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# Why Finland and Norway still shun university tuition fees ? even for international students

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OPINION: A high level of education is beneficial for all of society, so individual human beings should not have to pay for it, argues Professor Jussi Välimaa.

All the Nordic countries -- Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden -- provide higher education free of charge for their own citizens and, until recently, international students have been able to study free too. But in 2006, Denmark introduced tuition fees for international students coming from outside the European Union and European Economic Area. In 2011, Sweden followed suit. Now only Finland, Norway, Iceland and Germany do not collect tuition fees from international students.

Despite some moves to introduce fees, all these countries remain real exceptions in a world where international students are often a lucrative source of income for universities.

In Finland, the issue reared its head again last year when [the government](#) [9] proposed that universities would be able to introduce fees for international students coming from outside the EU after 2016. After a lively public debate, in January the Finnish government [decided not to go ahead with the proposals](#) [10].

Researcher Leasa Weimer's [recent study](#) [11] concluded that the main actors opposing tuition fees were the powerful Finnish student organisations. They feared that collecting tuition fees from international students would open the gate to tuition fee reform for national students as well.

Those students, politicians and academics resisting tuition fees also said that a tuition-free system supports international social justice by giving students from developing countries an opportunity to participate in higher education.

They also argued that the introduction of tuition fees would undermine Finnish internationalisation efforts as it would be likely to lead to a significant decrease in the number of international students – as happened in Denmark and Sweden after the introduction of tuition fees there. In Sweden the drop was 80% [during the two years](#) [12] following the introduction of fees.

## New source of revenue

On the other side of the debate, the promoters of tuition fees – which include university managers, the ministry of education and business representatives – advocated a neo-liberal stance on education as a private good. They argued that competition for international students would enhance the quality of teaching and make Finnish universities more competitive in the international marketplace.

They also pointed out that it was unfair for Finnish taxpayers to pay for the education of international migrants' coming to Finland where they also enjoy good social benefits. This argument has gained traction as a populist political view in Finland. Promoters also claimed that international students would be a new

source of revenue for universities.

In November, Norway's [government backed down](#) [13] from a [proposal to introduce fees](#) [14]. The main arguments against the reform were quite similar to those aired in Finland: student organisations, in particular, feared a “domino effect” by which tuition fees for international students would be the first step in introducing them for domestic students.

The rectors of Northern universities and university colleges – some of which are geographically remote – [argued](#) [15] that they would lose many international students, especially Chinese and Russian students, if they started charging tuition fees.

According to Agnete Vabo at the Norwegian Institute for Studies in Higher Education and Research, the leaders of the most prestigious universities in Norway also argued that tuition fees would mean a great loss in terms of maintaining the diversity and quality of the international student population. In a globalised world this would be very problematic.

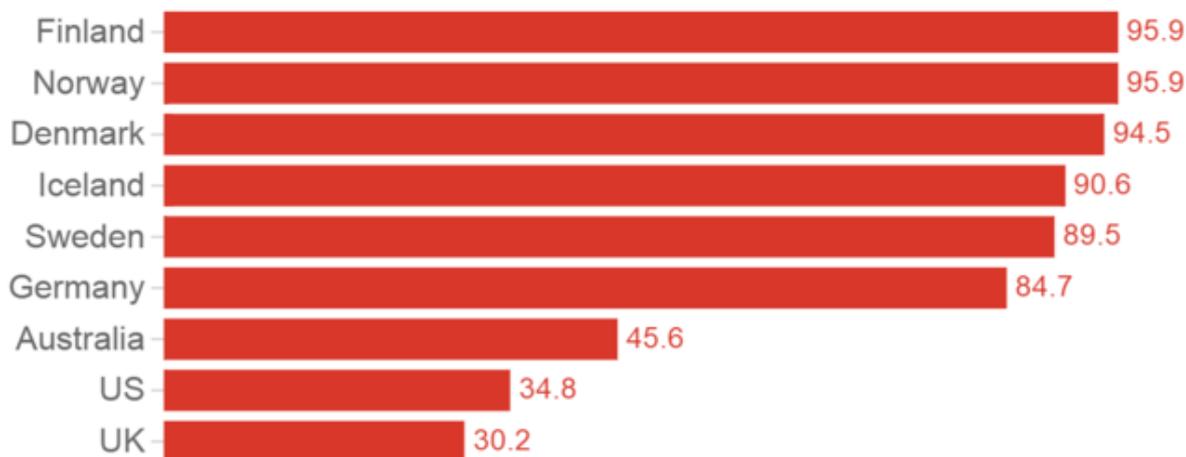
### Equality key in Nordic model

We know that education is expensive everywhere – including in Nordic countries – and that someone has to pay for it. The crucial question is who. But to answer this, it is important to pay attention to the differences between the societal goals and social dynamics of higher education in Nordic countries and countries which charge university tuition fees, such as the UK, US or Australia.

The Nordic higher education systems are almost entirely publicly funded. According to [OECD Education at a Glance 2014](#) [16] the proportion of public funding varies between just under 90 per cent in Sweden and 96 per cent in Norway and Finland, whereas in England only 30 per cent of the costs of higher education are paid by the public purse.

## Proportion of university funding from public expenditure

% public investment in tertiary institutions, 2011



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Data: Education at a Glance 2014: OECD Indicators [17][CC BY](#)

[18]

All Nordic countries also have a strong tradition of equality, which in education translates into offering equal educational opportunities for all citizens. The Nordic countries have policies to encourage gender equality and to support students from lower socio-economic groups to enter universities.

As a result, there is greater equality of educational opportunity in Nordic countries. Finnish students whose parents went to university are only 1.4 times as likely to participate in tertiary education as their peers whose parents did not go to university, according to the OECD. In Sweden, a young person with university-educated parents is 2.3 times more likely to go to university themselves, while in the UK they are six times more likely.

Yet perhaps the most important difference between the Nordic countries and countries such as the UK is the ethos of education as a civil right and a public service rather than a commodity. Degrees are not seen as commodities to be exchanged in the marketplace.

As the cases of Sweden and Denmark show, the neo-liberal argument for education is not unknown in Nordic countries. But a strong counterargument is rooted in the values of Nordic welfare societies which see higher education primarily as an equality issue.

A high level of education is beneficial for the development of society including business and industry, making it a collective economic issue. With this argument, education is defined neither as a private investment nor a commodity, but a civil right. So, individual human beings should not have to pay for it.

This article was originally published on [The Conversation](#) [19]. Read the [original article here](#) [20].

## THE CONVERSATION

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 [International students: you can still study for free in Helsinki. \(Photo: <a href="https://www.flickr.com/photos/hugovk/10390820706/sizes/l" target="blank">hugovk</a>, CC BY-NC-SA\)](https://www.flickr.com/photos/hugovk/10390820706/sizes/l) [21]

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