

PURE Helsinki

Addressing Ongoing Challenges

Introduction

In May 2011, the PASCAL Universities and Regional Engagement (PURE) Consultative Development Group undertook its second visit to Helsinki. A report on the learning from the visit was presented to the Regional Coordinating Group (RCG) in June 2011.

Following some discussion in the RCG, the Regional Link Coordinator for the Helsinki PURE project has asked for further discussion about how the Region might:

- sharpen the internationalisation strategy in the region;
- develop the regional cooperation between HEIs and Cities on societal interaction and engagement; and
- learn from ideas or initiatives/results from other PURE regions.

The purpose of this paper is to enable this discussion to move to another phase.

Internationalisation

In the Review Visit Report 2 (RVR2), 'internationalisation' was a major issue. The first challenge is becoming clearer about the Cities' objectives with respect to internationalisation. The CDG commented that:

While the apparent logic of an international approach to knowledge and human capital might be obvious enough in a globalising world, the strategy is not so clear in the current political and economic climate. Some of the issues are:

- confusion politically between the 'human capital for innovation' agenda, and current immigration policy (reflected in the support for the True Finns, especially outside the Helsinki region);
- the challenge of retaining international students and faculty in Finland, in appropriate occupations;
- tensions between efforts to attract international diversity into Finnish society, and the subsequent concern about segregation, wanting newcomers to 'fit in' with established Finnish language and customs;
- the related tension arising from increasing labour force needs, and the difficulties foreign workers have in meeting language and associated workplace requirements;
- confusion about the respective roles of the Cities, HERA, the HEIs and of business.

HEIs, with the municipal authorities, clearly have a major role to play in relation to this issue. Given the recent political results, the challenge is one of leading broader cultural change as much as the more direct responsibility as educator and employer. For example, can the universities exercise leadership in enabling Finnish people to see social (and linguistic) diversity as an opportunity to strengthen Finnish cultural characteristics, rather than undermining them? How might bilingual learning in Finnish schools lead to even stronger educational performance than is achieved already? Do degrees offered in English genuinely contribute to the Finnish innovation agenda? If so, how?

Further comment:

It is clear that the internationalisation agenda is a national challenge, yet it is one where the current political climate makes it difficult for the national government to exercise the kind of leadership necessary for coherent and constructive action. The presence in Parliament of a significant party in opposition which has concerns about internationalisation makes it difficult to forge a consensus about the need for internationalisation, and a readiness to explore the consequences.

Yet, Finnish people need leadership, and the City and university leaders could play a crucial role in this process. It also requires careful thought to explore how immigration and concerns about Finnish culture connect with innovation eco-systems. Almost by definition, innovation depends on lateral thinking, new ideas which offer new opportunities (products or processes) which were not apparent previously. The benefits for innovation could follow from immigration by both technical specialists and relatively unskilled members of the workforce. If we draw on Australian experience over many years, it is apparent that migrants bring new insights and practices to communities and workplaces, not just of new knowledge, but new ways of thinking about habits, products and processes.

In this respect, there is an inescapable challenge which needs to be understood better: as immigration develops, Finnish culture and values will broaden and change. This was an underlying sense that this was a threat to Finnish people, but it need not necessarily be so. It does not mean that Finnish culture will be obliterated, nor become unrecognizable. Rather, there will be a process of negotiation and development as people with different perspectives and values come to take their place in Finland.

The challenge for research and policy is to understand how this process can be supported in a positive way, and to manage the various issues which arise along the way. The way in which the Finnish is positioned and used vis a vis other languages is crucial in this area. Finnish language will always be important as a fount of energy and identity for Finnish culture, but English is increasingly accepted as the language of academic interaction. However, given the growing orientation of Finland towards Europe and North America, some consideration should be given to making English a third official language?

Here is where the City and university leaders can be both thoughtful and articulate in their public presentations about the reasons for immigration, the contribution to innovation of new ideas, and the inevitable impact on Finnish customs. These transitions are very difficult to manage constructively at the best of times, and even more so when future circumstances remain unclear. People need leaders who can offer unambiguous insights into the kind of society which Finland might become, one which is not only more visible and respected in international arena, but is also more diverse and inclusive of people from foreign backgrounds in their own communities. City and university representatives, at all levels, can be important voices for this vision, and the more that they can discuss this and coordinate their actions, the more effective their leadership will be.

This issue is an example of how more regular meetings amongst City and university leaders will be helpful. It will enable agreement on a strategy to ensure that their messages were consistent. Where appropriate, they would use a variety of public media to communicate both with own immediate constituencies and with national politicians, business leaders and citizens in various community settings.

Regional Cooperation on Societal Interaction and Engagement

The CDG made a number of observations (in section 6):

... there appears to be a lot of engagement activity between the HEIs and regional activities, but the general issue is that this tends to be ad hoc rather than strategic, reflecting personal linkages

rather than institutional priorities...

[T]hese arrangements are complicated by the multiple layers of governance, not only the Cities themselves but also other regional forums and councils. From a university perspective, there is a challenge in working out where best to develop a clear framework for collaboration, given the different possibilities...

The regional Competitiveness Strategy, which is influenced to some degree by the Metropolitan Policy, has provided one important framework for cooperation between the Cities and universities. This provides an important example of the ways in which national policy and funding can be so influential in regional policy-making. Its core focus has been on human capital as the key to innovation, both in the enhancement of skill levels, but also the development of occupational pathways...

The question of strategy arises also in relation to those projects or brokers set up to facilitate linkages amongst partners, particularly related to innovation...

There is clearly a significant level of activity between the HEIs and business, some of which involves the Cities. No doubt, much of the interaction between business and HEIs will be driven by their own commercial interest. However, much of this appears to occur outside a clear understanding of innovation eco-systems, and again, without a sense of strategic agenda.

Some of these might seem to be strange remarks about Helsinki and Finland, which has no shortage of strategies for addressing different kinds of challenges. This, however, is the point. There appear to be multiple strategies which are not necessarily aligned in a clear and constructive, united approach to making decisions about change. This seems to leave a situation in which many activities occur in parallel, without benefiting from the energy and coherence which can be achieved where initiatives are leveraged from each other, and the one can add impetus to the other. Putting it crudely, it is more like a hub and spokes arrangement, with the Cities maintaining discrete relationships with different partners rather than forming more collaborative partnerships. This seems to be particularly so with the HEIs, some of which have quite direct relationships with the City, without the lateral linkages. The notable exception, of the Urban Studies project in its more recent phase, demonstrates what can be achieved when the partnerships do become multilateral.

Learning from Other PURE Regions

There are several other PURE regions which can share their experience with Helsinki. Melbourne is an obvious example, partly because it is a city with multiple higher education institutions, but more importantly, a strongly cosmopolitan mix of nationalities and languages. For 60 years, it has absorbed waves of immigrants from Europe, South America, Asia and Africa, and has established ways of supporting these processes. Equally there is much which Melbourne can learn from Helsinki, not least in the ways in which university and government leaders do collaborate already. Glasgow is another which has had to manage transitions from one economic environment to another, as industries have been reshaped. Flanders has had long experience in dealing with multiple official languages, while Thames Gateway reflects a much more directive national government agenda at work, with local authorities and universities struggling to manage the implications for local communities, assisting them to envision a different type of future and to understand how they might get there.

While several of these regions are no longer actively participating in the PURE project, having completed their two year period, they continue to be connected productively with PASCAL. The PASCAL Centres, particularly in Glasgow and at RMIT, can facilitate making connections and helping to build relationships with the Cities in Helsinki Metropolitan Region.