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International networking at the top of Europe

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Lapland's location at the top of Europe provides good opportunities for international activities. Much has been done over the years, but high-quality operations require continuous development and evaluation.

Central to this is the region's desire and ability to develop cross-border business, cultural life and internationality. Cross-border co-operation works quite well and is constantly evolving, but the neighboring markets are not always enough, not for large-scale industry, but also for tourism and the SME sector.

Lapland UAS, together with partner universities in the Arctic region play a central role in the development of the cross-border cooperation by being a hub of digital knowledge networks (Hansen et.al. 2021). This article discusses the importance of internationalization of universities to promote the business development of the High North.

Northern expertise

Operating in an international environment is a lifeline and competitive advantage for the region. Success is based on a strong position and expertise in international issues on the market. According to the Ministry of Education and Culture, all higher education institutions must invest in internationalization and this must apply to both students and staff. Over the years, business education at Lapland UA Shas focused especially on international business, on bachelor level and in education leading to a master's degree.

To support the internationalization of the region, education is developed in co-operation with working life at the provincial level, both as degree-oriented and as commissioned and personnel

training. In addition, Lapland University of Applied Sciences has a regional development responsibility and should play a key role in promoting the internationalization of the entire northern area of operation.

International university partnerships have been built to develop our own expertise and networking. It is also important to work in RD&I projects that promote both business know-how and entrepreneurship as well as cultural activities.

Exports and know-how from the new pulp giant of Metsä Fibre, the bioproduct mill, will bring a significant boost to the economic life of Northern Finland. The investment has received a lot of attention regionally and nationally but also internationally. Recently, there has also been a wide-ranging debate about what else our Arctic operating environment needs. I would emphasize the importance of exports in maintaining our northern well-being. Export revenues are needed to finance service production such as social and health services, education, and land and railways to take care of the transport of people and goods in our long country, not to mention shipping lanes and air transport. I also want to emphasize the importance of RD&I activities and further processing. There are many companies in Finland which are successfully engaged in international trade, but there is room for more. In northern Finland in particular, there is room for new and innovative business activities, from further processing and internationally-minded startups to the production of creative industries, of which there are already good examples. Thanks to digitalization, high-quality education and EU funding, Lapland has opened up to cross-border cooperation.

During the Covid19, there has been a downturn, e.g. in tourism, but also new types of networks and ecosystems are constantly evolving with both immediate neighbors and more distant partners. Marketing skills of Finns are still criticized, and with good reason we can say that we have a lot to learn from the Swedes, for example. Building a brand requires not only knowledge, but also will and attitude, as well as networking. Our skills must be constantly developed. For years, Lapland UAS has invested in RD&I activities together with regional and international actors. Training is constantly updated to meet the challenges of working life. A good example is the Master School, which has been developed together with service and industry organizations in the region. The new curriculum for the online English-language Digital Business Management focuses on internationalization and leadership skills in a digital operating environment, not forgetting sustainable development, marketing and communication. During their education, students from all over Finland and the world, can

network with talents from different cultural backgrounds and at the same time develop their own and their employer's readiness to face the future. Exports and the income from them are essential for running RD&I and other activities, and Lapland UAS wants to play its part in keeping the country and the region on the world map.

Digital networking

There are several definitions for networking. Kastle and Steen (2014, 103) describe the network as a set of things or actors (people, firms, regions, computers, and so on). According to Oxford dictionaries (2016), a network can be seen as “the action or process of interacting with others to exchange information and develop professional or social contacts”. On the other hand, “it means the linking of computers to allow them to operate interactively”.

Personal networking is defined as “a set of human contacts known to an individual, with whom that individual would expect to interact at intervals to support a given set of activities. Having a strong personal network requires being connected to a network of resources for mutual development and growth” (Casciaro et.al 2016).

Effective knowledge networks are composed of unique individuals working on common challenges, together for a discrete period of time before the network shifts its focus again. The network enables infinite combinations between unique nodes (Jarche 2019).

Kagan (2021) states that networking usually takes place in informal social setting. It is the exchange of information and ideas among people with a common profession or special interest. Networking can help you identify opportunities for collaboration, strategic joint ventures, partnerships, and new areas to expand your business.

Networking, among others, is a competence, university students need to learn during their education, writes Barnard-Bahn (2021). He argues, that in a job interview, you are not only asked what kind of skills you have but also, what kind of networks do you have. Bridge project is a great way to learn to operate in an international environment with students and firms from another culture. Barnard-Bahn writes (2021) that each of us has preferences in working and communication styles, and usually there are some people that we have greater difficulty working with than others. The earlier you can identify the specific personality characteristics that are challenging for you, the more time you have to develop strategies for working effectively with them.

International education

It is important that co-operation takes place across borders in the High North, and in accordance with its strategy, Lapland UAS has been active in developing Arctic co-operation and border expertise for several years.

Personally, I have been working at the Kemi-Tornio/Lapland UAS since the start in 1992. From the beginning, we started to build the network with several universities in the Central Europe and in North-West Russia. In all the years, I have been actively planning, implementing and coordinating out international business education. In the second part of 1990's, we then started two non-degree and two bachelor programmes.

In 1995, the first non-degree Gateway Education started. Tuition was given in English and it orientated to work and make business in multicultural environments. Training was aimed for students and professionals from the EU countries, other European countries, Russia and from Finland. The 36 ECTS course prepared to work in cross-cultural environment by giving basics of making business between East and West. A study trip to Murmansk was included. It is great to see, that the students from all over Europe still keep in touch and meet regularly. Another non-degree programme called Euro-Arctic Tourism was run twice (Study Guide 1998 – 1999. Kemi Tornio Polytechnic).

At the same time, the Mayor of Haparanda suggested, if we could start a degree programme combining the ICT and business skills. The programme started in 1996 and name was Euro System Architect, ESA (later Business Information Technology, BIT). On the first two courses students were from Finland and Sweden, and the courses were taught in Swedish or English. We also started to plan an international business bachelor programme. The name in the beginning was Euro Economic Education, EEE, later Business Management, BM. The students were mainly from Finland and Sweden but we got first students also from Russia and China. Later these two bachelor programmes received students from all over the world.

The online Master programme in International Business Management, IBM started in 1997. Thanks to the successful, long-term capacity building we were ready to meet the challenges as we had competent PhD level teachers, and also international teachers living in the region. In addition, due to our network, we employed part-time lecturers from our partner universities in the Netherlands and Austria, among others. During the 14 years, we have constantly developed

the programme to meet the needs of future working life. Since 2021 we have a completely new curriculum and name, Digital Business Management.

The design of curricula has from the start been made in close cooperation with the local enterprises and the international partner universities. In addition, the lecturers have actively followed the trends and weak signals. In my mind, this has resulted in the modern and updated curricula which have been one-step-ahead of most other business programmes. Lapland UAS has been a forerunner in online learning which has made it possible to work with students and universities all over the world. As all students have long working experience from different industries, they also have contributed to the development of the programme.

In addition to my work as a principal lecturer and coordinator of the business Bachelor and Master programmes, I have actively been involved in several international projects, mainly financed by EU. My main focus has since late 1990's has been in projects which involve students and firms. Recent examples are a Startup project for Master students with partners from Germany and Northern Ireland, and KolarcticBridge, where more than 200 Finnish, Norwegian and Russian student have in mixed teams develop services and business models of firms in the three countries using the Creative Steps model (Arkko-Sukkonen et.al. 2018). In this way I have tried to contribute to the development of students' competences they need to become future-ready, such as internationalization, digital transformation, diversity management, team-work, communication, networking, and strategic thinking. Also, the case companies get creative ideas on how to develop their business models.

In our Master programme, we have used competence-based and collaborative learning methods. Kumari & al (2019) argue that to promote co-creation for social innovation, HEI's generally should actively encourage collaborative learning tools that focus on open platforms for collective action and systemic change that help them to engage with society and strengthen their collaboration with social actors. Different activities such as mutual learning and knowledge diffusion using a transdisciplinary approach, technology-based learning and collaboration, and relational transformation are key enablers that can promote social innovation. The students also learn from each other during the team work.

Conclusion

Today, networking between individuals and organizations more often takes place digitally. For small firms it is a good way to expand the partnerships and to find new customers. We're living in a digital world and many firms are missing or don't have so good skills or resources. Universities play an important role locally but cross-border cooperation is needed.

Lapland UAS is an active player in international projects such as Erasmus, Interreg and Kolarctic, and it could take a key role in the design of an Arctic knowledge network together with universities and public and private organizations including dissemination of the outcomes all over the world. My wish is that also in future, Lapland UAS, together with partners, will look to the future and support cross-border projects and educational programmes where the young generation learns about the opportunities of the European Arctic. Lapland UAS has a regional development responsibility and should play a key role in promoting the marketing and export skills, and internationalization of the entire Northern business context. Because the future is in the North.

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