

EVENT REPORT

MaxiPAC Symposium Event

Theme: Best Practices for Language Valorization in Finnish Higher Education

Organizer: University of Lapland

Location: Arctic Centre – University of Lapland
Pohjoisranta 4, 96200 Rovaniemi, Finland

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Compiled by

Ayonghe Akonwi Nebasifu & Yeasmin Nafisa

with content contributions from Working Group Facilitators in the MaxiPAC Symposium 2021

A. INTRODUCTION

This year 2021, the University of Lapland as a partner to the MaxiPAC.EU project organized an event on Wednesday the 27th of October, as part of its task to further activities of outcome 4 “how to deal with languages”. Going by the Bologna Declaration (1999), Universities and Universities of Applied Sciences have the autonomy to valorize the qualifications and competences acquired elsewhere according to their own standards. The Lisbon Recognition Convention (1997) further calls for EU countries to develop procedures to assess whether refugees and displaced persons fulfil the relevant requirements to access Higher Education or employment activities, even when the qualifications cannot be proven through documentary evidence.

However, third country nationals (TCN) and those in refugee like situations who travel to Europe face challenges such as: when their certificates are not recognized in the EU making them unable to work or study; inadequate access to e-services and language support services, to name a few. In some cases, there are challenges dealing with University programme requirements, learning procedures, and employment needs.

To address the above problem, MaxiPAC (Maximizing Previously Acquired Competences) University of Lapland began planning for a potential event already by December 2020. And between early January and late May 2021, a Steering Committee was already on the way, in collaboration with other Finnish higher education institutions such as: the SIMHE Services at the University of Helsinki; the University of Oulu Graduate School; the INTEGRA project at Jyväskylä University; the SIMHE Services at Jyväskylä University; Tampere University of Applied Sciences; and the Attract Lappi Project at the Arctic Centre of the University of Lapland, in an attempt to plan the organization of a symposium. Cooperation was also developed with policymakers from the Ministry of Education and Culture, and EDUFI (Finnish National Agency for Education) which acts as Finland’s national ENIC-NARIC.

At this point, there was general interest to involve a variety of participants. The Committee aimed at bringing together policy-makers, entrepreneurs, students, teachers, and researchers, and persons of other professions in Higher Education, to participate physically in a Symposium. The goal of the symposium was to contribute ideas towards “*best practices for language valorization in Finnish Higher Education*”. We ask the question, how can third country nationals (TCNs) and persons in refugee like situations gain better access to Higher Education and employment in Finland?

B. EVENT ORGANIZATION

Our target was organizing a “physical event” with 5 international guest participants and 50 national guest participants, with the exclusion of counting persons from the University of Lapland. Overarchingly, we recorded 53 national participants and 6 international participants physically present in the event. It was a challenge considering the varied perceptions about COVID-19, limited space for flexibility in the organization process, frequent changes on practical requirements for having physical events. In particular, even though during the summer break (the month of June and July), the Finnish government had already loosened some of its restrictions with increasing the legally accepted number of persons in any physical gatherings from 20 to 50. This came as good news to us, although many of our national invitees stayed unconvinced by the numbers and to what extent certain COVID safety procedures might be covered. Also, the question of inclusion came up as very important high-profile guests preferred the online medium of participation.

So, to include all the above aspects considered in our planning of the event, we focused on its “physical organization” while giving space for online inputs in cases where a participant had relevant information to share or where an individual who had previously registered as a physical participant couldn’t attend in-person due to other important or necessary reasons. In this case, only persons who actually made it to the physical rooms scheduled for the event were counted.

We also opted for parallel working groups (WG) chaired by facilitators in the collaborative institutions who are very much experienced or familiar with the related field of skill recognition, migrant education, student admissions, internationalization services, and in particular, language valorization. Below, is an illustration of the official symposium programme we followed on 27.10.2021, although discussions continued in the late hours of the day during dinner with our international guests.

(Times are GMT +2)

11:00-11:15: Anna Boucher (Associate Professor & Global Migration expert, University of Sydney)

11:30-12:30: Coffee & snacks/lunch

12:30-12:35: Welcome words by Nafisa Yeasmin (Coordinator, Arctic Migration Team - Arctic Centre)

12:35-12:50: Keynote by Kaisu-Maria Piironen (Senior Advisor, Ministry of Education & Culture)

12:50-13:05: Keynote by Salla Lauerma (Adviser, Recognition of Qualifications, Finnish National Agency for Education)

13:05-13:15: Question/answer

13:20-14:20: Group discussions / in-room discussions with guests, Md. Waliul Hasanat (Professor, Law School, Khulna University, Bangladesh), Prof. Jan Brzozowski (Cracow University of Economics, Poland) and Lara Wilhelmine Hoffmann (PhD Candidate, University of Akureyri)

14:20-15:00: Sharing/discussion of results from working groups + break

15:00-15:20: Patricia Staaf (Director, Centre for Teaching and Learning, Malmoe University)

15:20-15:40: Francesca Costero (Migration expert, Social Cohesion and International Cooperation Sector, ENAIP Piemonte, Italy)

15:40-16:00: Nina Staal (Programme Coordinator, UN International Organization for Migration, Netherlands)

16:00-16:20: Fatou Ndiaye (Chief of Mission, UN International Organization for Migration, Norway)

16:20-16:40: Question/answer

16:40-17:00: Concluding words by the MaxiPAC Project Coordinator + Visit to Arktikum Museum

The parallel working groups were organised physically with the following topics or themes of discussion:

Group 1: “how to deal with languages”, Facilitator Mervi Kastari (Language instructor, Tampere University of Applied Sciences – TAMK and the University of Tampere)

WG1 focused on practicalities for learning guidance and Finnish language teaching. Participants were asked to share their experiences, challenges of learning. How can learning procedures and language support be made better for TCNs/Refugees?

Group 2: “University Modalities and organisation aspects”, Facilitators Prof. Jouko Miettunen (Vice-Dean, University of Oulu Graduate School) and Ulla Alanko (Solution Designer, International Mobility Services/ Academic Affairs, University of Oulu)

WG2 discussed organization aspects in higher education: enrolment, student services, facilities services, education etc, general requirements for admitting TCNs/Refugees, guidance support and procedures in the admission process – with examples from the University of Oulu Graduate school. Participants were asked to share their opinions about University admission procedures. What kind of guidance support do applicants (TCNs/Refugees) receive when applying for a degree programme and when they have admission to University? What can be made better in the admission process?

Group 3: “e-Learning support”, Facilitator Tuija Lehtonen (INTEGRA Project Coordinator, the University of Jyväskylä)

WG3 discussed the various means of e-Learning support for the integration of TCNs, with examples from the INTEGRA Project. Participants were asked to share their experiences and challenges about access to online information and the use of online learning procedures. How can the integration of TCNs/Refugees be made better through e-Learning support? What ideas can be made to work better?

Group 4: “Employment support”, Facilitator Mäki-Petäjä Tiina (Attract Lapland Project Coordinator, Arctic Centre)

WG4 addressed the possibilities for entrepreneurship and employment among immigrants in Finland. Participants were asked to share their experiences and challenges when finding a job, creating a business, or finding information related to job vacancies that suit their previous qualifications. Recommend ideas on how to help TCNs/Refugees get better access to places of work. What ideas can Universities consider in enhancing employment support for student immigrants?

Group 5: “How to implement the procedure in Universities?”, Facilitator Marita Häkkinen (SIMHE Coordinator, University of Jyväskylä)

WG5 discussed the various ways to help TCNs/Refugees with previous qualifications get better access to higher education, training, and employment – with examples from the SIMHE services. Participants were asked to share their experiences and challenges about finding a job, getting training, and admission in higher education. What procedures need to be improved? In what ways can Universities implement procedures for immigrants to have better access to higher education, training, and employment?

Group 6: “how to deal with languages”, Facilitator Rebekka Nylund & Krista Heikkilä (Specialist, SIMHE Services, University of Helsinki)

WG6 focused on practicalities for learning guidance and Finnish language teaching. Participants were asked to share their experiences and challenges of learning. How can learning procedures and language support be made better for TCNs/Refugees?

C. RESULTS IN SUMMARY

Beginning with input from our international guests and keynote speakers, this was very much diverse with varied opinions and perspectives on dealing with the symposium's main theme. It was recognized that, any activity to promote or implement some procedure for skill recognition and also in the area of language valorization requires diverse inputs, a broad understanding of policy perspectives, learning from what is happening elsewhere, and so on. In the Australian case, for instance, recommendations were made during the symposium from a policy perspective of 1) immigration selection, 2) welfare and training policy, and 3) community-based solutions. In Australia, for skilled categories of applicants, skills assessment by an accrediting body is required before an individual can apply for immigration – and be successfully accepted. When compared to the EU's model on the use of skilled immigration policy, the Australian government has over the past years focused on high levels of language selection criteria in its immigration policy with economic participation intrinsically linked to English language proficiency. For example, in 2015- 2017, Australia took a booster selection of Syrian refugees and this group had educational and professional rankings 10% higher than the standard refugee intake. Their employment outcomes were accordingly elevated.

Australia is also allowing businesses to sponsor additional refugee flows in addition to the government's allocated quota, though there is the question of whether this is morally appropriate. It was suggested that government support will be important in assisting refugees and asylum seekers with basic living costs, which are necessary precursors to engagement in the labour market. Further, if native language skills are not already possessed, such welfare support will be essential before there can be a realistic expectation of engagement in the labour market, especially at the higher levels. It was also discussed that, governments could encourage the employment of refugees and asylum seekers in more indirect ways, such as through social enterprise projects. Australia has a proposed policy strategy to provide Settlement Services to assist new refugees in getting work, alongside the standard services provided through the welfare agency, Centrelink.

Having two of our international guest speakers from the UN International Organization for Migration (IOM) was a great opportunity to learn about the case in the Netherlands and Norway. In the Netherlands, several initiatives and projects are being conducted under the auspices and support of the IOM with one of its focus areas being human development resettlement programmes. For example, the Connecting Diaspora for Development (CD4D2) project funded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs since coming into operation in 2016 has been engaging professionals (according to their cultural and linguistic affinities with their countries of origin) with a migration background who want to make their knowledge and experience available to the diaspora, through temporary assignments, to promote capacity-building needs in the sectors of education, agriculture and rural development, health care, justice and the rule of law targeting countries like Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Iraq, Sierra Leone, and the Federal Republic of Somalia/Somaliland.

In Norway, similar initiatives are being followed. IOM Norway assists with resettlement, family reunification, cultural orientation for Norway-bound refugees and receiving municipalities, and other migration related issues. To boost migrant training and integration, IOM Norway assists in organizing pre-departure orientation courses for Norway-bound UN quota refugees (on site and online) in the refugees first country of asylum. IOM Norway also extends its tasks at the municipal level through the organizing of land information seminars to municipal staff in resettling municipalities. Overarchingly, what seemed motivating in the IOM's activities, is its approach of working with already well settled and experienced migrants who have knowledge of the local language in the host country (e.g. the Netherlands and Norway) with the aim to assist newly arrived migrants through resettlement programmes.

The above approach is already being applied at the University of Malmo in Sweden through the Centre for Teaching and Learning, where in, individuals who have come from elsewhere than Sweden, and having integrated already, are giving that opportunity to be employed and involved in training and teaching the newly enrolled migrants especially where they have adequate knowledge about the language of the migrant student's country of origin and the language of the host country. This also presents a potential in the IOM as a medium through which various institutions of higher education can push forward some of the ideas and proposals for a procedure for skill/language valorization, when taking into consideration the IOM's fundamental role of providing support and advice to governments and migrants through representation in 173 countries.

In the case of Finland, we gathered some inputs from policy-makers acting as Advisers in the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture, and EDUFI (the Finnish National Agency for Education). Both organizations are crucial in promoting best practices for language valorization in higher education. It was understood that the internationalization of higher education embedded in one of the Ministries action plan and priorities. The Ministry allocates funding based on certain University areas of educational profiling which in many cases, are accredited for funding where/when it matches with the Ministry's action plan and priority areas of interest. Ministerial funding to Universities and Universities of Applied Sciences may be channelled through various schemes and projects coordinated or assessed by EDUFI to promote the inclusion of immigrants in higher education. EDUFI functions as an ENIC-NARIC, and through cooperation with Finnish institutions of higher education, EDUFI might be referred to provide a basis for recognition of one's previously acquired skills where individuals, TCNs, and persons in refugee situations do not have sufficient evidence or certificates of their previous skills.

Here, we illustrate the key results reported from the working groups in chronological order of the WG number:

WG 1: Tampere University of Applied Sciences – TAMK and the University of Tampere

“Many students of refugee or TCN background need support in language learning, but also in achieving academic and society skills such as digital skills. They also often need a lot of other kinds of support, especially that of someone who believes in them and their capabilities. Almost always the teachers’ resources are limited and those teachers who are willing end up doing volunteer work at work. This does not produce a sustainable situation. At the same time, the healthcare and wellbeing services are very limited for the third country students. So, the question they ask often is if they do belong here in Finland and the University. If the above mentioned support s provided, the students can put the effort to learn a new language. There is still a challenge as Finnish language seems to be important anywhere but not in study programs where it has very little room for usage” (Symposium data, 2021).

WG2: The University of Oulu

“University of Oulu does not have specific requirements for admitting TCNs/Refugees. Participants were mostly pleased with the general support they receive at University. There were comments about the short application periods with regards to the Finnish Immigration Services and its lengthy time for processing student permit applications. Students need more information when starting their studies especially in the areas of housing and student discounts. It was also observed that the online platform studyinfo.fi was a good portal for newly admitted students and applicants due to its free of charge basis and the availability of information made online with easy access” (Symposium data, 2021).

WG3: INTEGRA Project, the University of Jyväskylä

“In this context E-learning= Distance learning; Participants’ backgrounds have effect: Inner motivation > clear and realistic aims; Self-study skills; Self-regulation; Digital skills–need of English when learning and using new applications; Digital equipment, internet connection etc.; Teachers’ skills as well; Pedagogical skills; new pedagogical skills needed (in-service training, teacher education etc.); Digital skills and knowledge of new applications etc need to be updated; Knowledge of the participants” needs, backgrounds, situation etc. is crucial when choosing and planning e-learning solutions. Good applications materials online: Visual presentation of the course / game in the beginning; Extremely visual, not much text; Clear tasks and exercise types not too complicated; Gamification / elements of games; The final result of tasks need to be usable also outside the learning context in the real world; General, useful web sites could have videos visualization) with translated texts e.g. employment office, health care; Special group refugees asylum seekers > for them mobile solutions related to real life needs e.g. How to fill in crucial forms. NOTE! The form of information has changed. We use mobile phones for everything and especially show, share and use the visual information of it. This should be considered when planning materials for the target group...” (Symposium data, 2021).

WG4: Attract Lapland Project Coordinator, Arctic Centre

What kind of experiences/challenges there are when finding a job/starting a business/working as a freelancer/light entrepreneur/job vacancy, that suit their previous qualifications?

“Immigrants in Finland need to have B (independent user) or even C level (proficient user) Finnish language skills, if they expect find work that would match with their previously acquired skills, competences and expertise. This was experienced when trying to find employment with university or university of applied sciences degree, when starting a business, and among day care workers. In customer service positions basic level of Finnish language might be enough. On the contrary there are some jobs where English is sufficient as a working language e.g. in tourism sector and in specialist organizations. The lack of Finnish language skills not only makes it difficult for immigrants to find work matching their previous qualifications but also makes it hard to being part of the community and getting the latest information” (Symposium data, 2021).

How to help TCNs/Refugees get better access to places of work?

“TCNs and refugees can gain better access to places of work by doing internships while studying. Internships are seen as a great way to improve person’s Finnish language skills, and to learn about Finnish culture and working life. Immigrants benefit from personal guidance related to working life during their studies. In general school were seen to lack resources to personalize studies according to student’s previous skills and competences. Apprenticeships contracts were seen as a good way to working life as well. Policy measures to expand labor market access to TCNs/refugees could be achieved by reducing the bureaucracy related to employing and entrepreneurship, and also making English as one of the official languages. At regional level in Lapland policy measures are taken by Centre for economic development, transport and the environment (ELY-center), which is creating Immigration Strategy of Lapland. ELY works towards changing the attitudes of employers to be more accepting and provides Finnish language training for companies and employees. Other suggested measures were improvement of employment and economic development services (TE office) integration training. In Lapland there are foundations like EDURO, which operate as a link between integration training and working life and/or studies. EDURO offers personal guidance, language training, recognition of immigrant’s previously acquired skills while working” (Symposium data, 2021).

What ideas can universities consider in enhancing employment support for student immigrants?

“Universities could consider measures towards language equality making all written materials and meetings available in English in the first place. There could be more study programs and degrees available in English. Immigrant students could have an appointed person in university that would help them with working life matters e.g. paper work and also would work as a cultural guide to working life, sharing silent knowledge and cultural codes of Finnish working life. Other suggested ideas were: universities creating training programs together with employers and business owners, and universities to work more closely with foundations and education centers in offering work life training to student immigrants” (Symposium data, 2021).

WG5: SIMHE Services, University of Jyväskylä

“Guidance and other support services offered for migrants and refugees should be interactive and realistic to provide suitable and meaningful options that take into account the Counsellor’s perspective on student needs and the needs of students, including language skills, goals, and resources. Orientation to the Finnish society, education system, employment market, and so on, must be offered and even required at very early stage of arrival. Support services must be planned and organized in cooperation between different stakeholders” (Symposium data, 2021).

WG6: SIMHE Services, University of Helsinki

Challenges of learning:

“There's a big difference between the spoken language and the written language. Language courses focus on the written language and the spoken language expressions are not reviewed. Learning how the words are pronounced is challenging and it does not seem to have enough time for this in language courses. It is a challenge to combine language studies and other life/other studies. And how to finance living during the language studies. Lack of language awareness at the university and society. International students or other people arriving in Finland do not realize how important Finnish language skills are in terms of employment, because it is possible to cope with English at the university and the rest of society. In integration training, person is able to reach language skills reach to level B.1 at least in theory. However, in academic studies and working life required language skills are at least B.2 level” (Symposium data, 2021).

Where do you find language studies to reach necessary level required at the academic studies? If universities do not take responsibility for this, who would? After the integration training, people need more training , how should their proceed?

“There are many international talents in Finland who are unable to continue or supplement their studies in Finland. Language skills and learning skills are closely linked. There are cultural differences in academic study skills...” (Symposium data, 2021).

How can learning procedures and language support be made better for TCNs/Refugees

“Integration training should include a “HOPS” (personal learning plan) for language studies. It should be made possible that for international students to study Finnish/Swedish one or two years after graduation. Better integration of language studies and studies in the field of expertise. Even domestic students learn the sectoral vocabulary/science-specific language during their studies. Combining of language studies to the learner's own everyday life and field of expertise should be stronger. If there would be a special place in curriculum for language studies it would be easier to find the time study them...” (Symposium data, 2021).

D. CONCLUSIONS

Overall, the symposium recognized that though there exist language-based procedures for immigrants when it comes to integration and also that of student admissions in general, many Finnish Universities and Universities of Applied Sciences do not have “autonomous procedures” for language valorization specific to TCNs and refugees. There however exist in Finnish Universities, suitable mechanisms for general support, applied in line with national policies for inclusive education. Going by inputs from the symposium, the topic of language valorization is indeed complex, and does require not a single approach, but several approaches – inclusive of a broader understanding of policy measures and perspectives in countries elsewhere than Finland. Within Finland, this complexity can best be addressed with the involvement of several stakeholders, and not simply the task of higher education sectors only. Much is needed in terms of the bureaucracy process, at the Ministerial level, the ENIC-NARIC level, the Finnish Welfare Service operators, and also the Finnish Immigration Service when it comes to prioritizing activities/ action plans for skill valorization among TCNs and refugees. Also, the notion of flexibility with respect to the MaxiPAC procedure was debated with questions about available resources, the need for less costly options to implement the procedure, and also suggestions for a case-by-case perspective on the procedure. Participants also shared the general view that digital skill is becoming an essential element for language valorization processes with much to be done in this context. Increased cooperation between Universities and Universities of Applied Sciences, as well as, between the Finnish higher education sector and international policy-related organizations as the IOM (and others) will also be a useful medium for prioritizing and realizing the relevant needs of TCNs and refugees in language valorization practices.