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# Legitimations of Finnish education export – exploring the plurality of guiding principles

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the legitimization of Finnish education export (EE) activities linked to higher education institutions. As a small non-English speaking country with only recent involvement in the EE market, Finland provides an underexplored context to consider the legitimization of overseas, fee-based educational services from the perspective of EE providers. In this qualitative case study comprising two Finnish EE endeavours, we draw on convention theory to argue that the legitimization of education export is based on multiple roles of such export, not just on generating revenue for the provider institution. We show that legitimations are linked to multiple guiding principles, illustrated in our data through five themes: education for the future generations, competing institutions, localisation of education activity, project-oriented activity, and Finnishness of education export. Due to the plurality of principles, the legitimization process of EE among internal and external stakeholders includes more variation than the seemingly important market-driven logic would suggest, even if this logic has been in focus of the national higher education policy over the past decade.

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## Introduction

The goals of international education for nations and institutions are a mixture of various commercial and social targets (Knight 2007; Ng and Nyland 2018), embedded with the national political settings (Knight 2007). Some goals set for international education are linked to revenue-generation, and thus aimed at gaining additional resources to the higher education system, while others have a political dimension such as aiming to enhance national competitiveness (Knight 2007), or establishing the reputation of the country as a credible actor in the field of education (Schatz 2016). Political and economic goals are intertwined; economic goals are underpinned by national branding (Schatz 2016) and setting of strategic priorities for the international activities of higher education institutions (HEIs) (Jokila, Kallo, and Mikkilä-Erdmann 2019). This requires HEIs to be

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able to justify their activities – that is, to gain social acceptance, i.e. legitimisation, for their activities (He and Wilkins 2018) in different socio-cultural contexts.

In this research, we explore the legitimisation process of education export (EE) in the context of higher education in Finland, a country with no long-term tradition in providing commercial education internationally (Juusola 2020). In our study, EE represents the for-profit international activities of HEIs (Knight 2013). It comprises the mobility of individuals and programmes (Kosmützky and Putty 2016), but also economic transactions such as tuition fees for international students and branch campuses (Knight 2016). While there are other terms, such as transnational education or cross-border education, denoting similar activity (Knight 2016), we prefer to use the term education export (*koulutusvienti* in Finnish), which is commonly used in the Finnish policy context (EDUFI 2020; MINEDU 2010, 2016).

In previous research, EE has been studied from the perspectives of management and programme design (He and Wilkins 2018; Healey 2018), researching learning and teaching (Juusola and Rähkä 2018; Smith 2009) as well as examining quality assurance and the quality of education (Borgos 2013). Recent studies have highlighted the potential of EE to support the development of capabilities in the project location (Ding 2019) and also challenges to that: What counts as ‘best practice’ in one country does not necessarily work well in other contexts (Chung 2017). However, less attention has been paid to the diversity of legitimisation of EE activities implemented by HEIs that utilise the national brand but are internationally relatively unknown as institutions. For example, the legitimisation of Finnish EE has not been emphasised in previous studies (Juusola and Nokkala 2019).

In HEIs, EE activities are affected, e.g. by national policies and external stakeholders (Seeber et al. 2016). The EE activities of a HEI are also typically driven by its internal stakeholders and the desire to gain different benefits from these activities. The expected benefits include, e.g. increased revenues through expanded EE activities (Healey 2018), or widening the international activities (Knight 2016) that support the teachers’ professional development (Juusola and Rähkä 2018) and enhance the institution’s international branding (Marginson 2006) globally or locally (Seeber et al. 2016). Therefore, the goals that HEIs wish to achieve with engaging in EE activities do not necessarily appear the same as the goals that states wish to achieve by encouraging this engagement. Instead, they stem from the HEIs’ own traditions, functions and the interest of international actors (Knight 2007).

The aim of this paper is twofold. First, our aim is to identify the main underlying principles on which the legitimisation process of Finnish EE is based. Second, we analyse the legitimisation differences between the internal and external stakeholders. Our analysis is guided by two interdependent research questions (RQs): (1) ‘What kind of underlying conventions (Diaz-Bone and Salais 2011; Juusola 2020) are emphasised in the legitimisation of EE?’ and (2) ‘What kind of variations can be found in the legitimisation process?’

Focusing on two different Finnish EE providers linked to Finnish HEIs, we shed light on a small non-English speaking country in which EE is still a contested activity (Schatz 2016). In this qualitative study of two EE cases, we explore empirically – by means of semi-structured interviews with teachers and institutional management – the principles that guide EE activities as perceived by their providers.

By stressing the perspective of EE providers that seek legitimization in an unfamiliar socio-cultural and political environment, this paper provides important insights into the multiple ways in which EE activities can be legitimated. Thus, it challenges the dominant notion (Dervin and Simpson 2019) that exporting education is primarily a revenue generation activity. Although our data were collected before the global spread of COVID-19, the legitimization of HEIs' international activities in an unfamiliar environment is now an even more topical question. The current uncertain geopolitical circumstances will inevitably affect the forms and practices of the internationalisation of higher education, while HEIs all over the world are facing a new situation and may thus have to reconsider the social legitimization of their activities.

### **Social dynamics of legitimating the education export activity**

Being perceived as legitimate by the stakeholders of higher education is essential for HEIs, not least for attracting skilled students and sustainable human and economic resources (He and Wilkins 2018). Therefore, legitimization is an ongoing process involving various interrelated activities (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006) to consolidate the status or function of the institutions (Kohvakka 2020).

Although the activities of HEIs usually hold great legitimacy in their own countries, establishing EE activities abroad requires HEIs to rethink what they are doing and why (Wilkins 2017). For example, provider institutions may wish to make a political impact by branding their EE activities internationally as well as facilitating the bi-directional cultural understanding and social impact in the host country (Wojciuk, Michalek, and Stormowska 2015). Therefore, legitimization of EE can be considered as a pluralistic set of different interpretations of what constitutes appropriate and justified action of HEIs in a knowledge-based economy (Sum and Jessop 2013).

Emerging EE activities also need to be perceived as legitimate and attractive in the host country, which is a new environment for the education exporting HEIs (He and Wilkins 2018). The stakeholders of education may be partially different from those in the home country (Lönqvist et al. 2018) and have different expectations and values (Farrugia and Lane 2013). Building mutual trust with the local stakeholders (Stafford and Taylor 2016) reinforces the ability of HEIs to understand the local socio-cultural and political context (Wilkins 2017) and to ensure the legitimacy and attractiveness of EE in the host country (Farrugia and Lane 2013). However, in practice, this can be a lengthy and arduous process if the local educational environment is new for the provider HEIs.

The legitimization strategies of HEIs are dependent on institutional factors (He and Wilkins 2018), such as appropriate facilities (Sidhu and Christie 2015) and available human resources (Juusola 2020). Depending on whether the provider HEI employs local staff (He and Wilkins 2018) or uses 'flying academics', who are temporarily present in the project location (Juusola 2020), the legitimization process may vary. Similarly, in delivering a curriculum from one country to another, HEIs need to balance between the expectation to provide education that is comparable to the home campus (Waterval et al. 2015) and the need to take the local context into account (Healey 2018) – in practice, these goals may not always coincide (Healey 2018). Therefore, legitimizing the EE activities requires HEIs to make strategic choices as regards the relevant

points of different EE activities and contexts (He and Wilkins 2018), even if the EE activities might differ from the core duties of HEIs.

### Convention theoretical approach to legitimization issues

We use convention theory (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006) to analyse the principles that underlie the legitimization of EE activities. Conventions are socio-cultural frames (Diaz-Bone and Salais 2011), that have evolved in a historical continuation (Esposito, Leemann, and Imdorf 2019). Conventions enable institutions to achieve the common good by evaluating objects or actions in relation to their contribution to the common good (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006). However, their underlying principles differ, that is, what counts as common good is defined differently in different conventions. For example, if HEIs draw on the market convention in their EE, they value saleable and desired services over other EE outcomes.

Moreover, conventions have a normative (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005) and moral (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006) dimension: they enable individual actors such as HEIs to frame their arguments and legitimate their activities appropriately, provided that they recognise which conventions are relevant in the given context (Diaz-Bone and Salais 2011). In this study, the conventions indicate the underlying principles embedded in the traditions of Finnish education and Finnish EE providers' own historical roots, as well as organisational and societal normative and socio-cultural settings.

Conventions are invoked in situations of uncertainty (Diaz-Bone 2018) or incomplete rules (Bessy 2012) and they support organisations' activities and decisions (Diaz-Bone and Salais 2011) in a public sphere (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006). However, recognising which conventions are relevant is difficult when HEIs operate in a new environment, and do not have earlier experiences of what kind of conventions may apply. Also, the internal and external stakeholders varies and includes teachers at home and at the project location, as well as students and other national and local representatives. Indeed, the legitimization process takes place in the complex set of spatial and logistical dimensions indicating the different socio-cultural, political, historical, and geographical contexts. Therefore, it is advantageous for an actor, such as a HEI, to draw on multiple conventions simultaneously and to alternate flexibly between them.

The plurality of conventions is well recognised in convention theory. To reach a common goal, the actors need to consider various conventions, some of which may be more dominant than others (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006; Diaz-Bone 2018). This plurality is significant especially when the actors try to legitimate their activities in new and uncertain situations involving cooperation with different actors (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006). In EE situations, HEIs must draw on multiple conventions to gain legitimacy for their EE activities internally, in their home institutions, and externally, in their home country and in the project location. Therefore, an EE provider must be able to analyse the different operational contexts and recognise what counts as common good in those contexts, and what the expectations of their stakeholders are (Knutsson and Lindberg 2019), to secure the legitimacy of their EE activity.

We focus specifically on how the Finnish EE providers linked to HEIs interpret the contexts that are relevant to them in their EE activities. Thus, we consider the interviewees' views as interpretations of the legitimization of their EE activities. Our preliminary

analytical framework for interpreting the conventions that steer the actions of the two EE providers is based on the following conventions recognised by previous convention theoretical research (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005; Boltanski and Thévenot 2006): the inspired convention, the domestic convention, the fame convention, the civic convention, the market convention, the industrial convention, and the project-oriented convention.

These seven conventions represent different values and, consequently, different prioritisations for their activities or achievements. For example, the inspired convention favours creative approaches and adventurous experiences. The domestic convention emphasises local trustworthiness, responsibilities, traditions and hierarchy. The fame convention highlights good reputation and public success. In the civic convention, collectiveness is valued and supported by rules, laws, and statutes. In the market convention, competition is important, and therefore desirable goods or services are what matters the most. The industrial convention appreciates efficiency, productivity and functionality, and thus emphasises established standards or other objectives with measurable evidence (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006). Finally, the project-oriented convention comprises networks and short-term activities that bring together different actors working on the same theme. This convention places emphasis on activity and the diversity of projects: the more they differ, the more valuable they are (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005).

## The context of Finnish education export

In the Finnish discussion, EE is understood in a broad sense and is often perceived to cover tangible exports, such as school buildings or equipment, and educational services commissioned and paid for by national authorities and employers in the host countries (EDUFI 2020). However, we focus on those marketing, administrative and teaching activities that are provided for students located in countries other than Finland and paid for by private individuals.<sup>1</sup> It is important to study this type of EE activity that clearly differs from the traditional international activities carried out by Finnish higher education institutions. Those would be characterised by short-term student and staff exchange, and other non-commercial academic collaborative activities based on reciprocity and indirect economic benefits to society (Dobson and Hölttä 2001).

However, like in many other European non-English speaking countries with largely taxpayer-funded higher education systems (Becker 2018; Lundahl et al. 2013), EE has become an important national policy goal in Finland (Jokila, Kallio, and Mikkilä-Erdmann 2019; Schatz 2016). Finland's small size, and language that is often considered difficult, have complicated its path as an education exporting country. Several national EE strategies have been launched (EDUFI 2020; Formin 2018; Minedu 2010, 2013, 2016, 2017) and the laws governing higher education have been revised to allow for EE (Universities Act 558/2009; Universities of Applied Sciences Act 932/2014). Similarly, a governmental cluster programme 'Education Finland' has been established to support Finnish education exporters' collaboration with international customers (EDUFI 2020). Nevertheless, it is not possible to assess accurately the scope of national EE activities for higher education, as for the time being, there are no publicly accessible annual national statistics available on EE activities (Juusola 2020). However, Education Finland has

estimated that the revenue of EE in 2019 was approximately 385 million euros. Admittedly, this sum covers all types of EE activities such as degrees, educational technology and furniture, be they provided by private companies or HEIs (EDUFI 2020).

Finnish HEIs have been relatively slow in implementing EE activities (Juusola 2020; Schatz 2016). Reasons for this have been attributed to non-neoliberal Finnish educational traditions (Schatz 2016), the lack of marketing skills, previous experiences, and motivation to engage in EE (Cai and Kivistö 2013), incoherent operational processes of EE (Lönqvist et al. 2018), and difficulty in recruiting teachers for EE projects (Juusola and Riihämä 2018). Still, for some faculties and educational units, EE has been established in the past decade as a significant form of activity (Juusola 2020).

International marketing of Finnish higher education is widely based on the country's good reputation in education (Schatz 2016). The relationship between EE and Finland's national brand is complex, however (Schatz 2016). Nationally, Finnish education is considered a promoter for democracy and equality (Simpson 2018), whereas international marketing has advertised an exoticised success story of Finnish education (Dervin and Simpson 2019). The underlying principles behind EE activities highlight normative values that reflect the social and cultural processes associated with education and its commercialisation, which, in the long term, may have implications for the education system as a whole.

For HEIs, engaging in EE activities has raised questions about the motivation for diversifying international activity (Dervin and Simpson 2019) and about the adequacy of human resources (Lönqvist et al. 2018). Accordingly, EE activities require Finnish providers to emphasise collaboration with the domestic and foreign stakeholders (Farrugia and Lane 2013), and understand the social, cultural, and political context of the project locations (Healey 2018). Therefore, EE can potentially influence the core duties and values of HEIs, including questions of accessibility and global justice (Kosmützky and Putty 2016).

## Research design, data generation and analysis

Empirical data for this study deals with two EE cases. In Case 1, a Finnish comprehensive school concept is exported overseas by a Finnish EE provider linked to a Finnish university. Case 2 is a fee-based Bachelor degree programme in international business administration, provided by a Finnish University of Applied Sciences (UAS). These two cases were selected because they represent some of the first institutions to carry out relative large-scale EE activities located abroad. The sample cases also represent different kinds of EE activities, and may be guided by different premises. While Case 2 is based on a regular UAS degree programme, Case 1 is a specifically designed concept that follows the Finnish primary and lower secondary education curriculum and is not directly related to the degree programmes offered by the university.

We collected the empirical data in 2018 by semi-structured interviews with three participants in each case. The interviewees were selected based on a snowball sampling and the researchers' prior knowledge, and they represented key personnel of the two EE cases. All interviewees were experts having relatively long experience from working on EE activities. Some of them had worked as teachers in EE implementations, while the others were primarily working with marketing and strategic planning, with some overlapping professional roles. Each interview lasted about one hour on average. The



interviewees were asked to describe the general aims and functions of EE activities in their respective HEIs, and to specify the implementation process in each case.

In preparing the interview template, we applied loosely the theoretical framework. We considered convention theory a potential framework to describe the underlying principles, yet understanding that after the interviews, another kind of analytical approach could be more suitable. Therefore, constructing the theoretical framework and data collection instrument were overlapping processes.

We recorded, transcribed and pseudonymised the interviews, and analysed them using a qualitative content analysis based on abductive logic. This foregrounds the researchers' pre-existing knowledge of the EE phenomenon in terms of theoretical considerations (Elo and Kyngäs 2008), and emerging aspects not included in the theoretical framework or the researchers' prior understanding (Paavola 2004). The process of the qualitative content analysis and abductive reasoning consisted of three stages: preparation, analysis and coding (Elo and Kyngäs 2008). The preparation and analysis stages were overlapping; at this point, we familiarised ourselves with the data by reading the interview transcripts several times, formulating the foci of the analysis and selecting the units of analysis. Here, we were especially interested in the underlying conventions invoked by the interviewees representing Finnish EE providers, and dealing with the marketing, planning and implementation of their EE activities. At the coding stage, we identified similarities and differences in the data and finally synthesised the coded units (theme-based sentences) into five main themes: (1) education for the future generations, (2) competing institution, (3) localisation of education activity, (4) project-oriented activity, and (5) Finnishness of education export.

To ensure the participants' anonymity, and verify the identified themes, we turned the initial findings further into composite vignettes (Hughes and Huby 2004). This approach allows for non-personal presentation of the findings (Hughes and Huby 2004) and enables researchers to build trust with and engage their research participants in the analysis (Miles and Huberman 1994). We considered anonymity particularly important in this study. The Finnish EE community is rather small, and our cases represent nationally well-known EE providers; therefore, a single quotation can potentially be connected to a single interviewee. Based on the six interviews, our vignettes are descriptive narratives combining the theme-specific characteristics of both case examples.

After formulating the five theme-based vignettes, we organised reflection workshops where the five-main themes, theoretical background and the theme-based vignettes were presented to and discussed with the interview participants. During the workshops, we wrote detailed notes about the discussion and composed later on memos, which were sent to the participants for checking and comments. The participants' reflective discussions about the vignettes enabled us to deepen and clarify our understanding of their EE activities, and illuminated the similarities and differences between the two cases. The vignettes can be accessed at link to the supplementary material (vignettes) (can be accessed in the supplementary material repository in the European Journal of Higher Education).

## Findings

In accordance with our two research questions, the main findings of this study are divided into two sections below. First, we introduce the conventions that expand the five themes identified in the qualitative content analysis and deepened in the workshop discussions. After this, we describe the diversity of principles arising from the conventions and look at how they contribute to legitimating EE towards external and internal stakeholders.

### *Plurality of conventions informing the legitimation of education export*

Based on the qualitative content analysis, we argue that our interviewees discussed EE activities through five themes, namely (1) education for the future generations, (2) localisation, (3) competing institution, (4) project-oriented activity and (5) Finnishness of education export. These themes illuminate the diversity of views stated by the interviewees and the plurality of conventions that education exporters draw on in order to legitimate the activity. The corresponding conventions are civic, domestic, market, project-oriented, fame, and industrial convention (Table 1) (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005; Boltanski and Thévenot 2006).

In practice, these five themes overlap, and the prevalence of a given theme in an interview depends on the situation; e.g. whether the EE activity is new or already well established. However, for the sake of systematic analysis, we present each theme separately. As we aimed to highlight the plurality of principles of EE, we have not counted the frequency of these themes in the data nor ranked them by their prevalence.

*Education for the future generations* refers to global responsibility, the possible societal impact of EE at the project location, and the societal benefits for foreign customers/participants that can be reached through education. However, the overall societal impact of EE can be recognised only in the long term. Thus, this theme emphasises also the need for a future-oriented approach when implementing EE.

*The localisation of education export activities* reflects the need to contextualise and adapt Finnish education to the local traditions and regulations. This is especially relevant when designing the marketing practices and when actually delivering the curriculum. Therefore, the EE contents can vary from one EE project to another. The localisation

**Table 1.** Main themes and their relations to conventions (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005; Boltanski and Thévenot 2006).

Theme	Education for the future generation	Localisation of EE activities	Competing institution	Project-oriented action	Finnishness of EE
Convention	Civic	Domestic	Market	Project-oriented	Fame, domestic, industrial
Characteristics in the data	Societal impact, global responsibility	Domestic traditions and socio-cultural context (abroad)	Competition, ability to respond to the clients' need	Being active in networks and participating several projects at the same time	Being recognised in public (fame), Finnish teaching traditions (domestic), effectivity and standards (industrial)

process can also provide a reflective context to re-consider Finnish education practices that are sometimes taken for granted and thus difficult to recognise.

The theme of *competing institution* highlights the new role of Finnish HEIs when they are entering the global knowledge market and seeking to attract international clients. This is recognised also in previous research on Finnish HEIs as novice actors in international EE market (Schatz 2016). The notion of competing institutions also pertains to settings where Finnish HEIs are increasingly emphasising cost-effectiveness when organising their teaching activities and curriculum planning for the clients' needs.

In contrast, the theme of *project-oriented activities* illustrates the fragmented, experiment-based, and temporal nature of EE, where multiple projects can be underway at the same time and cannot be fully planned in advance (cf. Juusola 2020). This poses a challenge to the HEIs and to their clients with regard to relevant anticipation and advance planning (Juusola 2020).

Finland's image as a safe and wealthy country has increased international interest towards Finnish education providers (Schatz 2016). In this context, Finnishness of EE reflects this good reputation. The theme also covers the 'Finnish approach' to pedagogical solutions and the national need to establish internationally recognised and valid standards that would ensure that the exported education is 'sufficiently Finnish'. Also, the Finnishness aspect is linked to the localisation of the EE activities and also to the notion of competing institutions: localisation seeks to satisfy the client's needs without losing the 'Finnishness' of the exported education. Therefore, Finnishness of EE is a contradictory theme that is continuously negotiated. On the one hand, 'Finnishness' refers to the reputational aspects such as the 'PISA miracle' and the stability of the Nordic welfare system (Schatz 2016). On the other hand, it indicates that the pedagogical choices of Finnish HEIs and 'the Finnish way of doing education' must anyway be adapted to local needs, yet ensuring that the provided education remains 'sufficiently Finnish'.

Each theme is intertwined with certain convention(s). The theme of *education for the future generations* stresses the importance of the civic convention where collectiveness is emphasised. In the same vein, the theme of *localisation of EE activities* emphasises the domestic convention where traditions play an important role. These two themes, education for the future generations and localisation of EE activities, draw on a blurred combination of a domestic-civic convention where the domestic value is needed to support the civic aspect to create a trust-based relationship with the foreign clients. This kind of combination is also recognised in previous convention theoretical studies (Daviron and Ponte 2005).

The theme of competing institution stems from the market convention, which emphasises the desirability of the educational products, saleable services, and the ability to respond to the clients' needs. This convention can be regarded as one of the most visible ones. In this line of thinking, EE activities are perceived essentially as a means to bring additional financial resources for HEIs. However, EE activities tend to be project-based by nature and leaning on the project-oriented convention. Then again, the project-oriented convention is also supplemented by the market convention, as responding to the clients' needs may require that there is suitable project personnel available on a short notice. This may have a negative impact on the employees' working conditions.

The theme of *Finnishness of education export* is based on the domestic, fame, and industrial conventions illustrating the multiple and vague ideas of national 'uniqueness',

which is continuously negotiated amongst the providers, clients and customers of EE. This kind of plurality of conventions highlights that different principles can appear in non-fixed sets. Some of the principles can challenge EE providers' legitimation process, because national reputation and 'uniqueness' are affected by various external circumstances, such as global geopolitical changes, which are typically beyond Finnish EE providers' control.

### ***External and internal legitimation***

In our empirical data, experts drew on multiple conventions to legitimate their EE activities (cf. Boltanski and Thévenot 2006). Our analysis also shows variation in how the studied HEIs, or their representatives, describe what is important to them in their EE activities, in relation to different stakeholders and types of EE. We consider this variation to represent the different ways in which EE providers legitimate their activities towards internal and external stakeholders, that is, external and internal legitimation.

In external legitimation, the most relevant aspects are related to the fact that the EE providers must assure the potential customers about the financial and social benefits of the offered educational services, but also seek general approval and convince the wider public about the legitimacy of the EE activities. The former notion confirms the previous findings (He and Wilkins 2018) that HEIs need to consider their attractiveness and societal impact in the host country. The latter aspect reflects the position of Finnish HEIs as part of the domestic public sector financed mainly by tax revenues and subjected to strong governmental steering. The educational promise, i.e. that education can bring along various benefits for students, is also stressed in external legitimation, as is the notion that educated citizens can better contribute to the construction of just societies.

These ideas are at the heart of the theme of education for the future generations in our EE cases. In Case 1, educating the future generations into enlightened citizens to bring about positive changes in their societies was presented as one of the main goals of introducing the Finnish school concept abroad. In contrast, in Case 2, the fee-based degree programme, the notion of global responsibility embedded in this theme was used as a tool to promote the marketing of Finnish EE to international customers. In both cases, this theme, which draws on the civic convention, was used to legitimate EE activities in Finland and abroad. Notably, such legitimation of EE is in line with the legitimation of education in Finland in general, as evidenced by the Universities Act (2009) and Universities of Applied Sciences Act (2014), for example. Thus, EE is an extension of the regular education activities in the home country.

The theme of project-oriented activity contributes to the internal legitimation of EE in the provider institutions. It represents the 'nature' of EE as a fragmented activity that is difficult to predict. This means, e.g. that individual employees are required to be available for EE projects on a short notice. In Case 1 project orientation was considered a common way to organise responsibilities in the HEI. This indicates a broader development where project orientation is typical in certain tasks or job descriptions, and a fundamental element of the entire organisation. Also, one may argue that project orientation has already become a core element in research, while in teaching it is a new approach that mainly concerns EE activities.

The theme of project-oriented activity also includes the expectation that in addition to a financial contribution to the home institution, there is contribution to the teaching activity

at home (Smith 2009). This aspect was considered in the interviews as an opportunity for individuals to reflect critically on their own work and way of doing things when they have been exposed to working in other cultural contexts. In line with He and Wilkins (2018) and Healey (2018), who point out the significance of institutional factors such as facilities and human resources with regard to institutional legitimisation strategies, also our findings indicate that in order to ensure their internal legitimacy, HEI-affiliated EE providers need to consider the teachers' engagement in EE projects and related contribution to institutional expertise in EE activities. Therefore, EE forms a two-way street, where the individual teachers carry their expertise to the host country and in return bring improved understanding to their work in the home country (Juusola and R ih  2018), promoting thereby also education for the future generations. As organisations, HEIs also learn from the EE activities, e.g. by gaining a more realistic understanding about the costs and profits of their educational activities. This can help enhance their organisational practices at home.

In both EE cases, the interviewees emphasised the quality of education, stating that Finnishness is actualised only if the EE project has a clear connection to Finland. This highlights the crucial role of teachers and their Finnish connection, as teachers usually have a more direct contact to the students than the management of HEIs do. It similarly brings forth the need to ensure that the implemented education is, and remains, 'sufficiently Finnish'; given that there are no nationally defined criteria for 'Finnishness'. Thus, in practice, Finnish EE providers have to balance between the localisation demands of Finnish education and the need to ensure that EE activities would still sufficiently follow the Finnish way of designing the curriculum and pedagogical practices. This balancing concerns the strategic management and the individual teachers who work in the field.

Moreover, as our two cases represented different types of EE activities and as they were located in different socio-cultural, political, historical and geographical contexts, their legitimisation efforts called for highlighting those societal benefits that best fit the local discussion in the host country. Therefore, Finnishness is based on contradictory principles, and the terms that determine the relevant characteristics of Finnishness are negotiable and may not be easily resolved.

## Discussion

The plurality of underlying principles (civic, domestic, fame, market, and industrial conventions) identified in the two case examples illustrate the interaction between the EE provider, EE client, as well as the socio-cultural context in Finland and in the project location (cf. Juusola 2020). The plurality of principles also indicates the change of the higher education sector and the activities of HEIs, reflecting the wider managerial trends of organisations moving towards project-oriented and market logics (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005; Deem 2017). This kind of change refers to increasing pressures to make the public sector more efficient by implementing widely business-like approaches to public organisations (Whitley and Gl aser 2014).

Nevertheless, emphasising things like educating the future generations, the importance of the ability to localise the exported education to suit the different socio-cultural contexts, the requirement to ensure Finnishness in Finnish EE activities, and widening the work tasks in the project-oriented direction are equally present in EE activities. This kind of hybrid of economic, political, social and academic goals (Knight 2007)

pertain especially to novice EE activities provided by a HEI that must gain legitimacy for its activities internally (e.g. among staff members) and externally in different geopolitical settings at home and the host country (Healey 2018). Accordingly, higher education is subject to several social and educational demands resulting in diverse interpretations and conflicting meanings of EE activity.

Our findings also illuminate EE as a new activity, partly separated from the HEIs' core duties, and thus not yet fully institutionalised (Juusola 2020). This is due to the Finnish HEIs' fairly short tradition in operating in the global education market. Hence, EE activities do not – yet – have a generally agreed position similar to that of domestic activities, nor is EE explicitly assigned to HEIs in related Finnish legislation.

In consequence, Finnish HEIs may seek national and international legitimacy for their EE activities by emphasising the societal impact and assumed national strengths, such as the country's safety and welfare. These implicitly include the promise that education provides benefits, such as a good position in the labour market, or a good opportunity to continue studies after graduation, to those enrolled in Finnish education. Our analysis also highlights how Finnishness comprises plural conventions that are continuously negotiated due to the lack of robust criteria, but also because of the dominance of the market-domestic convention that requires taking the clients' needs into account.

The plurality of underlying principles identified in the EE projects indicates the HEIs' ability to justify their activities to a wide range of stakeholders, both within the organisation and externally in Finland and in the project locations. Thus, to succeed as an EE provider, the HEI must be able to operate in a complex set of national-local demands (Sidhu and Christie 2015) and establish and maintain trust-based partnerships with various stakeholders (Lönnqvist et al. 2018). Moreover, to ensure that the national and institutional stakeholders agree with establishing commercially motivated EE in the first place, the stakeholders need to be convinced about the benefits and legitimacy of the EE activity (Healey 2018). Hence, it is useful for HEIs to recognise the diversity of principles that guide EE activities: emphasising the seemingly dominant market logic may not be the most sustainable means for gaining comprehensive legitimacy for the EE activity.

However, the underlying principles as well as internal and external legitimation can vary between different EE projects. Based on the workshop discussions, we were able to identify differences in the two case examples. First, as an export product, the school concept (Case 1) differs from the Bachelor degree programme (Case 2), which has implications for the competitive setting and teachers of these programmes. The competitors in Case 1 may be for-profit companies that do not have any connection to the higher education sector, whereas in Case 2, the other providers offering similar 'products', i.e. a Bachelor degree in international business, are more likely to be other HEIs. Therefore, the competition in the international education market' is not taking place on a single arena (Marginson 2006); instead, it covers a multitude of social networks and educational contexts. These contribute to defining what competition, localisation, the notion of Finnishness and the assumed impact of education for the future generations actually mean.

Also, HEIs' practices in different EE projects vary depending on the available human resources. For example, the teachers of the school concept move to work in another country for one to two years, whereas the teachers of the Bachelor programme teach abroad for shorter periods. As a result, the teachers of the Bachelor degree programme

may encounter challenges that differ from those in Case 1, as they need to juggle the work tasks at home and abroad. Similarly, the teachers in Case 1 must commit themselves to working abroad for longer periods of time, which may complicate their personal life. Therefore, while EE can provide teachers and organisations with new learning opportunities (Smith 2009), it also raises questions for HEIs' human resource policies (Juusola and Rähkä 2018), e.g. as regards the well-being of teachers and other employees amidst in many respects uncertain future prospects.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to determine the underlying principles that are used in the legitimisation processes by Finnish EE providers. We also identified variation in external and internal legitimisation concerning EE activities. The study concludes that HEIs must balance between multiple principles when seeking internal and external legitimisation for their EE activities. Thus, the competition-oriented market convention, often cited as the driving force behind EE (Dervin and Simpson 2019) and knowledge-based economy (Sum and Jessop 2013), is not the only underlying principle that is used to legitimate the EE activities.

This study also shows that internal legitimisation takes place e.g. by engaging the internal stakeholders, such as teachers, in the EE activities. This is necessary because the organisations need to have sufficient human resources for their EE operations (Juusola and Rähkä 2018). External legitimisation can take, e.g. the form of assuring the external stakeholders, such as national policy-makers or other HEIs, about the long-term benefits brought by EE activities. External legitimisation is relevant both in Finland and abroad. It emphasises the comparability of educational solutions at home and at the host country, and points out social responsibility as an important underlying value when exporting Finnish education abroad (see also Healey 2018).

The findings of this study must be considered in light of some limitations. This study does not address the relationship between EE and research activities at HEIs. However, previous research (Juusola and Rähkä 2018) indicates that in the university context, where individual research productivity is valued, people may perceive that engaging in EE activities reduce their time available for research and thus hinder their career advancement. From an organisational perspective, EE may bring new resources to the HEIs, cross-subsidising research and teaching in the home country. However, the costs of setting up, running, and marketing EE activities may also eat up its profits (Marginson 2006). In the Finnish context, the repatriated income is presumably still small, so no conclusions can be drawn in this regard; rather, it seems that EE and research are kept somewhat separate from each other at universities. This pre-occupation with research is less evident in the UAS sector, and thus the different types of HEIs may differ on this account.

EE is one form of international and commercial education activities taking shape as part of broader social, cultural and geopolitical developments. At the same time, the legitimacy of EE activities is influenced by the goals that HEIs themselves want to achieve with EE, and the forms of EE activity are constantly changing. Compared to the domestic education market, EE is more vulnerable to external, predictable and

unpredictable events that are not, or are only partially, under the control of HEIs or states. While we can assume that a global need for high-quality education will sustain, geopolitical situations are changing, and current EE activities may require re-establishment of legitimation. A further study would be needed to assess the long-term effects of the ongoing pandemic as well as other global and regional crises, and explore whether there are other significant factors, such as safety or environmental awareness, that HEIs should consider now and in the future to maintain the internal and external legitimacy of their activities.

## Note

1. According to the Universities Act (558/2009) and Universities of Applied Sciences Act (932/2014) Finnish HEIs are obliged to collect tuition fees minimum of 1500 euros annually from students who are participating in bachelor's or master's degree education provided in a foreign language (i.e. in a language other than Finnish or Swedish) and who are not citizens of the European Union (EU) or the European Economic Area (EEA).

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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