

# Is Finnish higher education a model or a myth? The case study of Erasmus mobility from Italy to Finland

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**ABSTRACT.** That the Finnish school system placed first in the major international surveys creates a real myth of efficiency and effectiveness in Italy, and keeps it far removed from the Italian situation.

Despite the PISA results, Finland's educational system is not a real model for Italy to import as the cultural or geopolitical differences identify an unbridgeable gap rather than a fine approach to apply. Paradoxically, the Italian image of the Finnish education system makes it too perfect to transfer or to use as a model in Italian schools and universities.

Erasmus Student Mobility is a plain example. The top ranking of Finland in OECD's statistics seems not to affect the destination choices of Italian students going abroad. Finnish leadership in Higher Quality Education seems neither a significant aspect nor a decisive element in choosing to study in Finland.

The purpose of this paper is to understand the reasons for Italian lack of interest in an education system that successful joins quality and equity, pedagogical attention and organizational effectiveness. With analysis of national data on the movement of Erasmus students and with qualitative research among Italian students who chose Finland as their Erasmus destination this paper will show the gap between the reality of Italian universities and the perfect model of the Finnish School System. The Finnish model of excellence shows the impossibility of all comparisons with Italy because the two are opposites.

**KEYWORDS:** *Erasmus Mobility, Finnish education, Higher education, School system, University*

## Introduction

Since the publication of the results of PISA 2001, and the unanimous celebration of the so-called *Finnish Model*, there have been many attempts to explain this primacy. Numerous analyses have described the factors of “success” clarifying the key elements of the Finnish Lesson, which successfully joins quality and equity, pedagogical attention, and organizational effectiveness. Finland’s leadership also involves a Higher Education characterized by a high-level academic model with a strong technological calling that is the source of a widespread culture of innovation tightly intertwined with the economy and with the social development of the nation. Nevertheless, while the rest of the world looks to Finland as an example to imitate, Italy seems to pay no particular attention to the *Finnish model*, nor does it find any useful hints offered in the OECD’s wide spectrum of statistical comparisons. The Finnish excellence seems so completely ignored by Italy that has continuously lost position in the PISA classifications. In Italy, both at the level of educational reforms, and at the level of pedagogical debate, the *Finnish lesson* has not become a phenomenon from which to learn or even one on which to reflect. One finds an evident gap, for example, between the excellent learning outcomes of Finnish universities and the low number of Italian students who choose Finnish universities for their Erasmus Mobility destination.

What are the reasons for Italy’s lack of attention to the Finnish model? How is it Finland’s primacy has been ignored in Italy from primary schools through university levels? Why has the excellence of the Finnish learning outcomes not been credited as a comparative element of crucial importance in scientific studies or even in policies relating to Italian education?

The aim of this paper is to understand why the model of the Finnish educational system has aroused such an inadequate reception in Italy, especially in the domains of Higher Education. We seek to show how Italian attention toward Finland fails to regard its scholastic primacy but instead looks at a stereotypical vision. From this perspective distinctive characteristics become idiosyncrasies underlining elements native to diversity and distance whereby Italy transforms the Finnish model into a myth, virtuous but unattainable. Initially we will examine the characteristics of the Finnish scholastic system, in particular those of the university, showing a profound

gap with those in Italy. Next we will examine why Italian students go to study in Finland, seeking to understand the reasons this north European country is among the least chosen as a destination for study abroad.

Finally, the paper will present the results of a qualitative research conducted among university students who did choose Finland as their Erasmus residence. We will seek to understand which motivations oriented their preference toward this Nordic country and if the high quality of the Finnish Higher Education system is a significant variable (Mullis, Martin, 2012).

### **The Finnish success: model or myth?**

The success of Finnish schools in OECD's PISA studies over the last ten years has generated a worldwide reputation for excellence and aroused a great deal of interest outside Finland. The Finnish education system has become an object of research and comparison. Finland has become a destination for expeditions by teachers and policy makers who want to see and to copy a system consistently ranked at the first place in science, mathematics and reading. This desire continues even though Finland's decade of taking the first positions in OECD rankings ended with PISA 2009 and with PISA 2012, bettered on the other side of the world by the OECD member-country of Korea, the city-state of Singapore, and the cities of Shanghai and Hong Kong (Sjøberg, 2012) and by some OECD member-countries (OECD, 2012).

Many explanations have been proposed for Finland's excellent results but ideas on what to do with this *Finnish recipe* differ greatly. The foremost position believes Finland's system is a model to export and apply in other countries where it will surely lead to greater achievement. The second position argues that as the *Finnish model* is rooted in the history of Finland, aided by specific governmental policy, dependent on the Nordic economy, and intertwined with Finnish society, it can never be transferred and all attempts to recreate it elsewhere will crash into incongruous reforms.

Many countries are analyzing the components with hopes of arriving at a full-and-complete description of the *Finland success*. France wants it to help push forward a national school reform. The United States, Canada and Japan want it to see how a competitive

economic model rose in a Welfare State.

Since the publication of the first PISA results in 2001, OECD has worked to find the reasons for Finland's high performing model. Some identified elements of Finnish improvement are: slow and continuous development; steady progress; highly visible innovation (OECD, 2010b). The Finnish reform movement is not merely a re-organization of schools but a philosophy of a school system that serves all students equally regardless of family backgrounds (OECD, 2010a). The Finnish *Big Dream* is a vision of a more equitable society in which school experience equips pupils for further education and for living and working together. In this regard, Finnish schools offer more than education, they offer meals, dental care, healthcare, psychological counseling, transport, stationery, books (OECD, 2010b, 129). *PISA concept* details some factors in which Finland is at the top: commitment to education; cultural support for universally high achievement; accountability; money expenditure; comprehensible instructional practice; optimal school organization. Other Nordic countries aspire to Finland's educational success (Osborne, Sandberg, Tuomi, 2004). Danish scores in PISA are much lower than Finland's. Though the Danish educational system is one of the world's most expensive, Finland produces better outcomes with the largest difference being the better scores by the lowest scoring 25% of Finnish pupils compared to the lowest scoring Danish quartile (Andersen, 2010). Finnish schools are close-knit, like a family or peer group, generally leading to the class being a community of pupils in which the teacher, respected and engaged in a classroom's life, is a professional with a higher degree of academic preparation than is required in Denmark (Andersen, 2010, p.171). Their first place scoring seems to have surprised the Finns themselves who tried to interpret the factors at the base of their enviable primacy, which Malaty (2007) attributed to characteristics of a culture of teaching profession: a high level of academic preparation for the teachers, best acquainted with didactics methods and pedagogy; the spread of both a scientific curriculum and a culture of technology; a research-based approach; the lack of punishment of students.

Some scholars have spoken of a *Finnish approach*, calling it a system-wide excellence in student learning attained through education policies, based on equity, flexibility, creativity, and trust in the schools and in the teachers (Sahlberg, 2007). This approach

diverges totally from the conventional, market-oriented, school reform strategies of other countries. Finnish educational policy places strong emphasis on teaching/learning to raise student achievement and encourage the shift from an agrarian/industrial state to a knowledge/technology economy. In Finland, teaching is perceived as an act of social and cultural responsibility, an act that shapes a multicultural and inclusive society (Tryggvason, 2009). The secrets of Finland's best-performance outcomes are strictly connected to pillars supporting the basic structure during continuous and gradual reforms. Some pillars are: children as the center of education; learning without stress; no control of teachers; autonomy and creativity as main goals; pedagogical freedom; regard for humanistic values; pupils' engagement; local curriculum linked to regional policies. And, in Finland, this holistic vision of education interweaves with a constructivist approach to learning which characterizes the teaching model throughout, not just at primary school levels (Robert, 2008).

Transparency, accountability, accreditation, and participation are also characteristics of Finnish Higher Education that influence the growth of both the society and the economy, increasing professional preparation and skills for production processes (Saarivirta, 2010). Enhancing general quality in universities and polytechnics relates to the possibilities of improving opportunities for people to acquire competences and knowledge, while developing both personal and shared attitudes. Since the 1990s the government has engaged in a reform process repositioning universities to face globalization as required in the Bologna Process (Tjeldvoll, 2010). Aiming to reduce disparities and enhance research the government has proposed a re-organization of Finnish universities, changed into a new independent legal institutions (Haapakorpi, 2011).

For the rest, the role of the university has always been central in this country because it is the source: of a widespread culture of innovation; of support for technological entrepreneurship; of the building of civil society (Castells, Himanen, 2006). The historical conditions birthing the national identity of the Finns include: their gaining of autonomy from Russia in 1917; their difficult rapport with the other Nordic countries (especially Sweden); their shift toward the west including membership in the Euro-zone. All these are at the base of a vision of society, of school, of economics that are tightly interwoven, and which provide the reason for the

development of *Nokia Valley*, the information technology sector of Finland's economy with decisive support from a national technology policy and a university system strongly oriented toward technology working like a talent forge feeding a net of enterprises capitalizing on the world market while investing in research and creativity. As explained by Castells and Himanen, the *ethics hacker* and the *open source* movement conceived by community of collaborators within the university, can be explained as a specific characteristic of an academic culture open to the highest degree, a culture that has found the right conditions for development only in this Nordic country.

According to Simola, the explanation for Finland's leadership resides in the "curious" combination of a series of elements completely divergent and contemporaneously interacting: intentional factors and casual accidents; local trends and trans-national directions; effects of deregulation, decentralization and thrusts of autonomy mixed with a solid bureaucratic tradition and "quiet consensus" (Simola et al., 2009).

Nevertheless, the union of specific key elements on which all the international analyses converge (with different accentuations), doesn't explain the excellent working of the model. If compared to the trends of the educational and cultural policies of the main western countries, these key factors don't appear to explain Finland's top ranking. These key factors appear to run against the currents of today's capitulation of Welfare State and Social Democracy to the justifications of global competitiveness

How is it possible that Finland came first in the comparative statistics when their children begin attending school at a later age than in other countries: enjoy three months of summer break: rarely have homework: spend less time in school per day and per year than others; and their teachers are never evaluated?

Organized as a system, the elements of the model proclaim a clear divergence from Italy; a massive gap is easily observed. The absence of a discussion about OECD's PISA studies or about the possibility of exporting the key elements to the Finland primacy, are more serious if we think that Italy has recently made a reform of the secondary school (Decreto Legge 137/2008) and, among a lot of contestations, the reform of the university (Legge 240/2010) aimed to enhance quality and merit.

At a moment when Italy is cutting funds to schools and universities,

when the recruiting of teachers doesn't follow criteria for the quality of preparation, when the universities are abandoning research, when the schools are locales for violent bullies, and teachers are not respected... no comparisons with Finland can be made. Hard, recent critiques are moved to the Italian schools that do not prepare young people for university courses, that the baccalaureate degree is reduced in value brings to light all the negative judgments on a system that is "disorganized, ineffective, inconsistent"; a system that furnishes only "a thin *patina* of education" with which "*young illiterate* Italians will be newly covered" (Mastrocola, 2011, 183). Educational professionals in Italy ignore Finland's excellence almost totally. Very few Italian journals have published studies on Finland results. One of the few texts in Italian is a seminar about the PISA 2000 survey (Associazione TreElle, 2004). The organizing "winning" factors that explain the Finnish success emphasize the difference with Italy. The text gives credits for these excellences almost exclusively to the high quality of the "collective culture" that characterizes the northern countries vs. the southern European ones. Factors of climate are also used to justify Italy's distance from the Nordic model. So the Finnish model appears a myth to look at with admiration and respect considering the problems that characterize the Italian educational and academic system. The image proposed is that of a noble and advanced "civilization" that makes appreciation but also amazement and curiosity. It looks like there has been produced a kind shifting of latitude degrees: like the Orient and the Southern seas, Finland has the characteristics of an *exotic* country, far away and profoundly different from Italy, where foreign factors (έξωτιχός) struck and fascinates. This excellent model becomes a kind of "inverse myth": too far away to be imitated; too perfect to be studied. Looking from Italy, Finnish excellence cannot be an object of analysis, nor of imitation, nor of critiques, nor of envy. It's an unbridgeable gap. Comparisons are impossible. Finland is the exact opposite of Italy, and therefore a non-importable a model, an unattainable myth.

## Erasmus student mobility to Finland

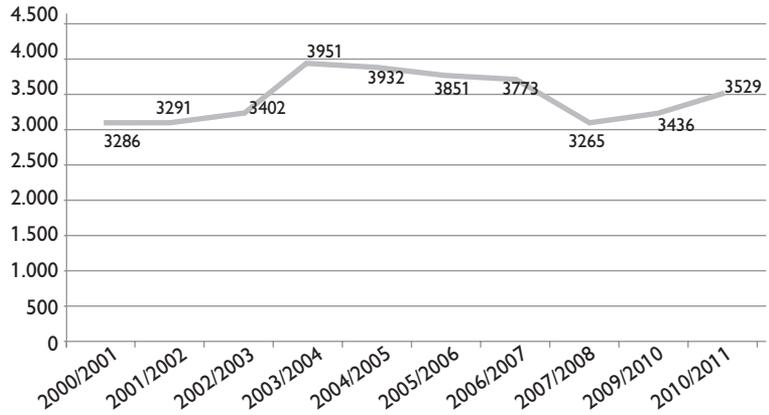
The Erasmus Programme is Europe's best-known student exchange organizer. A core part of the EU's Lifelong Learning Programme, and a key element of the Bologna Process, Erasmus remains high on the EU's agenda of creating a European Higher Education Area (EHEA). One goal is that by 2020 at least 20% of students spend time in study or training abroad (EC, 2011, 6). Since it began in 1987, Erasmus has helped 2.5 million students to live and study in a different European country. Erasmus also aids Higher Education Institutions in working together on transnational projects. European student mobility aims to broaden an individual's personal development while supporting the growth of Europe's societies and economies (EC, 2011, 5).

In academic year 2009-2010, 33 countries participated and Erasmus moved more than 220 000 students. Social Sciences, Business and Law, Humanities and Art were the primary studies. Receiving more than 35 000 students (about 16%) Spain was the most popular destination. In the top 10 higher education institutions receiving Erasmus students in 2009-10, eight universities are Spanish (Granada, Valencia, Madrid, Seville, Barcelona, Salamanca); Spanish institutions are more than 25% of the 100 destinations listed by European Commission in 2011. Italy, France, Germany, and the United Kingdom complete the top preferences.

In this list, nine universities are Swedish (Uppsala scheduled between the 22 first positions), six institutions are Danish (Københavns Universitet is at the 11th place), three are Norwegian. Helsingin Yliopisto is the only Finnish university in a list of 100 top higher education institutions receiving Erasmus students in 2009-10, placing at the 35th place.

These trends are also found in Italy. Data (Almalaurea, 2013) shows 9,3% of university-level Italian students study abroad for some period. The main destination for the exchange is Spain (36% of students in 2010); Finland's share of Erasmus students was less than 1,5 %. At both Italian and European level we see a gap between the international evaluation of the high performances of Finland schools and universities and the choice of destination for the educational or academic formation (Table 1).

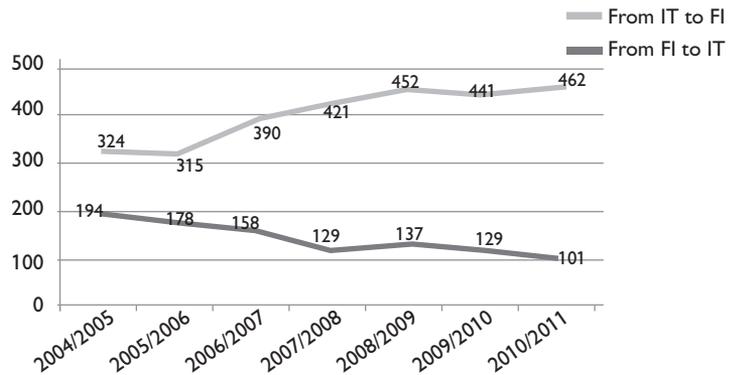
Table 1. Incoming Italian Students per academic year to Finland



(Agenzia Nazionale LLP Italia, data 2012)

Indeed, Italian students going abroad seem to completely ignore the results of the PISA survey (Table 2) at the same time as Finnish students pay no attention to Italy as a choice for Erasmus mobility (Agenzia Nazionale LLP Italia, 2012).

Table 2. Incoming and Outgoing Students per academic year



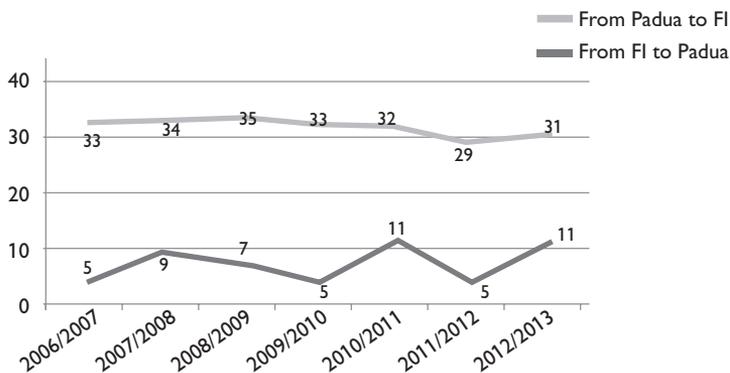
(Agenzia Nazionale LLP Italia, data 2013)

## Hyvaa Matkaa!

### Research and method

The University of Padua is one important Italian university, in recent years placed 36th in the ranking of top receivers of Erasmus students, that strongly supports EU exchange programs; 8% of students go abroad, differently distributed with the Schools. We will use this institutions as our model.

Each academic year, about 30 Padua students travel to Finland. The number has been stable for over five years (Table 3). Why do these students choose Finland as their Erasmus destination? What reasons motivated them? We want to understand why, contrary to both European and Italian trends, these students chose Finland. The research questions are: Who or what influenced their choice? Did the primacy of Finland's educational system in the OCDE studies play a part in their choice? What was their image of Finland before leaving for their Erasmus? How do they evaluate it after their return?



(University of Padua, International Relations Office, data 2014)

Table 3. University of Padua - Erasmus student mobility to/ from Finland

Research is based on empirical data collected during 30 semi-structured interviews of students who chose to study in Finland during academic years 2004/05 to 2009/10. We selected 53 such students. The sample is constituted of the 57% that agreed to interviews. The interviews were conducted in May 2011. The students come from three Padua faculties: Agricultural Sciences; Psychology; Education.

The first part of the interviews registered general information on the participants; the second part asked 9 questions about their Erasmus experience in Finland and their opinions about it. Responses were registered and analyzed following a qualitative analysis. The analysis software ATLAS-TI was used for coding of content. ATLAS-TI permits construction of theoretical hypothesis directly from the data. Responses are considered as hermeneutic units, small texts through which the individual's meaning is expressed on each question posed. Content categories are elicited from the answers. Terms, concepts, and constructs are defined from the quotations themselves, then gathered and compared by specific questions. ATLAS-TI develops networks views, nodes from categories and families of subcategories generated from the responses.

As to respondents' general characteristics: the preponderance is male (67%); average age is 26 but with a high variability (dev.st. 3,6); the average number of the courses taken in Finland is 7; the average number of exams is 6 with 12 as a maximum. The 54% of students go studies abroad in Finland in the years 2009 and 2010; half part of students are enrolled at the university of Helsinki, half part in Joensuu University.

### *Results and discussion*

Student responses to the question on motives for choosing Finland don't mention Finland's primacy in the OCDE results. Two people do talk explicitly about the "absolute quality" and "superior excellence" of the Finnish educational system, and one affirms northern European universities are "good" generally, especially Helsinki's. Coming from university students, these answers amaze. Do they not have (or want) information on the quality levels of their academic courses? Are they not interested in improving their own university preparation? Above all, do they ignore the academic leadership of the country they will live in for several months of their university study? Even more dumbfounding is that Finland's

educational excellence is entirely extraneous to their reasons for choosing Finland. The principal motive is curiosity about a country they define as “completely different”, “very distant” from Italy. The interviewees said:

I was curious to know a different country, whether culturally or from the point of view of climate and language. I wanted to go as far as possible from Italy (Q6.24).

I opted for a Euro-zone I'd never seen even on a postcard (Q6.28).

I wanted to know the reality of a country where things seem to work, as opposed to what happens in Italy (Q6.29).

Insistent indication of terms like curiosity, attraction, fascination, desire, discovery of, specifically, a place very different from Italy. Interest in this *alien* country appears attributable first to its strangeness and a kind of *exotism* moved by many degrees of latitude. Two other reasons are most frequently present in the answers: the first one regards the congruence of the course of university studies, and the second concerns learning or practicing English. We find the first motivation present mostly in students from the School of Agriculture who explicitly declare real interest in the forests. The second reason, more shared, looks at the possibility of learning or improving English in a country other than the UK, which receives more mobility requests than can be filled.

Supporting the hypothesis that Finland was chosen almost accidentally, in a mix of casualness and curiosity, we have the answers to question 7. The majority of students declare that there weren't orientating or directing factors in their choice, least of all the results of PISA survey. Six students had course comrades, or friends, or a university tutor, or a family member who talked to them of Finland in very positive terms. Some say their choice was oriented by a deliberately cultivated «passion» for the north countries; their beauty, diversity, and aspects of cultural. One person refers to the quality of the Finnish educational system:

I've always had a grand passion for the culture and environment of Scandinavian that brought me to this choice (Q7.14).

It was a deliberate choice, moved by the desire to understand

good educational practices (Q7.21).

I've seen lots of Finnish films and heard lots of Finnish music.  
I love Finnish art, design and architecture (Q7.23).

Striking for its lack of awareness and research is the answer of one student who liked

the snow. I like skiing, downhill, but unfortunately when I arrived I discovered there aren't any mountains in Finland. All that snow for nothing (Q7.28).

Question 8 intended to fathom what were the main pieces of information the student possessed before leaving for Finland and so what was their image of the country. Also, we wanted to know what motivational role was played by Finland's world leadership in the OECD statistic.

Only one person said that the information available to them had considered the Finnish educational system, defining it as "among the best in the world". Another four referred explicitly to the efficiency and organization of the university system, to the administration of the courses, and to the campus where they would study. Answers with the greatest frequency considered aspects of nature and climate, and reinforced factors of strangeness in respect to Italy. Though a place of educational and academic excellence is *exotic* to Italy, what the students spoke of was a country rich with forests, of the hostile climate, cold (or rather, very cold), with not many hours of daylight in winter and with "lots of snow, always and everywhere". This information - gathered from the net, books for tourists, guides to Helsinki, photo books - is superficial and stereotyped. One student summarized what he knew before leaving this way:

it's cold, they eat only potatoes, and the girls are very beautiful. Information revealed to be true (Q8.29).

The other image is of a very civilized nation, liberated and organized, where public structures work and filled with services for its citizens and its students. Alongside this vision is one relating to the high cost of leaving in a country not "accessible to all economically". Finland is also judged to be technologically more advanced than Italy, and to be a place where everybody speaks English.

In answering question 10, nearly everyone said their Italian university had neither orientated their choice nor given any information on Finland's academic system. In two cases professors did prepare their students. One said some bureaucratic problems totally interfered with the choice. Before leaving for Finland, expectations of those interviewed were tied to university life and to Erasmus itself. From the majority of answers to question 9, we can infer that the principal desire regarding "coming closer" to the Nordic culture, connotes a quasi-ethnological interest more than a literary one. The couple strangeness/exoticism and the duo newness/diversity return constantly:

I wanted to compare their style of life with ours (in every sense: from studying to pure and simple pleasure *divertissement*) (Q9.11).

I had a great desire to know and to live this reality, their traditions, customs, and above all to try their daily life and not live there only as a tourist (Q9.14).

I wanted to discover a different country and culture that has maintained a diversity and uniqueness despite globalization (Q9.24).

Also present are personal expectations, objectives for individual development and of socialization, that appears on one hand connected to the age of the student and on the other to the Erasmus experience abroad, hence entirely connected to the peculiarity of Finland, like:

the desire to have an experience of independence and autonomy with the possibility of bringing myself closer to a Nordic culture (Q9.6).

I wanted to measure myself and put myself to the proof; the expectation of finding a community of young people in the same situation with whom to create a network (Q9.20).

I hoped to find a place that might please me, a place in which to live for some years (Q9.29).

In question 11 our interviewees judged their Finnish experience. In every case but one their judgments ranged from very favorable to optimum. They recognized, afterwards, the excellence of the

experience they lived either in learning or in human experience. The affirmations have recurrent elements: the efficiency of the organization, the fine level of the courses, the straight forwardness of direction, the good relationships with the teachers. These aspects were spoken of by everyone in very positive ways; and they signaled explicitly that such “opportunities are not present in Italy”.

I judge it a very good experience, very educational and individualizing, it created in me many positive aspects for studying, something that doesn't happen in Italy (Q11.14).

Optimum... The courses were very good, the university is well managed and organized, the teachers are very available and prepared (Q11.23).

Magnificent! They are lots less formal than in Italy and the education system is more practical. A professor loaned me his personal books for months... I was astonished and moved (Q11.27).

Attempting a more critical approach, questions 11 and 12 asked students to clarify the principle positive and negative aspects of the Finnish educational system. The respondents agreed in many positive characteristics of the system: efficiency, pragmatism, flexibility, transparency, seriousness, a slim bureaucracy, abundant funds, simplicity in management, availability of many extra-curricular activities, “internet everywhere”, and advancement by merit. They agreed in pointing out a particular teaching modality: planning of lessons, workshops, short and practical courses. Above all they agreed on the good relations with teachers who were available, interactive in dialogue, open to confrontation, punctual, attentive to each student, very highly prepared and teaching interesting subjects. The students' answers contained all the elements that international studies have put forward for the Finnish success. One gave a wonderfully complete summary, saying students

are chosen through a selection process and receive a salary to study so they work on learning without worrying about money. There are lots of discounts on public services, on various purchases, and taxes are reduced. The courses are attended by few, allowing teachers to interact directly and build knowledge in a personal way without having to learn

slavishly. Tests are “lighter” and there’s not just the final test. There are a lot of essays to write during the course and a lot of challenges along the way, allowing a better division of the study burden. The university campuses are few and organized as centers excellence allowing an improvement of resources and diminishment of costs. And, there are only primary faculties, no inter-faculties and sub courses. Each student personalizes their academic career choosing one major subject and one or two minors to widen their knowledge (Q12.25).

11 students criticized courses as too general, under-specialized. Nonetheless, over half of those interviewed mentioned no negative aspects, were surprised by the question, and admitted to never having asked it of themselves. It seems the differences they saw with Italy were so strong as to be disorienting in attempting comparisons between the two EU countries.

On question 12, everyone, without hesitation, affirmed they would indeed tell a colleague to take their Erasmus in Finland, a “fabulous country to discover”... “where there is loyalty and no stress”. A “very advanced” with “a multicultural environment”, “a very high level of integration”, and “pristine nature”. Exotism returns as a reason for the attraction and fascination Finland exercised on the Italian students:

although the climate doesn’t help and the people are more shy, it’s a country with a culture and a society totally different from the Italian ones, where there is a high-level university system that works perfectly (Q14.10).

It’s a fantastic country that has to be understood, like its inhabitants; once you enter in contact with their way of life and their mentality, it’s difficult not to be fascinated and enchanted (Q14.14).

It guarantees an openness of mind very different from the Italian system (Q14.22).

You come back and you are another person. I can say, I have made two right choices in my life: 1) choosing Padua 2) choosing Helsinki! (Q14.28).

## Conclusions

This paper examined the excellence of the Finnish scholastic model; and sought to understand the reasons for the lack of dedicated studies or of proposals inspired by it in Italy, above all, at the level of academic and scientific debate. The scarce diffusion of the results of the PISA survey, the limited preference for Finland as an Italian Erasmus destination of study; the superficial knowledge and stereotypical image of the country which makes elements of contrast to Italy prevail over aspects of excellence in orienting Italian University students toward study in Finland.

From the interviews, it emerges that for the Erasmus students tourist-type information prevailed over information on scholastic top-ranking and efficacy which were considered afterwards, as a direct result of the study experience in Finland. The choice of the Nordic country seems a casual or contingent decision without knowledge of the Finnish primacy, not at all oriented by the Italian academic institutions. Nevertheless, Padua students returned from Finland with a real knowledge of this country and their exposure to the Finnish model promise to be long remembered.

Almost paradoxically, the Finnish model acquires its form because its elements of substantial difference and distance, not only geographic from Italy, puts into evidence a fundamental deviation between the two countries. In Italy, quality, equity, participation, civility, and efficacy do not seem the keys of a system to analyze or to import, but represent only reasons for admiration and respect. A detachment sets in. The model of Finnish excellence annulling all comparisons with the problematic and disorganized design of the Italian educational system, thus, becomes a myth by contraries: too perfect for study, to different for imitation.

However, if the goals of the Erasmus program are to improve the quality of education in Europe, to promote exchanges and to help young people to acquire intercultural awareness and new skills, experience in Finland could become a good push toward shifting the Italian system in a different direction. Students Mobility to Finland can be the little seed from which positive change can birth.

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## Sintesi

Sin dalla pubblicazione dei risultati PISA 2001, l'eccellenza del sistema scolastico finlandese è stata ampiamente riconosciuta e apprezzata a livello mondiale. All'unanime celebrazione del cosiddetto modello finlandese hanno corrisposto vari tentativi di spiegare tale primato. Numerose analisi hanno descritto i fattori di "successo", enucleando gli elementi-chiave della lezione finlandese, in grado di coniugare qualità e equità, attenzione pedagogica ed efficacia organizzativa. La leadership della Finlandia riguarda anche l'Higher Education, caratterizzata da un modello accademico di alto livello, a forte vocazione tecnologica, fonte di una cultura dell'innovazione diffusa, strettamente intrecciata all'economia locale e allo sviluppo sociale.

Tuttavia, mentre i vari paesi del mondo guardano alla Finlandia come a un esempio

da imitare, l'Italia sembra non prestare particolare attenzione al Finnish model né trovare spunti utili dalle comparazioni ad ampio spettro offerte dalle statistiche OCDE. L'eccellenza finlandese non appare particolarmente apprezzata in Italia e, sia nel dibattito universitario sia in quello scolastico, la Finnish lesson non sembra affatto un fenomeno significativo dal quale apprendere o, quantomeno, su cui riflettere. Tale segnale sembra cogliersi, ad esempio, nello scarto evidente tra gli excellent learning outcomes delle università finlandesi e la mancata preferenza per le istituzioni finlandesi tra le destinazioni degli studenti italiani nel quadro dell'Erasmus Mobility.

In questo contributo ci si chiede quali sono le ragioni di questo mancato riconoscimento attribuito alla lezione finlandese e, soprattutto, quali i motivi per cui il primato della Finlandia viene così poco valorizzato nel nostro Paese, sia a livello dell'istituzione scolastica sia universitaria. In particolare, si vuol capire perché il modello del sistema educativo finlandese abbia destato in Italia una ricezione così limitata, soprattutto nell'ambito dell'Higher Education. Si cercherà di mostrare come l'attenzione verso la Finlandia non riguarda direttamente il suo primato scolastico, bensì attiene principalmente ad una visione stereotipata, legata ad alcune sue caratteristiche distintive. In questa prospettiva, tali qualità costitutive divengono peculiarità che enfatizzano l'elemento autoctono di diversità e di distanza rispetto all'Italia, trasformando il modello finlandese in un mito, virtuoso ma irraggiungibile.

Verranno inizialmente prese in esame le caratteristiche del sistema scolastico finlandese, ed in particolare quello universitario, mostrando il profondo divario con quello italiano. Sarà poi analizzata la mobilità degli studenti italiani verso la Finlandia nell'ultimo decennio, cercando di capire perché il paese nordeuropeo è, a dispetto della sua eccellente leadership, tra i meno scelti come destinazione di studio all'estero.

Infine, il lavoro proporrà i risultati di un'indagine condotta tra gli studenti universitari dell'Ateneo di Padova che hanno scelto la Finlandia come sede Erasmus. Si cercherà di capire, attraverso delle interviste semi-strutturate, quali siano state le motivazioni che hanno orientato la preferenza verso questo paese nordico e se l'alto livello qualitativo dell'Higher Education system finlandese abbia rappresentato una variabile significativa nell'indirizzare la scelta formativa verso questo paese.

Dalle interviste agli studenti Erasmus emerge il fatto che le informazioni generali di tipo climatico e turistico sul paese nordico spiccano su quelle relative al top ranking mondiale e all'efficienza, le quali vengono prese in considerazione solo a posteriori, come risultato finale e diretto dell'esperienza di studio finlandese. La scelta del paese del nord Europa come destinazione per la mobilità Erasmus appare, piuttosto, una decisione casuale o contingente, inconsapevole del primato finlandese, per nulla orientata dall'istituzione accademica italiana.

In maniera quasi paradossale, il modello finlandese si configura per i suoi elementi di sostanziale differenza e di lontananza, non solo geografica, dall'Italia, mettendo in evidenza uno scarto fondamentale tra i due paesi. La partecipazione diretta, l'efficienza

*e l'efficacia sembrano non costituire i fattori-chiave di un sistema da analizzare o da importare in Italia; essi rappresentano, bensì, dei motivi di ammirazione o di rispetto, acquisiti solo ex post. In una sorta di rovesciamento di prospettiva, tali fattori divengono indicatori di un distacco e di un contrasto difficilmente colmabili rispetto alla situazione universitaria italiana. In ragione di questa superiore specificità, il modello dell'eccellenza finlandese annulla ogni comparazione con il disegno del sistema scolastico italiano e diventa, dunque, un mito al contrario: troppo perfetto per essere studiato; troppo diverso per essere imitato.*