Koreans who had lived in or visited New Zealand. Recent studies (Geddie 2013; Mosneaga & Winther 2013) also stress the importance of social relations in international student mobility.

Research on the migration decisions of skilled migrants gives similar results to those concerning international students. Thorn (2009) examined the motives behind the international self-initiated mobility of highly educated New Zealanders living abroad. According to the results of this quantitative study, cultural and travel opportunities and career prospects were the strongest motives. Similarly, Conradson and Latham mention an interest in travelling. With reference to the reasons behind the moving decisions of New Zealanders in London, they suggest that relocation is "part of a project of self-fashioning" (Conradson & Latham 2005b: 290).

Providing further evidence of the importance of social networks, a study on skilled workers in Europe highlights the role of personal trajectories and networks in migration decisions (Martin-Brelet *et al.* 2010; Musterd & Gritsai 2010). The study, conducted in 13 European cities, showed that both earlier experience of a certain location as well as the need to be near family members and friends affected the location decisions of the respondents. According to the authors, "individual networks are key to understanding people's location behaviour" (Musterd & Gritsai 2010: 34).

Migration decisions tend to be complex and include a variety of components (Halfacree 2004). However, it appears from earlier research on international students and skilled migrants that destination choices are driven by similar factors. Educational and professional reasons are dominant, but cultural and travel opportunities also feature. Much of the literature focuses on students who choose popular English-speaking destinations such as the United States (Hazen & Alberts 2006) and New Zealand (Collins 2008), and most of the respondents in Findlay *et al.*'s (2012) research studied in English-speaking countries (Ireland, Australia, the United States). A study on international students in Denmark (Mosneaga & Winther 2013: 187) reports that exoticism and a "coincidental combination of opportunities and constraints" were relevant factors among students who chose to migrate to Copenhagen. However, their motives were not the focus of the research and therefore were not considered in depth. As ISM is growing in numbers and the number of English-language study programmes is rising, it is justified to investigate the migration decisions of students who choose a less common destination country.

4 Research method

This research is based on qualitative data, specifically semi-structured interviews with international degree students living and studying in the Helsinki metropolitan area in Finland. The interviewees were carefully selected from the student registries of two universities in the area. The University of Helsinki and Aalto University, which host the largest numbers of international students among Finnish universities (Ministry of Education 2009), were the obvious choices. To identify the faculties with the highest levels of internationalisation, I obtained relevant statistics from the universities' web pages and information from the student services personnel. As a result, I chose the Faculty of Arts at the University of Helsinki and the School of Science at Aalto University, both of which had almost the same number of international students in the spring of 2011 (344 and 362, respectively, representing 7 and 11 per cent, respectively, of the student body in the two units). When those who did not give an address or lived outside of the Helsinki metropolitan area were excluded, the sample comprised 285 and 321 students from the University of Helsinki and Aalto University, respectively.

The two faculties differ considerably in the range of subjects they cover. The respondents at the Faculty of Arts were majoring in areas such as Finnish language and culture, theatre science, theoretical philosophy and musicology, whereas those in the School of Science were studying subjects such as computer science, mobile computing, industrial engineering and physics, for example. I systematically chose the interviewees to represent the nationalities present in the two educational units: the School of Science attracts Asian students in particular, whereas most of the international students in the Faculty of Arts are from Russia and Europe. Having obtained contact information from the student registers, I approached students via email. All in all, I contacted 74 individuals before finding a suitable number of interviewees (25).

Having given their consent, the interviewees were asked to choose the interview location. The majority of the interviews were conducted in cafes, but some took place at the universities, in the interviewees' homes and in a park. They lasted, on average, for about an hour, varying from 36 to 86 minutes. The interviewees chose which language would be used, either English or Finnish. I used a semi-structured interview format I had tested beforehand on

Table 1. Characteristics of the 25 interviewees

Category	Number of interviewees
Area of origin	Asia (8), Western Europe (6), Russia (3), Eastern Europe (3), Middle East (2), Africa (1), North America (1), South America (1)
Age	19–24 years (6), 25–30 years (13), 31–36 years (2), over 36 years (4)
Sex	Male (15), female (10)
Degree in process	Master's (17), doctorate (8)
Degree upon arrival	No university degree (5), Bachelor's (10), Master's (8), doctorate (2)
Length of residence in Finland	Less than a year (4), 1–3 years (9), 3–5 years (4), 5–10 years (6), over 10 years (2)
Living arrangements	Single (8), room in a shared apartment (8), couple (6), couple with children (3)

other international students. My goal was to explore the students' motives related to ISM, as well as to understand their current life in the Helsinki metropolitan area by discussing topics such as studying and working life, housing and social life. My focus in this paper is on their working and studying life in the context of the literature on skilled migration and on their motivation for choosing Finland and their current universities as their destination for ISM. All the interviews were transcribed and coded using the ATLAS.ti program for qualitative data, which helped me to analyse the data systematically. I based the coding on both earlier theoretical findings and interesting details that emerged from the data. I grouped the students' motives for moving according to whether they related to professional and academic aims, financial aspects or social life, for example. To see how well they fitted the skilled migrant profile, I analysed their educational and professional careers and how they talked about their future goals.

Table 1 lists the characteristics of the interviewees. The focus in this paper is on students in a certain location, not on certain ethnic groups and their experiences as international students. Therefore, the diverse backgrounds of the interviewees represent the mix of people studying in these two faculties.

5 Results

5.1 International students as skilled migrants

One of the main assumptions about skilled migrants is that they are highly educated and work in demanding positions. Although international students are widely included, their qualities remain somewhat unclear. Interestingly, the interviews revealed that the majority of the respondents were highly educated when they first arrived in Finland. Twenty of the 25 students already had a university degree: 10 with a Bachelor's degree, 8 with a Master's degree and 2 already had doctorates. Upon close examination, I found that the students who did not have a university degree upon arrival had come to Finland at too young an age (18–19 years) to have obtained one. These results are similar to those reported in an earlier study (Kärki 2005) showing that almost two in three international students in Finland have a university degree upon arrival.

A small group of five students were repeating qualifications they already had, studying for their second or even third Master's degree, for example. Three of them had completely changed their field of studies after developing an interest in a new subject, and two were continuing their studies to gain some international experience, as in the case of this Russian student:

At Aalto University I'm studying industrial management. [...] this is my third Master's degree. My first was in applied mathematics and physics from St. Petersburg State University. [...] I was looking for some international experience [...] I got an invitation from Joensuu University [in eastern Finland] and they actually provided a scholarship, so that was an easy choice. You can go abroad and learn something new and you can get money from that. I lived in Joensuu for one year and after that I moved to Helsinki because of my Master's thesis work. (male, 29, Russia, industrial management)

In addition to being highly educated, another factor that supports the view of international students as skilled migrants is that, as well as studying, many also had jobs: only four of the interviewees reported that they did not have paid work. It is not just the fact of working that is interesting; however, 13 students worked in knowledge-intensive positions in fields such as research, teaching and telecommunications. This finding is in contrast with the results Liu-Farrer (2009) reported with regard to Japan, where Chinese students tend to contribute to the low-skilled labour market. In particular, many of those studying ICT-related subjects at Aalto University worked in private companies in their own field, some even full time. Other PhD students were fully employed as members of research projects. The position of these people is ambiguous in that they are students and researchers at the same time. Among the interviewees, four of the PhD students were receiving a salary for doing their thesis as a part of a research project. In total, 17 of the 25 students held knowledge-intensive positions. Four students did not work at all, and the remaining four worked mainly in the service sector.

Some people come to a foreign country to work rather than to study, as was the case with two of the interviewees: the idea to apply for a place at a university came later. Another two students had migrated to Finland with their families and started studying later. Thus, people do not necessarily migrate to study at a specific

university for a specific degree: they may decide to continue their studies after being in the country for a while. This finding resonates with Carlson's (2013: 168) observation that studying abroad can be perceived "not as the result of a one-time choice but as the outcome of different long-term biographical and social processes and events".

I study Finnish language and culture. I have lived here for a long time and I have worked as an interpreter, but I want to have more knowledge and skills. (female, 40, Romania, Finnish language and culture)

Most of the interviewees with jobs obtained them through the normal channels, in other words applying for an open position. However, there were also interesting stories that demonstrated the role of chance in this context (Mosneaga & Winther 2013). For example, a Spanish student of service design and engineering spent one weekend throwing snow down from the rooftops. Through his co-worker there, he was given an interview in a small IT firm and ended up working as a consultant for many years. At the time of the interview, he was starting up his own business.

Combining studying and working tends to prolong the studies. A Turkish student of mobile computing described his situation: "I've been working for around three and a half-years full time. That's why I'm still a student". For those in full-time employment, studying is not the only priority, as a service design student from Kenya aptly remarked: "It's a full-time job, so I have to try to fit my school schedule into my work." However, working while studying was a financial necessity for many. In fact, the four students who did not have paid work had a spouse or parents who could support them financially. The interviews also revealed that finding work as a foreigner in Finland is not always easy, not even for skilled people:

Even though I have two Master's degrees and a doctorate, I know that even a Bachelor's degree will help you to get work in Finland if the degree is from a Finnish university. (male, 44, France, Finnish language and culture)

The extent of labour-market participation questions the separation of international students and labour migrants, as Findlay *et al.* (2012) point out. Most of the interviewees were participating in working life in their new country of residence. In addition, my findings in the case of international degree students in Helsinki do not support Baláz and Williams' (2004: 217) notion that international students' 'principal manifest function is human capital acquisition'. Although for some students, it is the main reason for studying abroad, there are many who work full time and capitalise on the human capital they have already acquired, and for whom studying does not rule their lives in Finland.

5.2 Motives for moving to Finland

Earlier studies on international degree students suggest that professional and academic reasons prevail in migration decisions (Findlay *et al.* 2012; Hazen & Alberts 2006). Among the students I interviewed, factors related to education and a career were mentioned by half of them as reasons for enrolling at Aalto University or the University of Helsinki. These factors included the characteristics of the universities as well as Finland's reputation and success in certain professional fields. With regard to the universities, the interviewees valued the perceived high standard of Finnish university education

and the existence of suitable study programmes. Renowned university staff and the reputation of certain departments also attracted some of the students. One Italian student decided to come to Finland because "Aalto University had a good reputation in the sector of audio and acoustics". Furthermore, the existence of English-language study programmes was an essential condition. The OECD (2011) categorises Finland, together with Denmark, the Netherlands and Sweden, as countries that offer many tertiary programmes in English.

The first and foremost [reason for migrating] was the high education standard of Finland. Secondly this [Aalto University] is quite popular in Pakistan and we have some very good professors that got their PhDs from there. (male, 28, Pakistan, bioinformatics)

However, the students were not simply "in search of world-class education" (Findlay *et al.* 2012), choosing only top-ranked universities, but also critically evaluated the content of the degree programmes, the reputation of the departments and the skills of the research teams. Their interest was not so much in whether the institution was "recognised" as in its expertise in their field of study.

Both Aalto and the University of Helsinki have good computer science departments, but it's not that they are world famous for their computer science. [...] I did check the ranking lists, but the thing with these ranking lists is that if you look at different lists you get very different results. (male, 26, Germany, computer science)

Basically, there were three possibilities: Switzerland, France and Finland, but from the work perspective Finland was the best. That's why I chose it, from the career perspective and topics. (female, 25, Ukraine, physics)

Some of the students chose Finland because it had a good reputation in the field in which they were interested. Although still not very well known globally, Finland is famous for its success in the field of information and communications technology, led by Nokia (Vaattovaara 2009). The students at Aalto University mentioned fields such as telecommunications and remote sensing, and those at the University of Helsinki talked about musicology and theoretical philosophy.

Mobile phones were becoming quite popular and I got interested in that. Nokia being one of the producers, which was a very popular brand, I naively started looking for schools in Finland even though I did not know where Finland was. (male, 27, Kenya, service design)

As Collins (2008) notes, the cost of education plays a role in the moving decisions of international students. All Bachelor- and doctoral-level degree programmes are free of charge in Finland. Some Master's programmes have tuition fees for non-EU/EEA citizens. Ten students mentioned the lack of tuition fees or getting a suitable scholarship as a factor that encouraged them to study in Finland. Students with few alternatives in terms of their destination country in particular tended to base their final choice on financial factors.

Although educational and career-related reasons are apparent, my findings also support the notion that travelling and experiencing

new cultures are important for international students (Hazen & Alberts 2006). One-third of the interviewees expressed their desire to study abroad, almost regardless of the destination country. Studying in another country seems to be a “process of sustained self-experimentation, exploration and development” (Conradson & Latham 2005b: 290). It is considered a practical way of exploring the world, as a German student noted: “Basically, I wanted to go to a foreign country, so I took a look at different universities in different countries”. The “middling” of skilled migration (Conradson & Latham 2005a) is noticeable in the interviews: for many it was self-evident that they would move abroad at some point in their lives.

In some cases, the migration process started with the choice of a specific geographical region: the students had decided to go to Europe or “somewhere north” and then found a suitable programme in Finland. Four individuals reported that they had purposefully migrated to Finland because they were interested in the Finnish culture and language. For example, a 19-year-old student from Russia said that she had studied Finnish and had been interested in Finland since she was a child. There were also cases in which the Finnish culture or living environment weighted the choice towards Finland when more options were available. Some of the respondents also mentioned the Finns’ good English skills as one reason for their choice.

I didn’t want to go to North America, I wanted to go to Europe, because there are so many countries here and I like the culture here. So I just googled “Europe” and “art”, “English programme”, “master” and it just jumped out of Google. (female, 23, China, theatre science)

Certain aspects of their home country also affect the migration decisions of international students (Hazen & Alberts 2006). The classical push–pull model (Lee 1966) explains migration as a sum of push factors in the region of origin and pull factors at the destination. In this case, a couple of the students referred to strong educational push factors such as the absence of suitable educational opportunities. A student from Peru, for example, said that it was not possible to study musicology on the postgraduate level in his home country. In addition, a few of the students said they left their home country because of the social environment: one of them, a Chinese student of security and mobile computing, described people in his home country as “always working very fast, and worry shows on their faces”.

Although international students are generally seen as young and mobile, some of them have social relationships that guide their migration (Carlson 2013; Geddie 2013; Mosneaga & Winther 2013). Dating, marriage and children are factors that affected some of the interviewees’ migration decisions. As in the case of European skilled workers (Martin-Brelot *et al.* 2010; Musterd & Gritsai 2010), personal trajectories were also mentioned as a motivation for migration. Five students gave social reasons for moving to Finland: they were involved with a Finnish person, or they had moved with their family.

I met my girlfriend [in Finland] [...] She lived with me in Spain for a couple of years and after that we had to decide where we would go to study. [...] It’s really hard [financially] to study in Spain [...] That’s how we got the idea that we would try to study in Sweden or Finland [...] We applied and we both got a place and then we came here. (male, 28, Spain, service design and engineering)

An interesting observation in the case of Finland is the students’ lack of knowledge about the destination country before migrating.

Disregarding the interviewees who mentioned the Finnish language or Finnish culture as their motivation, a striking number of students admitted that their knowledge and impressions of Finland were almost non-existent when they made the decision to move. One Chinese student claimed that he “basically knew nothing about the people, city or culture” when he came. In this case, the context of migration is very different from that of UK students who move to places that are familiar to them through film and television (Waters & Brooks 2011), and reflects Mosneaga and Winther’s (2013) description of international students coming to Denmark because of its exotic image. This finding highlights the desire for adventure. The adventure side of migration may be of more importance when the destination country is less familiar than in the case of the more traditional destinations.

Actually I didn’t know much about Finland. I just had a good feeling about it, I can’t explain it. (female, 28, Romania, theoretical philosophy)

6 Conclusions

The target group of research on skilled migration has diversified during the last decade as international students have been brought in as an influential group. The results of this study support previous theoretical discussion on this issue, but at the same time challenge the conceptual division between student and labour migration. The study also explored the migration motives of international students in the case of Finland and compared them with earlier findings concerning more popular destination countries. On the theoretical level, this enhances the understanding of ISM through the inclusion of versatile destinations alongside traditional English-speaking countries.

The interviewees were carefully chosen to represent the nationalities of the non-Finnish student population in the two faculties of the most highly internationalised universities in Finland. Four out of five interviewees had a university degree when they migrated to Finland, and half of them worked in knowledge-intensive positions at the same time as pursuing their studies. In fact, the levels of education and working experience were surprising given the tendency to classify international students as people whose only aim is to acquire human capital and knowledge (Baláz & Williams 2004; Raghuram 2013). It could be argued that in many cases students are not only students, and skilled workers are not only workers: the roles change during the time they spend in the host country. Those who originally came to study might find themselves working full time in demanding positions and studying in the evenings, whereas those who originally came to work might end up studying another degree in order to develop their skills and advance their careers. This finding gives reason to question the strict separation between labour and student migration. It also challenges the concept of “study-to-work transition” (Mosneaga & Winther 2013), because “studying and working are simultaneous.

This paper also sheds light on the motivations of international degree students who choose a more unusual destination country. Reflecting the findings from earlier studies on more popular destinations, professional and academic reasons were the main motivators for ISM. The desire for a “world-class education” (Findlay *et al.* 2012) also appears to be present in the case of international students in Finland. However, the students do not blindly go where the ranking lists tell them to: they critically evaluate the content of

the programmes and the merits of the university staff. As there are no world-famous universities in Finland, potential students assess the suitability of the study programmes in detail before making their choice. They scrutinise the research topics, teams and professors to find out whether the research and knowledge on offer meet their needs. Another advantage in the case of Finland is the lack of tuition fees for most programmes.

In addition to pursuing educational and career goals, exploring a new country and culture was also a strong reason for studying in a foreign country. This finding is consistent with earlier studies highlighting the adventure side of studying abroad. It is also noteworthy that many of the students did not know much about Finland before arriving, which further accentuates the adventurous nature of their migration.

This study demonstrates that earlier results concerning the factors affecting ISM are also valid in the case of an uncommon destination country. Students migrate for the same reasons: they want to develop their skills and embark on a career, as well as to travel and learn about different countries and cultures. Even if the international student population is growing and diversifying, it appears that the motivations for mobility stay the same.

Given the aim in Finland and other countries to attract the best in the world, it is worth examining students' motivations for migrating. It could be concluded from the interviews that universities in Helsinki attract ambitious and career-oriented international students who have selected their educational institution carefully. In this respect, their strategies have been successful. However, the diversity of the international student population and their many reasons for migrating remain unacknowledged. As Mosneaga and Winther (2013: 184) note, "the complex human side of talent mobility" is often missing in efforts to attract international students. Although many come in search of top-class education, others are seeking adventure: they enjoy travelling and new experiences. The lack of tuition fees is also important for many students. Therefore, the proposed introduction of tuition fees for international students (Cai & Kivistö 2011) would probably lower the attractiveness of Finland as a destination country.

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Furthermore, it is difficult, if not impossible, to take the social factors behind student migration into account in the strategies.

Perhaps one way of attracting skilled students and workers to countries that are less familiar and have no world-famous universities would be to emphasise the unfamiliarity and exceptionality in relation to popular English-speaking destinations. An offbeat destination can offer unconventional experiences to students with travelling and adventure-seeking on their agenda. Hence, it may be worth rethinking the nature of unfamiliarity as a valuable asset in the competition for skilled migrants. Universities should also emphasise their unique qualities, research topics and teams more strongly, as such factors seem to attract international students as much as being a "recognised" institution. The interviewees said they had chosen their universities for their interesting subject areas and reputable researchers, not because of ranking lists. Instead of trying to imitate world-class institutions, Finnish universities would do better to capitalise on their own fields of expertise, which the skilled migrants participating in this study clearly appreciated.

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