

THE CHALLENGES OF CROSS-BORDER EDUCATION: THE FINNISH-RUSSIAN CASE

Finland and Russia are important partners in international co-operation, and this is especially true for the universities and research institutes of Petrozavodsk and Joensuu. For the past year, Finnish-Russian co-operation in higher education has been moving ahead with an initiative originally sponsored by Finnish Ministry of Education, the Cross-Border University (CBU) Project. After so many years of bilateral contact between individuals and institutions in our two countries, the current project is both a continuation of, and a new way of meeting the challenges of cross-border relations between neighbours. In this paper I will discuss briefly some of these challenges and how the CBU is proposing to overcome them.

Finland's academic ties to Russia and the Soviet Union have been somewhat unique, due to the 'special' political relationship of monitored Finnish neutrality established after 1948 between the former enemies. During the Soviet period, the only formal agreement at the state-level concerning educational co-operation came in 1960, though the arrangements were largely symbolic with a large emphasis on language studies. The bilateral contacts between higher educational institutions that existed already during the Soviet period were very strictly monitored and controlled, and it can be argued that co-operation was superficial. Despite the challenge of these limited ties, however, Finnish researchers were well-poised to take advantage of the explosion in academic research in Russia that came with the collapse of the Soviet Union, activities that have been supported widely at the institutional and state levels in Finland ever since. The special relationship continued to be emphasised when Finland joined the European Union in 1995, as government and academic institutions – highlighting the EU's only land border with the Russian Federation – tried to position themselves as a bridge between Brussels and Moscow. After Russia signed up to the Bologna Declaration in 2003, the Finnish Ministry of Education committed itself to helping Russia implement it.

As EU enlargement in 2004 has eliminated Finland's border advantage within the union, the Finnish side has sought new and creative approaches to co-operation with Russia to try and maintain the close relationship – and the establishment of joint programmes as envisioned by the CBU is one of these approaches. For example, the CBU project continues and supports several government programmes: the Foreign Ministry's *Strategy for Co-operation in Neighbouring Areas* (2000) and leading role in the EU's *Action Plans for the Northern Dimension* (2000 and 2004) are connected to CBU development; the Academy of Finland's research programmes *Russia and Eastern Europe* (1995-2000) and *Russia in Flux* (2004-2007) have increased the academic contacts with Russian institutions directly and indirectly; while the Ministry of Education has funded special exchanges with related Finno-Ugrian - speaking minorities and regions of the Russian Federation.

The importance of general Finnish-Russian cross-border relations is underlined at many levels, for example this year's development strategy for eastern Finland is implicitly dependent upon cross-border co-operation (Etelä-Savon Maakuntaliitto 2005). The Cross-Border University, therefore, can be interpreted as higher education in support of these goals. The CBU project has, in some form or other, been discussed in eastern Finnish universities for some time as a logical next step beyond existing programmes. Several universities have been running successful international study programmes of various descriptions, including International Master's Degrees, involving increasing numbers of Russian students. Special mention has to be made of the International Master's Programme in Information Technology (IMPIT), which is running collectively at Lappeenranta, Joensuu, and Kuopio universities (see, e.g. Voracek 2003; Voracek & Zemcik 1999), and involved partners in Petrozavodsk and St. Petersburg. It was in 2003 that the CBU was given official blessing when it was identified in the Ministry of Education's 2003-2007 action programme, *Finland, Russia and International Co-operation* (Opetusministeriö 2003). In 2004 this initiative was concretised when the CBU was founded, administered from the University of Joensuu and involving 9 partner universities from both sides of the border (see Figure 1).

In 2004 stage 1 of the CBU project – a feasibility study – was completed. Currently, new funding has been organised until 2007. The conceptualisation of the CBU is still evolving, with many variations rang-

ing from virtual, semi-virtual or taught formats under consideration; in general terms, it is an umbrella structure that will co-exist with and complement existing programmes in its member institutions. The goal has been to identify and develop areas of common interest and expertise upon which to build high-quality Joint Master's and doctoral training programmes in English – important objectives identified within the Bologna Reform process (see, eg., European Union 2005).

Figure 1.

Location of CBU member institutions.



Students will enrol in CBU programmes at their home institutions on both sides of the border and will complete courses contributed equally by the various institutions involved, thus comprising the joint programme. At the moment, six subjects are being developed at the Master's level within the CBU framework, including business and administration, forestry, history, information technology, international relations, and public health. These subjects gradually are being introduced ('piloted') starting from the autumn 2005, with fully-functioning programmes envisioned for 2006/07.

The CBU has been conceptualised as a tool to realise many goals, the most basic of these being not only to increase the overall level of co-

operation between Finland and Russia in higher education, but to intensify it. The CBU is closely linked to the European-wide Bologna reform process and in Finland this has been formalised by the recent 2005 change in the Law on Higher Education, which conforms to Bologna criteria and emphasises such aspects as mobility, ECTS compatibility and standardised diploma supplements. With the CBU the aim is to promote the objectives of the Bologna process in Russia, providing a hands-on model of such principles as ECTS and the 3+2 (Bachelor's + Master's) degree programmes. Arguably, the CBU is a rejection of the models of cross-border co-operation with Russia of the past 15 years that symbolised and maintained inequalities between Western and Russian higher educational institutions. The principle of joint programme development is only possible because the CBU recognises that there is already a high level of quality education on both sides of the border that can support such a venture. At the Koli Border Forum's *Re-Bordering of Europe* seminar in Finland in 2004, a presentation by Dr. James Scott of the Freie Universität Berlin emphasised the need to embrace positive interdependence and to reject asymmetry, whereby partnership is difficult when a more powerful partner dictates to a weaker one. Indeed, another of the forum's participants who has since returned to Petrozavodsk to develop CBU teaching, Dr. Sergei Prozorov, echoed these thoughts when he stated that Russia too often has been treated as an 'object' by the West (cf. 2004, 17). For too long individuals and institutions in Russian have been relegated to the position of junior partner – 'minds without money' – and not given due credit. The CBU challenges universities on both sides of the border to recognise that we have much to learn from each other; its joint programme development underlining mutual information exchange by involving as partners only those institutions and subjects that can bring a high level of quality to the project.

There are many challenges and hurdles already encountered that must be overcome for the successful realisation of the CBU project. Funding is certainly one aspect that will determine the success of the project, and while European and Nordic institutions certainly have been asked to contribute, the challenge is for the individual partners to also find resources from within. One potential obstacle to the CBU is commitment – the commitment of university administrations, the commitment of individual faculties, departments and academic

lecturers to such a revolutionary idea. For the CBU concept does mean that control over instruction and programme content will be shared between institutions – institutions in a second country – so trust between and mutual respect of the Finnish and Russian partners must be built up. Perhaps the largest hurdle is that of quality assurance. Obviously, the very viability of the CBU depends upon being able to create programmes that will be recognised as high quality in the pan-European, and even global arenas. We know that even within the Nordic countries and EU – hence the initiatives that have led to Bologna – standards can fluctuate, that the national requirements for degree fulfilment can vary, that much can depend on individual lecturers, students, departments, and universities – all affecting the quality of education. And thus Russia’s implementation of the Bologna Reform, something that the current government has committed itself to, is vital in the successful realisation of the CBU idea.

These are just some of the difficulties that have been met and identified by the CBU administration – more will certainly arise. Within the current organisation, a CBU Council of Rectors, Working Group, and specialised academic councils comprised of individuals from university administrations, departments, and outside experts have been entrusted to address any problems that arise, and at the institutional level we must trust that the individual scholars and departments involved in the development of the pilot subjects will be there to advise us on how best to overcome these challenges in their fields. In summary, the CBU has the potential to take Finnish and Russian institutions forward in a new direction and in a new partnership – only time will tell if this challenge will be met, but the fact that efforts are being made is important in the overall development in cross-border co-operation in higher education.

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