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Victoria Kompanets

NORDIC AND RUSSIAN STUDENT AND BUSINESS PERSPECTIVES ON UNIVERSITIES' INTERNATIONAL ACTIVITIES

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**NORDIC AND RUSSIAN STUDENT AND BUSINESS
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ACTIVITIES**

Victoria Kompanets

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ABSTRACT

Name of publication Nordic and Russian student and business perspectives on universities' international activities
Author Victoria Kompanets
Abstract <p>The purpose of this report is to investigate university stakeholders' attitudes to and engagement in the international cooperation activities of universities in the Nordic countries and Russia. This report aims to explore how companies and students are involved in the international activities of universities, what benefits they expect and what the potential areas for internationalisation development are. The data for this study were collected using semi-structured interviews with nine companies and a survey of over 200 students from the Nordic countries and Russia.</p> <p>The findings reveal that students and companies recognise the benefits of the international activities provided by universities. International exchange programmes, internships abroad and interaction with students from other countries are considered important parts of the studies. The most common mode of the international dimension of university-business cooperation is the supervision of international student teams' projects and R&D projects, and the most preferable modes are international R&D projects and strategic cooperation with universities. Student and business representatives believe that universities should develop more practical aspects of internationalisation, such as collaborative international projects, traineeships in international companies and applied research.</p> <p>Higher education institutions are recommended to more actively promote international cooperation opportunities to companies to increase their awareness and consequent involvement. More intensive language courses and actions for more interaction between international and local students are suggested as the key directions for the improvement of students' international experiences.</p>
Keywords: internationalisation; higher education; university stakeholders; university-business cooperation; student engagement; Nordic countries; Russia.

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1 Introduction

International university cooperation expands and combines various forms of joint education and research activities. According to Knight (2008, 21), internationalisation is “the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of higher education at the institutional or national levels”. From international students on campus to joint and double degree programmes to research projects, internationalisation has become an integral part of almost every type of activity in higher education. However, the widening of international networks and partnerships does not necessarily mean their deepening and effective utilisation.

Internationalisation as an integral part of university activities involves and has an impact on different university stakeholders¹. The recognition of internal and external stakeholders’ importance in university internationalisation can bring more relevant benefits from international activities to the university (Castro, Rosa, and Pinho 2015). Despite the existing acknowledgement of students and employers as the drivers of internationalisation (Egron-Polak and Hudson 2010) and directional influencers (Castro, Rosa, and Pinho 2015; Kompanets and Väättänen 2018), they seem to be underrepresented in the development of international activities of universities (Urban and Palmer 2014; Crossman and Clarke 2010; Teichler 2017). The abovementioned studies indicate a moderate stakeholder involvement in and influence on internationalisation.

Heitor (2015, 281) called for new forms and quality of international cooperation between universities, industry and government to create “knowledge integrated communities”. For this purpose, company and student voices on what they value and need in international relations should be heard. The purpose of this report is to investigate university stakeholders’ attitudes to and involvement in the international cooperation activities of universities in the Nordic countries and Russia. This report aims to *explore how companies and students are involved in international activities of universities, what benefits they expect and what the potential areas for internationalisation development are.*

The Nordic countries and Russia have extensive business, educational and cultural ties. However, higher education and cultural contexts in these countries are rather different. While Nordic higher education institutions (HEIs) have extensive experience in internationalisation, Russian HEIs are actively developing their internationalisation strategies, and the number of Russian students studying abroad is rapidly increasing (Chankseliani 2015). Companies work in these countries and need internationally competent professionals. Nordic and Russian universities cooperate in different fields: international student exchanges, international joint degree programmes and joint research and, thus, create global talent and expertise.

¹ Stakeholders are defined as “any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization’s objectives” (Freeman 1984, 46).

To respond to the abovementioned questions, company interviews and a student survey were conducted during the project “International cooperation of universities to the needs of global stakeholders - Digital platform for Nordic-Russian cooperation”. Nine company representatives from Finland, Sweden and Russia were interviewed from January to September of 2017. The respondents worked at large or small and medium-sized industrial companies in managerial positions and were responsible for business development or research and development (R&D). All of the companies cooperated with international partners and/or have branches in other countries. The experiences and expectations of the collaborators were discussed based on the semi-structured questionnaires. The questions combined both open-ended questions and questions asking participants to evaluate the importance or relevance of certain issues for them.

A student survey was conducted from May to August of 2018 and collected 214 responses from international and domestic students from Finland, Sweden, Norway and Russia. The self-administered online survey was distributed through the international offices, student guilds and university student portals at four universities, as well as through student communities in the social networks of other Nordic and Russian universities. The survey was iteratively tested in an HEI situated in Finland, and the results were presented at international conferences. The findings of this study contribute to the stream of literature analysing the quality of university internationalisation and can be implemented in international study and research services activities by presenting perspectives of students and companies.

The report is organised in several sections, and, after presenting the students’ and company representatives’ profiles, it addresses the students’ and companies’ views on the following issues:

- International experiences;
- Importance of internationalisation;
- Criteria of quality of international programmes / universities;
- Motivations and barriers of internationalisation;
- Changes in universities.

2 Background information

2.1 Student profile

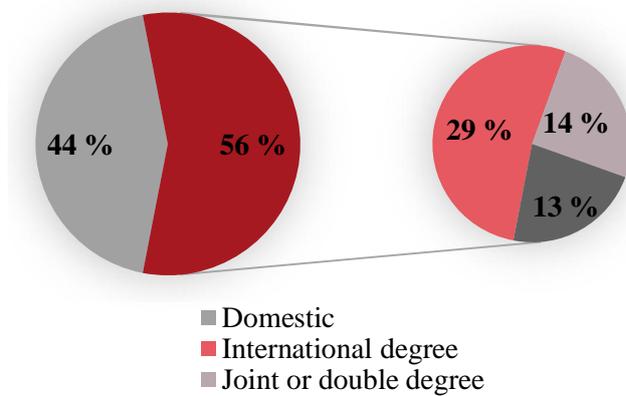


Figure 1. Type of students

In total, 214 students took part in the survey: 94 domestic students and 120 international students, including international full-degree students, joint and double degree students and exchange students.

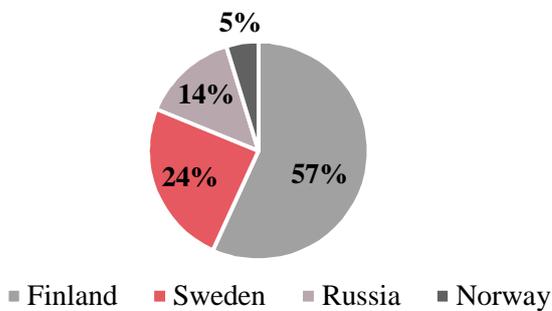


Figure 2. Country of study

The survey targeted HEIs in the Nordic countries and Russia. Of the respondents, 56% were students from universities in Finland, 25% in Sweden, 14% in Russia, 5% in Norway and less than 1% in Denmark.

The respondents were from 47 different countries, including 25% from Finland, 18% from Russia and 10% from Sweden.

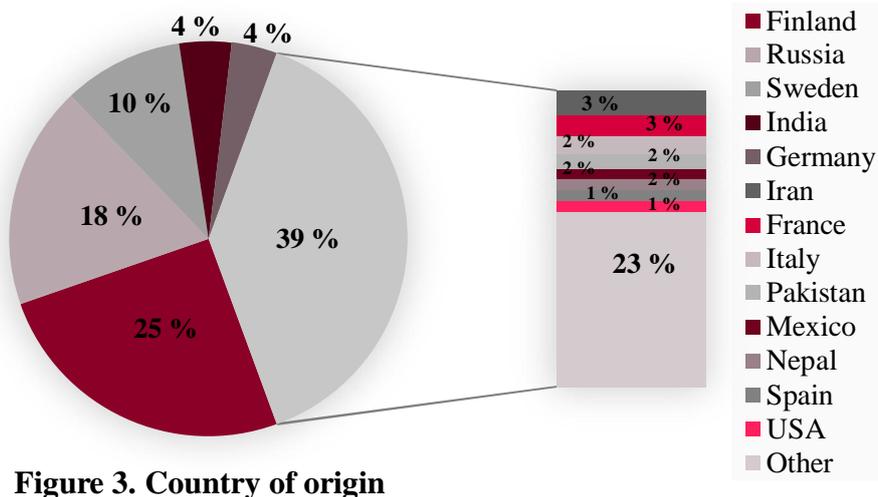


Figure 3. Country of origin

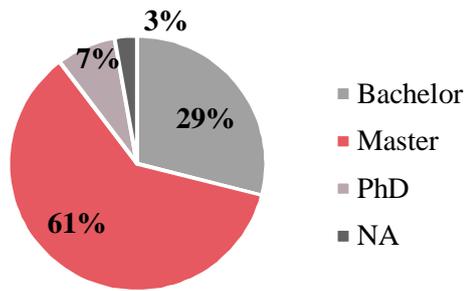


Figure 4. Level of studies

The majority of the students studied at the Master’s level. Engineering, Economics and Business Sciences were the study fields of the majority of the respondents.

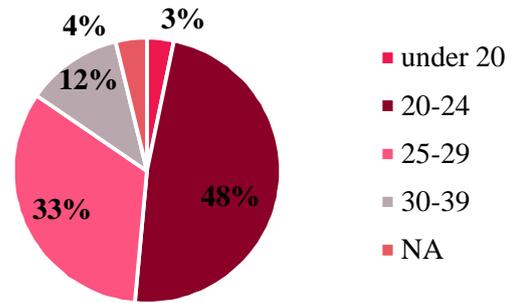


Figure 6. Age

Most respondents were aged 20-29 years; 50% of respondents were female.

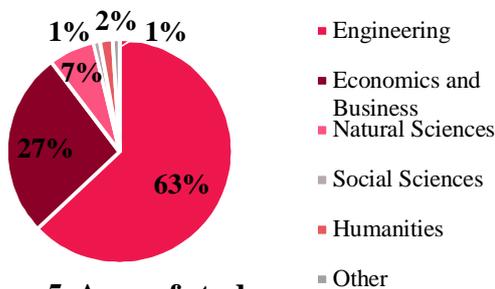


Figure 5. Area of study

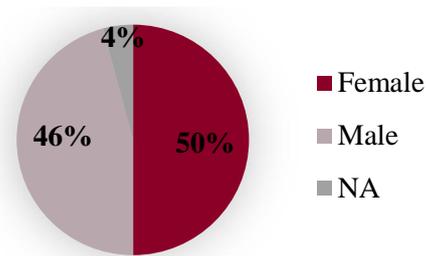


Figure 7. Gender

2.2 Company representatives’ profile

Table 1. Company representatives’ profile

	Country	Position	Company size	Area of operation
1	Finland	Top manager	Large	Maintenance
2	Finland	Line manager	Large	Technology
3	Finland	R&D manager	Large	Manufacturing
4	Finland	Sales manager	SME	Energy
5	Finland	Board member	SME	Energy
6	Russia	Top manager	Large	Maintenance
7	Russia	Top manager	Large	ICT
8	Sweden	R&D manager	Large	Energy
9	Sweden	Executive Board Member	Large	Manufacturing

The respondents represented engineering and service companies specializing in the areas of Energy, Mining, Manufacturing, and ICT. Their background information and affiliations are presented in Table 1. Seven respondents worked in large industrial companies, and two respondents worked at small- and medium-sized enterprises (SME) in managerial positions and were responsible for business development or research and development (R&D). All of the companies cooperated with international partners and/or had branches in other countries. Disciplinary areas of collaboration included Energy, Industrial Engineering and Management and IT.

3 International experiences

3.1 Student experiences

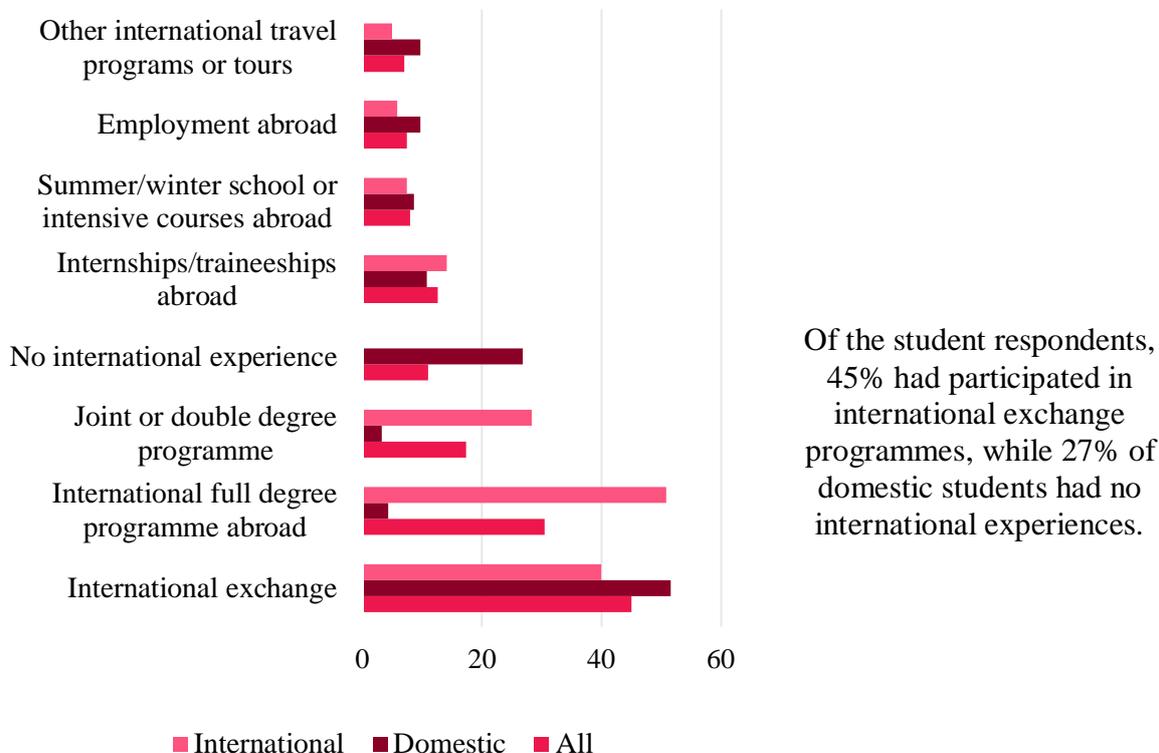


Figure 8. International experiences of students (% of respondents)

3.2 Company experiences

The overall experience of university–industry cooperation among the company respondents was diverse and included cooperation in both education and research and development (R&D). The majority of the respondents had cooperated with universities through the supervision of student projects and R&D projects.

In most of the cases, the international dimension of university–industry cooperation was conducted via students. Two thirds of the respondents supervised student project teams that included international students. They considered the benefits of the international teams to be considered in wider access to the knowledge available in different languages and the diversification of views on a problem:

Multinational points of view and wider experience on working or studying internationally normally helps to widen their perspective more, and then it gives better report or better outcome. (Finnish company, Line manager).

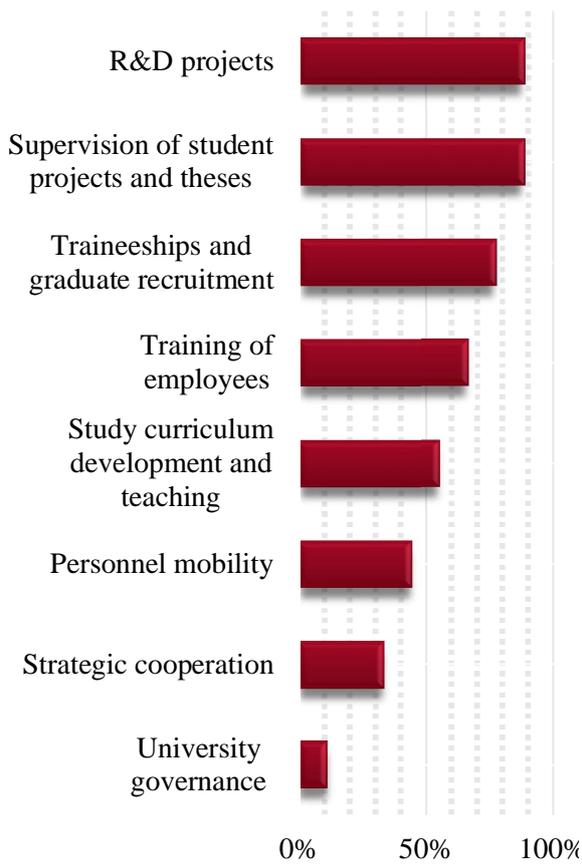


Figure 9. Company experiences of cooperation with universities (% of respondents)

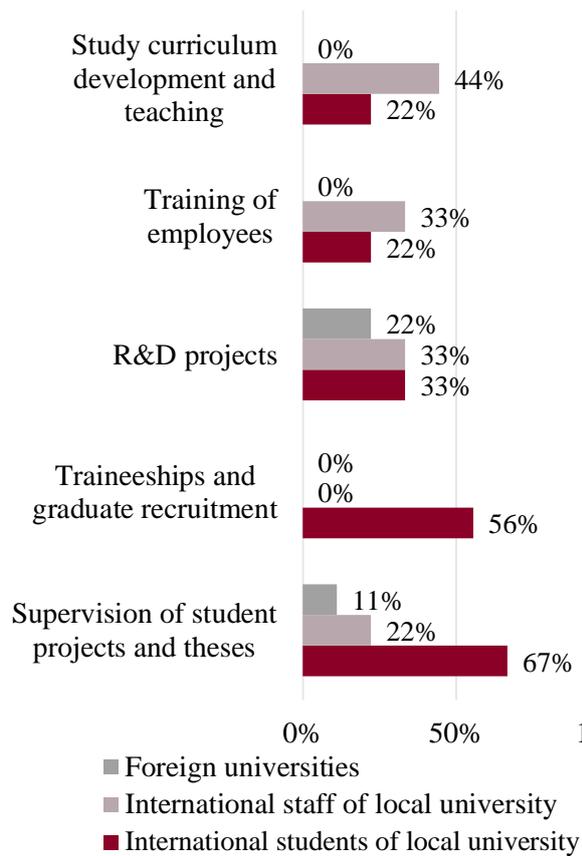


Figure 10. International participation in university-industry cooperation (% of respondents)

Companies recruited international students for internships or employment as well as cooperated with them in R&D projects. A Russian business representative taught local and international students at university, which supported him in selecting candidates for recruitment:

[International education] tells about alternative points of view, broad outlooks and that the [candidate] is potentially inclined to develop further and look for new opportunities. (Russian company, Top manager)

In the studied examples, only one third of the company representatives cooperated with the international staff of local universities. Cooperation with foreign universities was also uncommon and was mainly done indirectly through local universities, for example, in international R&D projects or the supervision of student theses.

4 Importance of internationalisation

4.1 Student perspective

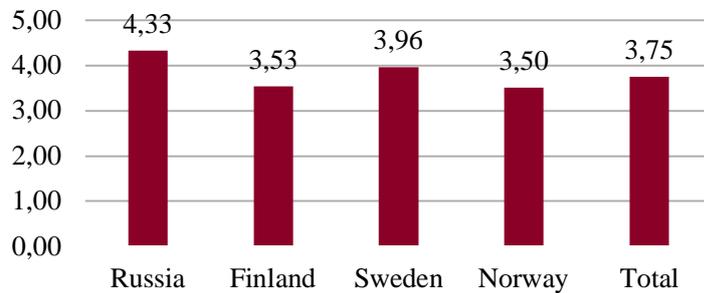


Figure 11. Answers to question "If a university had a requirement that all students need to study in another country to graduate, would this requirement make you . . . to attend this university?"

Means, Likert scale from 1 (Much less likely) to 5 (Much more likely)

Students from the Russian universities were notable for the highest mean value of the likelihood to choose universities that offer study abroad opportunities in comparison to students from Nordic countries. Nordic students were also positive about study abroad, though the mean values of Finnish and Norwegian students were closer to neutral.

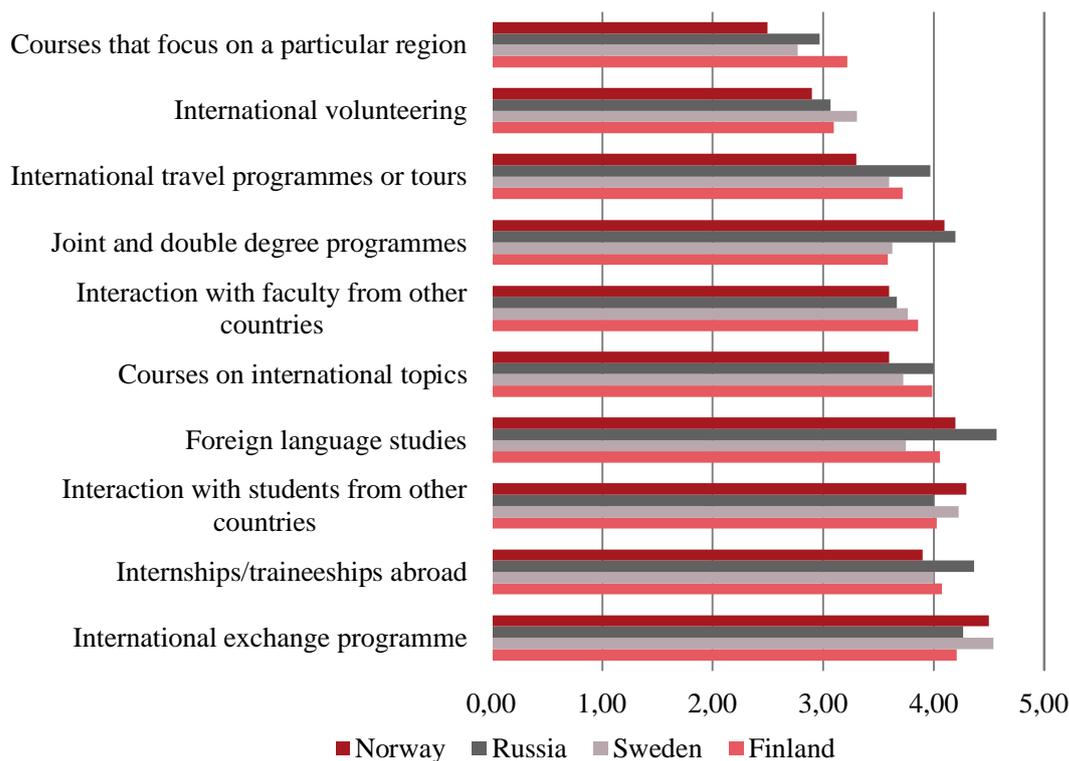


Figure 12. Importance of international activities for students

Means, Likert scale from 1 (not important) to 5 (very important)

There was, on average, a high interest to the presence of different international activities in an HEI portfolio. The country perspective shows that, in general, students studying in Russia revealed higher interest in international activities in comparison to Nordic countries and

attached the utmost importance to foreign language studies and internships abroad. Students from Norway showed the least interest towards the availability of different international activities. Joint and double degree programmes were recognised as somewhat important only by Russian and Norwegian students. The international students were the most interested in internships and traineeships abroad, followed by exchange programmes and interaction with students from other countries. From the domestic students' points of view, the most important activities among the university internationalisation services were exchange programmes and foreign language studies.

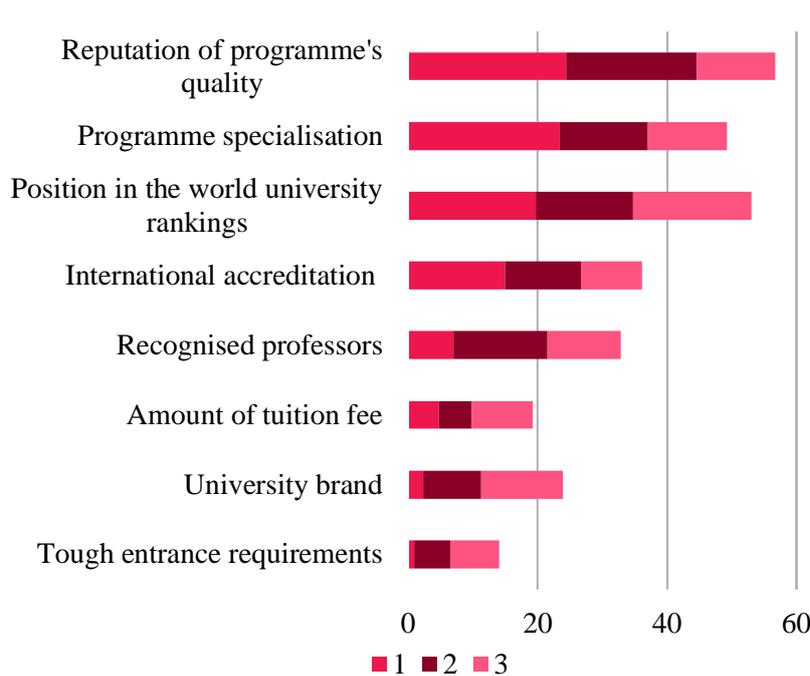


Figure 13. Signals of quality of international programme / university, % of respondents
 1 = the most important; 2 = 2nd most important; 3 = 3rd most important

One of the universally recognised signals (or indicators) of quality when students choose an international programme or university was the reputation of the programme's quality. There was relatively vague uniformity among the students' views on signals of quality among the different countries. Where students studying in Finland and Norway mainly oriented themselves by programme specialisation at HEIs, students studying in Russia looked at HEIs' accreditations.



Figure 14. Signals of quality of international programme / university by country, % of respondents

4.2 Company views on international university–business cooperation



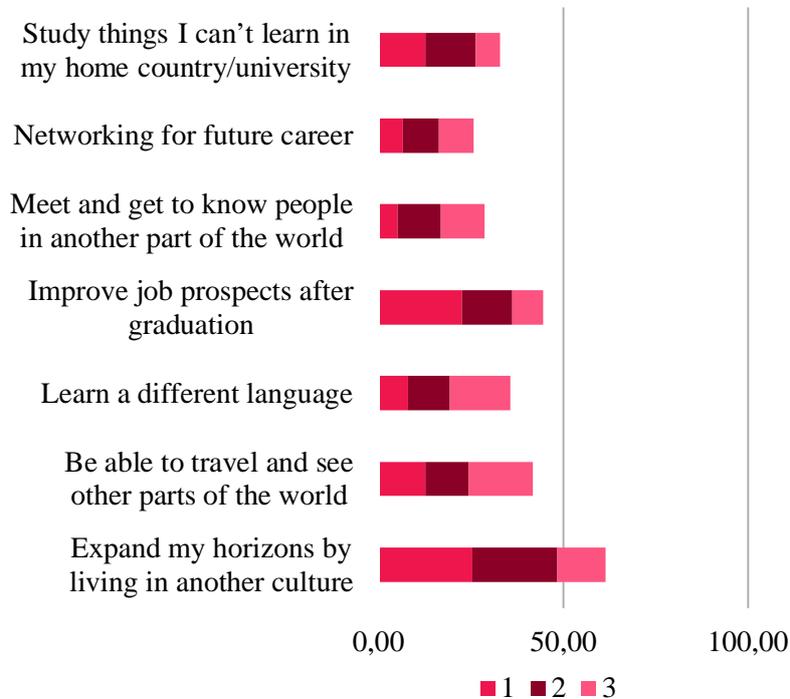
Two thirds of the company respondents would like to be more involved in international R&D projects. The second most-indicated cooperation mode, by more than half of the industry representatives, was for more multifaceted and strategic cooperation with international universities, so that universities would better serve company needs.

Figure 15. Most interesting international cooperation modes for companies, % of respondents

5 Motivations and barriers of internationalisation

5.1 Objectives and benefits

5.1.1 Student objectives



Expanding horizons by living in another country and improving job prospects were the most important objectives for studying abroad. The country-related results correlated with the responses on the importance of international activities when choosing universities, particularly in the importance of language studies for the students from Russia, and for the importance of job prospects or receiving internships/traineeships abroad.

Figure 16. Most important objectives to study abroad, % of respondents

1 = the most important; 2 = 2nd most important; 3 = 3rd most important

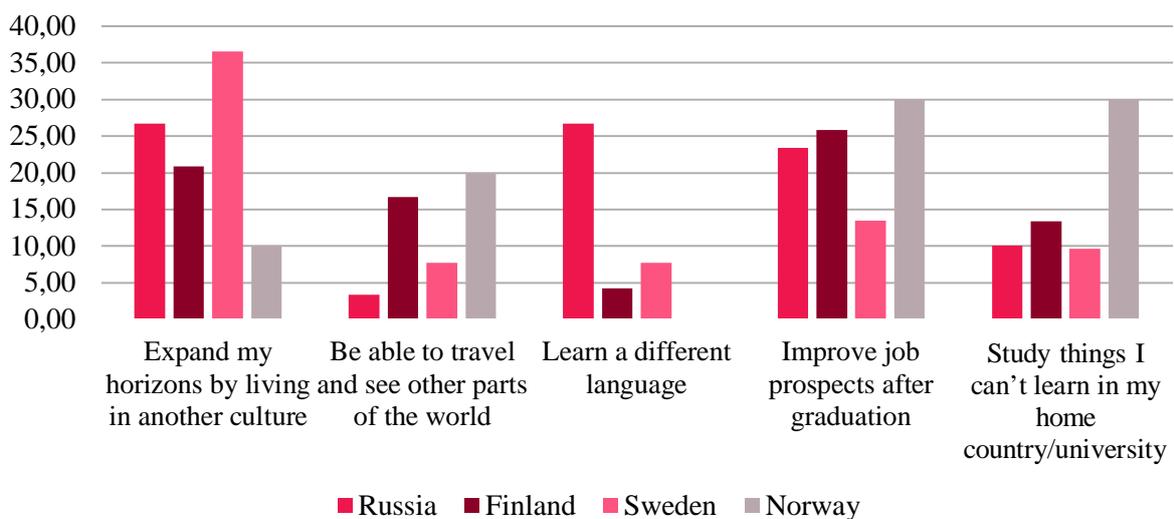


Figure 17. Most important objectives to study abroad by country, % of respondents

5.1.2 Company benefits



Figure 18. Importance of benefits from international university–business cooperation
Means, Likert scale from 1 (not important) to 5 (very important)

Company representatives evaluated the importance of the benefits the international dimension of cooperation with universities could bring. The highest values belonged to innovation and knowledge creation. It was expected that international collaboration with universities would provide access to international knowledge pools, enhance innovative capacity and promote diversification into new areas of expertise.

5.2 Barriers

5.2.1 Student barriers for participation in international programmes

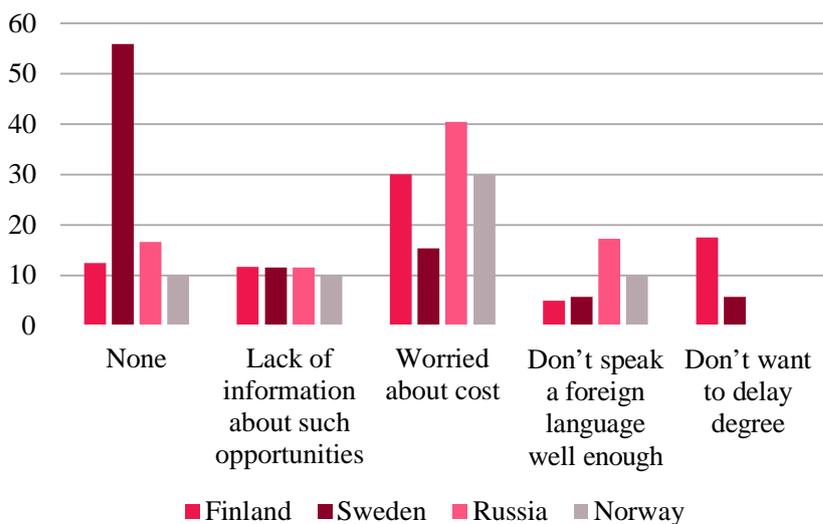
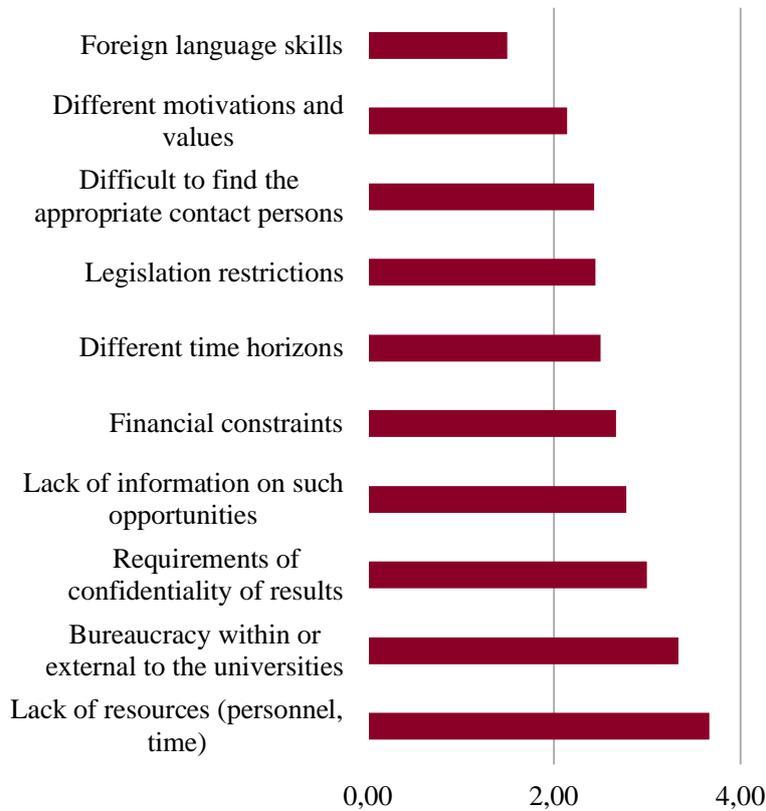


Figure 19. Most important student barriers for study abroad, % of respondents

The highest barrier seen by the students from Russia were costs, followed by lack of information and language issues. The students from Finland were most concerned about costs and staying in line with academic goals, while the students from Sweden mostly did not see any considerable barriers to studying abroad.

5.2.2 Barriers for international university–business cooperation



The most important barriers to international cooperation with universities from the companies' perspectives were lack of time and personnel resources. Bureaucracy within or external to universities and the confidentiality requirements from the companies impeded the companies' involvement in the internationalisation activities of universities.

Figure 20. Barriers for international university–business cooperation
Means, Likert scale from 1 (not important) to 5 (very important)

6 Changes in universities

Table 2. Student and business perspectives on changes in universities

	Companies	Students
Strategic cooperation with business	4,57	3,87
More collaborative international projects	4,17	4,12
More applied research and commercialisation of research	4	3,56
More practical orientation of education	3,83	3,99
More traineeships in international companies	3,8	4,2
More multidisciplinary education and research	3,71	3,8
More education provided by an international network of universities	3,4	3,79
Support more international orientation	3,29	3,98
More international student exchanges	3	3,79

In the top answers on *how and to what extent should universities change in the future*, both companies and students indicated the importance of more practical issues of internationalisation. The companies focused most on strategic cooperation, collaborative international projects and the commercialisation of research. The students' opinions were connected to future job opportunities: more traineeships in international companies, more collaborative international projects, a more practical orientation of education and strategic cooperation with businesses. There was no significant difference in the views from the country perspective.

7 Conclusions

We can summarise the results of this project as follows: students and companies see an added value in the international activities provided by universities. Students believe that studying abroad and international communication expands their horizons and helps in employment after graduation. Companies expect that international collaboration with universities will provide access to international knowledge pools, enhance innovative capacity and promote diversification into new areas of expertise. Business representatives who have supervised international student teams see that international students and graduates provide wider access to the knowledge available in different languages and the diversification of views on a problem.

Among the various forms of internationalisation, students and companies distinguish several forms as most important from their points of view. International exchange programmes, internships abroad and interaction with students from other countries are considered important parts of the studies. The most common mode of the international dimension of university–business cooperation is the supervision of international student teams’ projects and R&D projects, and the most preferable are international R&D projects, as well as strategic cooperation with universities.

From the students’ and business representatives’ perspectives, universities should develop more practical aspects of internationalisation, such as collaborative international projects and strategic cooperation with business. Students are most interested in traineeships in international companies. Companies also draw attention to the commercialisation of international research.

Overall, the companies’ awareness of the international activities of universities, as well as their understanding of the benefits they could bring, are rather limited. We suggest that universities should more actively promote international cooperation opportunities to companies to increase their awareness and consequent involvement.

Open student feedback in the survey on the needs for internationalisation support has provided points for further development. More intensive language courses and activities for the interaction between international and local students are the key directions for the improvement of students’ international experiences.

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