

When Nordic Education Myths Meet Economic Realities: The “Nordic Model” in Education Export in Finland and Sweden

Linda Rönnerberg

Umeå University, Sweden

Contact corresponding author: linda.ronnerberg@educsci.umu.se

Helena Hinke Dobrochinski Candido

University of Helsinki, Finland

ABSTRACT

We analyse policy rhetoric on education export in Finland and Sweden as a lens to explore the multifaceted Nordic model in education. We also examine how the Nordic dimension in education is represented in Finnish and Swedish education exports. Our findings highlight that, while education export approaches differ considerably between the two countries, both contexts provide opportunities for private edu-business actors to thrive, thereby sustaining the global education industry (GEI). Education export is rhetorically positioned in relation to both the national and the Nordic contexts in specific ways, with implications for how Nordic education is framed in the globalised economy.

Keywords: *education export, Nordic model, nation branding, commercialisation, global education industry*

Introduction¹

In late 2017, the Nordic Council of Ministers met in Copenhagen to discuss future cooperation in Nordic education and research. Prior to these deliberations, a high-level

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report was prepared, which included the following comment regarding the “new market” of education exports:

Many of our education institutions are taking the opportunity to export education (...) by delivering “Nordic education” to other parts of the world (...) in this new market for education export. Now, the Nordics are experiencing an exceptionally strong interest and curiosity from the rest of the world. But it looks like the rest of the world is perceiving the Nordics as a more integrated region than we do ourselves. (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2017, p. 44)

This quote highlights that education export appears on the political agendas of Nordic ministers and is considered promising given expanding international interest. Additionally, this quote articulates how education export is linked to perceptions of as well as interest in the Nordics, which may appear more integrated in the eyes of the rest of the world than to the Nordics themselves.

The conceptualisation of a “Nordic model” emerged in the 1930s in reference to the distinct political, economic, and social systems of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden, in contrast to the rest of Europe and elsewhere (Hilson, 2008). In addition to these five countries, the autonomous regions of the Faeroe Islands, Greenland, and Åland also fall within this group, while the three Scandinavian countries of Denmark, Norway, and Sweden are sometimes clustered together as a subgroup. Despite sharing certain political and cultural views that support collectivism and conformity, different historical processes in the Nordic countries have challenged the perception of homogeneity, and instead of speaking of a Nordic model, Hilson (2008) refers to many Nordic models.

The rise of neoliberalism and the introduction of choice- and market-oriented reforms in education and other welfare sectors have also challenged the Nordic model in various ways (Strang et al., 2021). The Nordic model has been employed not merely as a rhetorical element for political projects, but is also used for business purposes; specifically, it has been converted into a brand representing welfare states’ commodities which can be traded internationally (Strang et al., 2021).

In this article, we examine the intersection of the (myths of) the Nordic model and its business purposes via the commercialisation of Nordic education abroad. Education export includes the international selling of a range of education goods and services, such as teacher training and teaching materials, education technology, education services and consultancies in various forms (Schatz, 2016). For education export to be possible, some form of commodification needs to take place to enable cross-national exchange. Such processes are far from neutral and entail the creation of subjectivities and associated power relations in the global education industry (GEI) (Parreira do Amaral et al., 2019; Verger et al., 2016).

Still, research on Nordic engagement in the GEI and education export activities remain underexplored. Finnish education export has received some attention (Schatz, 2015, 2016; Schatz et al., 2017), but Finnish export in higher education (HE) has thus

far remained the primary research focus (Cai et al., 2012; Juusola & Nokkala, 2021; Kantola & Kettunen, 2012; Schatz, 2016). In Sweden, research is even sparser with a few exceptions (Rönnerberg, 2022), and most (still limited) scholarly interest focuses on the (market-based) internationalisation of HE (Alexiadou & Rönnerberg, 2022; Forstorp & Mellström, 2018). A Nordic comparative take on education export, including sectors other than HE, and how the Nordic model is used (or not) for education export, however, remain largely missing in the literature.

In the following, we investigate education export in Finland and Sweden as a lens to highlight some features of the multifaceted Nordic model in education, guided by the following research question: *How is the Nordic model in education represented in the policy rhetoric on education export in Finland and Sweden?* To address this, we aim to analyse how education export is positioned in the Finnish and Swedish policy rhetoric in the context of the wider GEI, focusing specifically on whether and how different rhetorical positionings of the “Nordic” model can be perceived in these processes.

After outlining the theoretical and methodological approaches, we examine how education export is portrayed in Finland and Sweden and positioned in relation to national and/or Nordic education model(s). We then discuss the rhetorical elements sustaining such positionings – that is, whether and how Finland and Sweden make use of (the myths of) a Nordic model in education via branding processes in and through the commercialisation of education.

Theoretical and methodological approaches

A vast literature exists on the Nordic welfare state and the image of the Nordics, including historical expressions and roots, as well as contemporary transformations of and contradictions within the welfare state (Antikainen, 2010; Kettunen & Pedersen, 2021; Kuisma, 2017; West Pedersen & Kunhle, 2017). Relationships among the Nordic countries have shifted and historical power asymmetries characterise the region. In the past Sweden often served as a model for the Nordic countries, but Sweden’s position as a reference point is increasingly challenged (Andersson, 2009; Loftsdóttir & Jensen, 2012). The Nordics are often portrayed as sharing high degrees of fluidity in international relations, manifested through cooperative agreements, neutrality (“bridge builders”), consensus and multiparty democracies, social democratic policies, solidarity, and welfare models of distinctiveness and exceptionalism (Hilson, 2008). This image of the Nordics and its exceptionalism carry a positive appeal in the eyes of non-Nordics (e.g., progress, modernity), even if more negative connotations also exist (e.g., arrogance, self-righteousness, high rates of taxation, and xenophobia) (Browning, 2007; Brunner, 2019; Nicholson et al., 2016; Strang et al., 2021).

Several meanings and functions have been attached to the Nordics historically, politically as well as in scholarly debates. The same also applies to a Nordic model in education (Blossing et al., 2014; Antikainen, 2006; Telhaug et al., 2005; Tröhler et al., 2022), where indeed some common dimensions have been highlighted, such as striving for equity and equality, along with comprehensive systems with little differentiation

and a pupil-centredness often expressed as “a school for all” (Blossing et al., 2014). Simultaneously, the Nordic education systems are characterised by significant differences, not least regarding the varying degrees to which the countries have adopted market-oriented principles and privatisation (Dovemark et al., 2018; Lundahl, 2016; Skedsmo, Rönnerberg & Ydesen, 2021). Despite being traditionally described as social democratic welfare states (Esping-Andersen, 1990) and following a Nordic path to education privatisation (Verger et al., 2017), Sweden and Finland have adopted quite different approaches to privatisation and marketisation in education. Specifically, while Sweden has implemented far-reaching reforms, Finland has employed a more restrictive approach to privatisation domestically.

We acknowledge the changing and borderless nature of the growing GEI as an important external context in which the global and national/local intersect (Ball, 2012; Parreira Do Amaral et al., 2019; Steiner-Khamsi, 2016, 2018; Verger et al., 2016). Immersed in business logic, education as an industry is intrinsically connected to other sectors and broader strategies. Thus, we draw from perspectives on nation branding and welfare export, including the role of commercial actors in education and focusing on the corporate in the political economy of education – that is, the “actors, processes, networks, styles, and power relations related to businesses or the for-profit sector” (Moeller, 2020, p. 233).

A central point to the forthcoming analysis is that the construction of the Nordic (and the national) is a reflexive process, “where self-images meet the eye of the Other in a mutually reinforcing way” (Andersson & Hilson, 2009, p. 222). The Nordic identity is complementary, rather than opposed, to national identities and the use of “Nordic” instead of a national identity can be associated with a favourable image of neighbouring countries, thereby enabling repositioning, such as connecting Finland to the West (Strang et al., 2021). Through the circulation of ideas, outside views become crucial in co-constructing these images (Marklund & Pedersen, 2013). This, we argue, makes education export a particularly relevant context in which to explore images of the Nordic (and national) as it is rhetorically articulated to appeal to the Other.

Nation branding, originally attached to the marketing of destinations and places, diplomacy, and international relations, focuses on how a nation positions itself using traits and cultural markings to increase its competitiveness and soft power in various ways (Fan, 2008, 2010). Such branding processes have been studied in the Nordic domain to some extent (Andersen, 2020; Browning, 2007; Kettunen, 2011; Marklund, 2017; Mouritzen, 1995; Strang et al., 2021), but not from the perspective of education and its export.

The branding of Nordic nations and the Nordic region emerged from growing international interest motivated by global competitiveness in the globalised economy. Multiple dimensions – economic, political, social, and cultural – were combined to create “national branding programmes aiming to attract investments and promote export” (Strang et al., 2021, p. 31). Browning (2007) argues that the Nordic model has incorporated traits of both a particular identity (being), but also ways of organising society and

welfare (doing). Such a deliberate creation of a unified Nordic brand has transformed into a Nordic experience that can travel and, thus, become available to others who wish to import it. The Nordic brand stimulated discourse about the Nordics under a label that could either represent the whole region or parts of it, ultimately becoming a “seal of quality” and “something prescriptive or even aspirational” (Strang et al., 2021, p. 32), conferring a status and reputation to both the exporter and the importer.

We acknowledge Nordic branding as form of both identity and values, as well as modes of organising and providing education. Welfare export, which encompasses both education and other social services, can be described as a matter of turning the common into a commodity (Andersen, 2020, p. 24). Previous studies on elder care (Bjerregaard et al., 2016; Bjerregaard & Kjeldgaard, 2019) and preschool (Andersen, 2020) highlight how the Danish state draws upon both myths and particular forms of knowledge to frame an international welfare offer to the outside world. This welfare know-how becomes exportable through commodification processes and contributes to the branding and image of the Nordic welfare state both abroad and at home, connecting domestic and international agendas. Welfare export thus pinpoints how globalisation meets a particular commodified representation of the national or, alternatively, Nordic welfare. These activities can be viewed as embodying the pressure that global competitiveness has placed on Nordic “exceptionalism” (Andersen, 2020; Andersson & Hilson, 2009).

In our analysis, we rely on the theoretical foundations laid out in Marjanen, Strang, and Hilson (2021) and their rhetorical perspective as “a useful way of exploring the connections and interplay between foreign and domestic visions of Nordicism” (Marjanen et al., 2021, p. 19). We applied their perspective to our analytical framework to study the policy rhetoric of contemporary education export in Finland and Sweden. Rhetorical communication requires engagement with and acceptance from the audience – a combination of argumentation, persuasion, reasoning, attractiveness, and emotional appeal (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1971; Säntti et al., 2021), which we find particularly useful to our study. Initially, we traced the policy rhetoric on education export in the two national settings before moving on to how the national and/or Nordic is used (or not) in these processes. We structured our data analysis using different themes, which were refined during subsequent steps to provide a clearer picture of the rhetorical elements. Such elements included the origin, justification, and functions of both education export and nation branding, with an emphasis on transformations and debates in recent decades. Furthermore, we centred our analysis on policy rhetoric manifested in the data in which the Nordic and the national (Finnish or Swedish) were used to make a claim of exceptionalism and difference or as a marker of tension(s) and disruption(s). We aimed to capture the policy rhetoric regarding how education export is positioned in relation to national and/or Nordic education model(s) and how these positionings are justified. Our analysis acknowledged not only what is said, but also how it is said, to capture the rhetoric in the data and how it is used to convey its message to the intended audience (Marjanen et al., 2021).

Our analysis is based on a selection of policy documents from the two countries and includes various government publications, such as reports from ministries and agencies, export and branding strategies, government bills, and commission reports, as well as other documents. These documents were identified through multiple search strategies, including databases of parliamentary and legislative documents and tracing related documents via other relevant materials at various stages in the policy/legislative chain using keywords and search terms derived from the overall research question. The Finnish government has published and commissioned several documents on education export, which we selected for our analysis. In the Swedish case, government documents were also collected along with reports from education export advocacy interest groups. These stakeholder documents were identified via national bibliographical search engines as well as by visiting and harvesting documents from stakeholder/interest group websites. Taken together, the selected material (Table 1) captures how different stakeholders approach and rhetorically convey education export in their domestic and foreign affairs strategies.

Table 1: Overview of selected documents in Finland and Sweden

FINLAND	SWEDEN
<p><i>Government documents from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), the Ministry of Education and Culture (MOE), and agency reports from the Finnish Board of Education (OPH): MFA (2018; 2019); MOE (2009; 2010; 2013; 2015; 2016; 2017a; 2017b); OPH (2020).</i></p> <p><i>Documents related to country branding from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and commissioned reports, etc: MFA (2017); FPB (2016); CBR (2010).</i></p>	<p><i>Government documents and commission reports: Government Bills (2004/05:162; 2009/10:65); SOU (2000:92; 2007:95; 2018:3; 2018:78); Regeringskansliet (2019).</i></p> <p><i>Reports from interest groups and stakeholders: Almega (2014; 2008); Sweducare (2015); Stockholm Chamber of Commerce (2017); SN (2020).</i></p> <p><i>Documents related to country branding: Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2005); NSU (2017); SI (2017; 2021; 2022).</i></p>

Note: Please see reference list for complete document details.

Finnish education export and branding

The Finnish “PISA miracle” (Simola, 2005) has enticed other countries to use Finland as a reference point and to model their own education systems on the Finnish example (Takayama et al., 2013; Waldow & Steiner-Khamsi, 2019). This triggered a demand to import Finnish education, a reality reflected in Finnish policy. Education is strategically identified as one of the country’s brands and one of its key export programmes. This export primarily targets countries in the southern hemisphere as well as the USA and Eastern Europe. Even though Finnish education export (FEE) is quite modest when compared to countries such as the USA, the UK, and Australia, there are currently about 300 companies operating in the sector (MFA, 2020), the turnover of which represents 0.2% of the country’s GDP, and further growth is expected (OPH, 2021).

The scope of FEE ranges from early childhood and basic education to vocational and HE, encompassing school services, teacher training, education technology,

attracting foreign students to Finnish HE, consultancies, and international education programmes. Export actors are not only active in education, but also in other related sectors, such as gaming and tourism. “Education Finland” was launched in 2017 as part of the Finnish Board of Education (OPH) and tasked with promoting and enabling FEE. Creating clusters is perceived as essential to both optimising efforts and speeding up exportation (MOE, 2010).

Following Chadee and Naidoo’s (2009) classification of education export stages, FEE immediately moved to a direct and strategic export growth stage, doing so much later than many other countries. It all began around 2007 with a clear goal: to explore the potential of education associated with a Finnish brand image (Schatz, 2015, 2016; Schatz et al., 2017). In 2008, the Foreign Minister appointed a Country Brand Delegation, chaired by a high-level corporate executive, proposing a vision whereby Finland would become a global problem-solver by 2030. The resulting Country Brand Report (CBR) highlighted three themes in developing the national brand: the functionality of Finnish society, Finland’s close relationship with nature, and Finland’s world-leading basic education system. Rhetorically, the CBR conveys an international message that the Finnish model works well and can help other (developing) countries to improve. It was thus recommended that Finland should capitalise on its internationally competitive – that is, high PISA-ranked – education system and disseminate Finnish education across the world (CBR, 2010). This reputation has since been generalised from basic education to all levels of education, including vocational and HE. In fact, the initial stages of FEE were closely connected to various strategies for the internationalisation of HE (see MOE, 2009).

In 2009, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and the Ministry of Education and Culture (MOE) established a working group to create an education export policy for Finland, resulting in the publication of a Finnish education export strategy in 2010 (MOE, 2010). Finnish HEIs and private companies were defined as the “export agents” and “engines” of education exports and granted the autonomy to engage in different education export initiatives (Cai et al., 2012; MOE, 2010; Schatz, 2016). More recently, additional roles have been allotted to HEIs concerning FEE, including attracting both students and investors (MOE, 2017a), all very much in line with the governmental growth programme “Education Finland”.

The first FEE “roadmap” was published by the MOE in 2016, which outlines the strategies for the 2016–2019 period. That roadmap explicitly refers to education as a business, using phrases such as clients and demands. A major concern raised in the 2016 document is that the potential of FEE had not yet been fully explored (MOE, 2016). The second FEE “roadmap” was launched in 2020 for the period 2020–2023 by the OPH. This roadmap places greater emphasis on the image of Finland than on specifically enhancing FEE. It also reinforces the role of “Education Finland” as a central stakeholder in this process. In addition, this document conveys an underlying assumption that Finland is moving to the next stage in education exports after successfully implementing tuition fees in Finnish HEIs, and uses the rhetoric of education as a globally well-known Finnish brand (OPH, 2020).

In tandem, “Finland’s Country Branding Strategy” reaffirmed, in 2017, the centrality of education, since “Finland has one of the best education systems in the world” (MFA, 2017, p. 4). That same year, the MOE published new policies to promote the internationalisation of Finnish HE and research for 2017–2025. The 2017 document suggests taking advantage of “one of the most rapidly growing export sectors” (MOE, 2017a, p. 10) globally, which comprises education export and expert services. For this purpose, the MOE plans “a new business-based operating model to attract private investment for education export projects and for product development in the sector” (MOE, 2017a, p. 11).

Around the same time, the MOE commissioned an “Action Plan for Global Education Brand Finland” (MOE 2017b), written by an American scholar in Media Studies. This document presents Finnish education as a superpower and as “good business” that Americans amongst others are eager to buy (MOE, 2017b). The action plan also reflected on Finland’s nation branding, which aims “to make Finland visible abroad (awareness-raising), to highlight Finland’s strengths (opinion-shaping), and [to] choose Finland (decision-making)” (FPB, 2016, p. 5). The nation branding report argues that education remains one of the themes for which Finland is best known internationally and, despite falling in the PISA ranking, Finland is still featured as a model society (FPB, 2016).

In 2018, the MFA published a report aiming to “improve and better organise the work and collaboration of stakeholders to make the most of the Finnish capacity and resources to address the global challenges in education”, namely, the “global learning crisis” (MFA, 2018, p. 70). This report highlights that “Finland has one of the most respected and potentially powerful national education ‘brands’ in the world” (MFA, 2018, p. 67). The recurrent rhetorical framing of Finnish education in the report is discursively linked to the field of development policy, arguing for a closer link to Finnish development aid and education; Finland’s “most credible global brand” (MFA, 2018, p. 7). The “learning crisis” is portrayed as a business opportunity and “at some point development cooperation can also transition into education exports” (MFA, 2018, p. 55).

Swedish education export and branding

The Swedish case provides quite a different story compared with the Finnish education export example. Needless to say, Sweden has no PISA miracle from which to draw. By contrast, the Swedish PISA results delegitimised Sweden as a reference society for the English conservative Party on free schools (Rönnerberg, 2015). Moreover, a search in the Swedish database of parliamentary documents identified few results for education export, and education appears not to form a part of the Swedish national export strategy (Regeringskansliet, 2019). Education export is not altogether missing, but it is difficult to assess the financial value (Stockholm Chamber of Commerce, 2017). Since multiple education companies benefit from a large domestic market, this appears to justify the limited interest in Sweden in education export from both policymakers and education commercial actors (Almega, 2008, 2014).

Prompted through choice and privatisation reforms during the 1990s, as well as deregulation and decentralisation, Sweden has witnessed the emergence of a national education industry. To illustrate, Swedish municipalities paid private actors a total of 55 billion SEK (appr. 5.4 billion EUR) in 2021 for the education services they provided (SKR, 2022). This domestic market has provided fertile soil for experiences “at home”, which can be used for education export activities. One example is education services exported by for-profit education companies based on their experiences in running so-called free schools in Sweden (Rönnerberg et al., 2022).

Around the same time as education export forcefully entered the Finnish policy agenda, the Swedish Agency for Public Management published a report on the internationalisation of Swedish welfare services (SOU 2007:95). It concluded that if welfare exports such as health care and education are to reach any substantial levels, political strategic action is needed: “the work must be done by private companies in well-developed markets, but this will not happen by itself” (SOU, 2007:95, p. 11). Furthermore, the 2007 report used education as an example in the context of a potential welfare export but did not result in a visible strategic agenda and the issue failed to gain broader political interest and support. Notably, education export is not a term used in political debates in Sweden. Instead, the internationalisation of welfare services or HE rhetorically framed the processes that would fall under the rubric of the international trade of education. Overall, education export is largely absent from the Swedish policy agenda.

Still, a few exceptions emerged. Explicit reference to education export appeared in a recent public commission report on the internationalisation of HE, noting limited Swedish activities in relation to what other countries do. According to SOU (2018:78), “several countries, such as the Netherlands, Germany, and Finland, are increasing their international presence via establishing abroad or education export. In relation to this development, the Swedish position remains restrained” (p. 77). Furthermore, almost two decades earlier in 2000, a commission focusing on Sweden as an attractive nation for HE students concluded that “education export is a considerable revenue for many countries”, specifically mentioning Australia, the USA, and the UK, adding that “Swedish higher education is of [a] high quality and should be interesting [for] the growing global education market” (SOU 2000:92, p. 68). These reports indicate that there is indeed an awareness of an international market – primarily in HE – but the political effort to position Sweden in relation to it has been and remains limited. Student attraction is a competitive race and Sweden, despite introducing fees for non-EU/EES students in 2011 (Government Bill 2009/10:65), has not visualised the potential of HE export as a policy goal (Alexiadou & Rönnerberg, 2022).

Turning to national branding efforts, there is again a discernible difference between Finland and Sweden, with much fewer explicit links to education in the Swedish case compared with its Finnish counterpart. Sweden has been active in nation branding for decades. For instance, in 1995, the Council for the Promotion of Sweden (NSU) was founded to connect stakeholders from both the political and business sectors. One

central actor is the national agency, Swedish Institute (SI), founded in 1945 to establish positive links between Sweden and the international community and to build trust for and in Sweden (SI, 2020). National branding efforts have been carried out in various ways over time. For instance, an internationally acknowledged branding initiative was implemented in response to an NSU report on the need for reinforced efforts to build the image of Sweden abroad (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2005). The “trademark programme” Sverige bilden 2.0 was launched in 2007 and updated in 2017. This programme highlights four core values – to be innovative, open, caring, and authentic – accompanied by four profile areas where “Sweden is strong” (SI, 2017 p. 6) in society, innovation, creativity, and sustainability. Neither explicitly mentions education, but the society profile area includes a strong welfare state.

Thus, the lack of an explicit role for education in national branding serves as a striking contrast to the Finnish choice of branding. A similarity between countries can, however, be found in how the branding rhetoric situates the country in relation to its international role in promoting development: “the nation brand of Sweden (...) shows how Sweden can contribute to developments in the world (...) with something that the rest of the world perceives as almost unique to our country: our strong tradition of freedom and openness” (SI, 2017, p. 7). SI continually monitors the image of Sweden abroad in various ways, advertising a selection of international national rankings for Sweden. PISA and related international assessments in education are not included in that list, although a few talent and competency rankings at the HE level are (SI, 2022). In summary, some additional implicit ways in which education relates to the Swedish image in the eye of the Other were identified. These include, for instance, the promotion of core values and highlighting the Swedish welfare model, although strategic and deliberate explicit rhetorical framings on education remain largely absent.

Taking Nordic education into the world?

In what follows, we turn our analytical focus to exploring how education export is positioned in relation to national and/or Nordic education model(s) and how these positionings are justified.

Finnishness and Nordicness

The Nordic model is made rhetorically visible in Finnish documents to serve different purposes. A 2013 report from the MOE regarding the position of Finland on the international education market conveyed ideas on how to improve FEE, asserting that it was not Finland alone, but all Nordic countries which joined forces to create exceptional economic efficiency and social equality. This was achieved through a combination of innovation and the mobilisation of the population through quality education within the labour market (MOE, 2013). The Nordic model is also included in the first “roadmap” of FEE, which positions Finland as “a modern Nordic society by many standards, and its strengths, particularly through its educational excellence, is something that

the world wants to learn from” (MOE, 2016, p. 2). The 2009–2015 HE internationalisation strategy and the 2017–2025 follow-up strategy both emphasise cooperation in research and innovation with the Nordic countries (MOE, 2009, 2017a).

The MFA, and its Minister for Nordic Cooperation and Equality, also emphasises the Nordic model of prosperity, based on cooperation between government, business, and nongovernmental organisations when it comes to strategic approaches to education (MFA, 2019). The Nordic welfare state is considered one of Finland’s strengths with regard to the country’s brand and image abroad (FPB, 2016). Yet, to address the “learning crisis” and “step up Finland’s global role in education”, “in education exports as well” (MFA, 2018, p. 53), one task focuses on a “presentation of the Nordic model for developing countries” (MFA, 2018, p. 70). The Nordic model is also mentioned in the “Action Plan for Global Education Brand Finland” (MOE, 2017b). This report frames the particularity of Nordicism as a potential problem due to transferability limitations — that is, the “Finnish model is excellent, but much of its system performance probably depends on special and cultural foundations that are unique to Finland and other Nordic nations” (MOE, 2017b, p. 24).

Another rhetorical framing of the Nordic model is found in the CBR. Despite alerting the reader to positive associations with the Nordic model, the report also advises Finland to maintain some distance from other countries in the region. The CBR positions Nordicism as reliability, functionality, peacefulness, and prosperity, stating that Finns have the “gift” of the Nordic identity, with a strong positive image and reputation worldwide (CBR, 2010, p. 113). However, Finnish products’ reputation, reliability, and quality rank higher than other Nordic countries, according to the report, and thus closely associating with lower ranked countries may be unwise. The main idea of the CBR is to make Finland stand out amongst other countries and, as a result, tries to detach Finland’s image from Sweden’s: “being ‘a bit like the Swedes’ is not a very strong brand” (CBR, 2010, p. 43). Instead, Finland should acknowledge and capitalise on its differences, specifically through “an almost mystical strangeness and an edge” (CBR, 2010, p. 59) and its persistence (in Finnish, *sisu*), which may eventually set the country apart from other Nordic countries.

This Finnish uniqueness is thus a rhetorical device that coexists with more inclusive and collaborative shared images of the Nordic region. Such Finnishness is indeed contradictory. It draws upon the good reputation of Finland’s education system globally due to its PISA ranking, but also on the security and safety provided by the Nordic welfare system more generally. The country’s image is also associated with particular pedagogical choices, “the Finnish way of doing education”, yet the transfer of this to another context remains a challenge – does the imported education remain “sufficiently Finnish” (Juusola & Nokkala, 2021, p. 9)? Linking Finnish education too closely to the Nordics could undermine the chances of export, but, at the same time, the policy rhetoric relies on the stereotyped imaginary Nordic welfare state to boost it. Ultimately, the branding of FEE, therefore, both links to and detaches itself from images of a Nordic model in education.

Swedish, European or Global?

In the Swedish case, the connections between education exports and the Nordic model are not clearly visible. Given the limited policy attention to education export, this is unsurprising. Still, we can identify such connections in how other education stakeholders and exporters use and position their agendas in relation to the Nordic model. Beginning with the more general Swedish nation branding context, we recognise some of the rhetorical positions from the Finnish case. For Sweden, under the heading of “why should Sweden nourish its brand” (NSU, 2017, p. 3), recommendations noted that “the Nordic countries have ongoing work to communicate the Nordics as a cohesive unit. In the case of Sweden, however, promoting and facilitating relations between Sweden and other nations are still the main foci, even if we also follow and contribute to other initiatives” (NSU, 2017 p. 4; see also Nordic Council of Ministers, 2015).

As in the Finnish example, tension exists between the national (Swedish) and the Nordic. A recent publication from SI concluded that “the Nordic countries are often viewed as a single market” and viewed as “associated with similar attributes” with the potential that “Sweden and the other Nordic countries can draw on each other’s and the Nordic brands (...) and by acting collectively in the world market and achieve greater economic benefit” (SI, 2021, p. 6). The issue of “bringing the Nordic back in” is further highlighted by the National Confederation of Swedish Enterprise. Specifically, when commenting on the revised national export strategy, “Nordic cooperation seems to have been lost in the new strategy” and Sweden needs to “take advantage of the strong Nordic brand” (SN, 2020, p. 2).

Interest groups primarily from the business side have attempted to push for policy attention devoted to education export promotion and to position the potential “Swedish education offer” in relation to a wider Nordic and European/global domain. In HE, the internationalisation strategies from 2005 and 2018 place a strong emphasis on Europe, as well as the Nordics, with the latter strategy being more (if not extensively) rhetorically positioned towards the commercial side of both establishing Swedish HEIs abroad and attracting fee-paying students (Government Bill 2004/05:162; SOU 2018:3). Although Nordic cooperation and exchange is emphasised, the internationalisation of Swedish HE closely adheres to a European dimension (Alexiadou & Rönnerberg, 2022).

Finally, preschool services are clearly positioned in relation to a particular Nordic tradition and practice which combines education and care in relation to how it reaches out to Europe, as a potential market for Swedish and Nordic preschool actors (Elinder, 2010; Sweducare, 2015). Such Nordic pedagogical practices are likely to appeal to the global market, even if the EU represents a suitable target market for many of the Swedish preschool export attempts thus far (Sweducare, 2015). Interestingly, Swedish preschool education export to Germany has explicitly used the Scandinavian model to attract German parents, linking Scandinavia to, for instance, democracy, the environment, and child-centredness (Rönnerberg et al., 2022).

Education export and the (myth of a) Nordic model in education

Education export and nation branding are nationally embedded activities that aim to appeal to the eyes of the Other in the international setting, ultimately for commercial purposes and a competitive gain. Education is a welfare service that has been commercialised and exported, representing activities that can take multiple forms with various rhetorical framings and purposes in the two Nordic countries studied here. While PISA has positioned Finland as a reference society and prompted explicit state-led national export policies, Swedish private education suppliers have enjoyed solid opportunities to prosper domestically before moving abroad via export. One key finding is that while education export policy trajectories and approaches differ considerably between these two Nordic countries, both countries provided opportunities for private edu-business actors to thrive as well as for market-oriented principles and business-like approaches to flourish in both the Finnish and Swedish settings, thereby expanding the GEI.

Regarding reference to a Nordic model in Finnish and Swedish education export, we highlight three main concluding points. First, Nordic rhetoric has shifted from a cultural-political community argued as holding similar values, ideas, and practices, to becoming increasingly framed in relation to branding and marketing purposes. The collectivist and unitary vision of the Nordic has, arguably, merged with an individualistic market-oriented neoliberal approach to cope with global competitiveness (Strang et al., 2021). When Nordic exceptionalism (Browning, 2007; Danbolt, 2016) meets education branding, it suggests positioning a particular commercialised version of the Nordic model for sale on the global market (Marklund, 2017; Schatz et al., 2017). In this context, notions of a remaining Nordic exceptionalism come to serve commercial purposes. This exceptionalism of the Nordics is, however, permeated by contradictions and contrasts, even if the alleged Nordic model of welfare encompasses both utopian views on the ideal society and more dystopian perspectives on the contemporary Nordic reality. Unsurprisingly, education export tends to draw rhetorically on utopian views in a unified way. In addition to our analysis of policy rhetoric on education exports, there are also examples of Finnish and Swedish edu-businesses which use and draw upon Nordic in their brand names, such as the New Nordic School (n.d.), which offers to “operate your school the Nordic way” via Finnish best practices, and the Nordic International School chain (n.d.) which runs schools in Sweden and Pakistan.

Second, our analysis of education export in the two countries indicates that the “Nordic” often intersects with the “national”. The added value of universal assumptions regarding a Nordicness seems to contribute to a better positioning of education export services and products that appeal to the global market. Nevertheless, referring to the Nordic appears to be predominantly implicit even when it is at times explicitly employed as part of the branding of education services. The rhetoric of the Nordic is strategically operationalised to suit different circumstances and interests under the realm of a national identity, fuelled by nation branding efforts that take place in both

of the settings we studied. We, thus, conclude that the “Nordic” is viewed largely as an “empty vessel” (Steiner-Khamsi, 2014) in the education export rhetoric. Used in an opportunistic way, it looks appealing to foreign markets and clients which, indeed, seem to be attracted to Nordic exceptionalism — in particular, but not only, in the highly ranked PISA Finnish version. This constitutes, we argue, an important dimension in understanding the perception and continuing myth of a Nordic education model globally – one carried and mediated by commercial education export actors. The Nordic model is re-created, demanded, and reinforced by the Other (e.g., the international audience and those importing it). Education export stakeholders operationalise the “empty vessel” to suit the demand and attract clients and profit. By analysing education export and how the Nordic is represented in this context, we can gain empirical and analytical understanding into processes that shape, exploit, sustain, or challenge particular representations of a Nordic model in education, which either contribute to portraying the Nordic countries as (more) integrated or depict the individualised (national) dimensions of each of the Nordic countries.

Third, our study provides insights regarding how welfare services in the form of education are branded as edu-business offerings and how this positioning also feeds into sustaining (potentially profitable) national and Nordic education myths circulated in the GEI. The expansion of the GEI not only transforms education but impacts society as a whole. In the Nordic countries, education has traditionally been viewed as embodying central characteristics of the welfare state – now that it is increasingly permeated by business interests, education is has been commodified and exported. Our research shows that education export has incorporated the Nordic in multiple ways, but we also need further research on the largely understudied intersection of welfare export and branding, education commercialisation, and the Nordics as a discursive sociopolitical and geographic context. Future research could address, for instance, the impression of importers and exporters regarding how Nordic education is perceived abroad in the eyes of the Other, how education export commercial actors in the Nordic countries perceive and use the Nordic, and how Nordic education ideas and values are commodified and commercialised by such education export actors.

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