
Finland

-the country of not belonging?

EKONOMIT
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How does it feel to study
and work in Finland when
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14 stories.

“Finland is a country where things work”: making the slogan a reality

Ted Apter, Tapio Heiskari & Mikko Särelä

Finland is a small, open, international economy that lives on export. We are a member of the EU and an attractive country for new arrivals. At present, just under half a million people with a foreign background live in Finland, of whom around 450,000 have a native language other than Finnish, Swedish or Sámi. People who have moved here did not just come to work: they came to build their future. These people’s hopes have been neglected in the past twenty years in political decisions, the labour market and in issues that affect people’s daily lives. Change needs to happen now, because it is not only right but

also inevitable due to the constantly accelerating global competition for labour.

Increased immigration is essential for the national economy. Even now, the increase in the Finnish labour force since 2000 is entirely thanks to immigrant-background workers. The Finnish population is ageing and the number of working-age people is decreasing. The ratio of workers to people needing care is worsening. We constantly have to cut back on the welfare state’s services as it is. The country needs more people in work overall to reduce the economic burden on shrinking future generations. We

need more workers to ensure sufficient tax receipts to pay for public services.

Instead of making the problems of immigration an impassable obstacle, we ought to think about what will happen if we do not significantly boost immigration. We can paint many pictures of the Finland of the future, but we they must be rooted in honest premises. Is there any alternative to immigration besides Finland's slow transformation to an open-air museum with a brilliant future behind it?

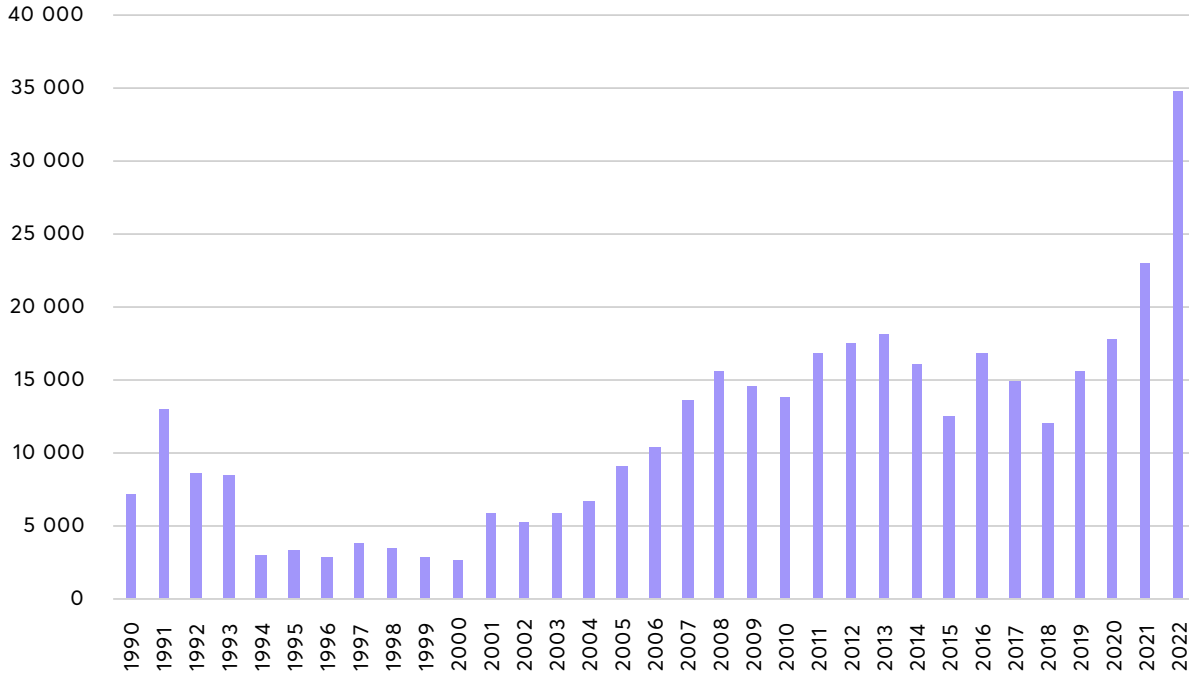
The national economy requires successful businesses that grow and employ. The labour shortage bedevilling firms is a persistent feature of many sectors. Addressing that shortage is one of Finland's key challenges. We must improve export companies' operating conditions by increasing the availability of labour. That will in turn will attract more investment to Finland. Without workers, there is no growth, no innovation, and

no success in international competition. The energy transition is one shift that gives Finland a fantastic premise for creating new business and attracting significant foreign investment. There is a lot of work to be done and not enough people to do it here at home.

The Finnish labour market also needs an update. The Nordic welfare system rests on the principles of equality and non-discrimination. These are not yet sufficiently visible in our workplaces. A modern job market requires understanding and action for diverse, equal and inclusive workplaces. What we do and how we do it must match our values. Immigration, recruitment and integration into the job market have problems that must be addressed.

Presently, people mainly move to Finland for work and family reasons. Clear majority of new residence permits are issued for these reasons. Studies is another reason for coming to Finland.

Finland's net immigration 1990-2022 (amount of people)



SOURCE: Statistics Finland

Those seeking international protection or quota refugees are a tiny minority of applicants. The reality of immigration is thus quite different to the picture drawn by public discussion and pub talk.

Change may make people suspicious and worried. Finns have long been a people who look the same, speak the same languages and profess the same faith. On the other hand, we have long had distinct cultural traditions within Finland and various minorities. The world changes, and we change with it, as we always have.

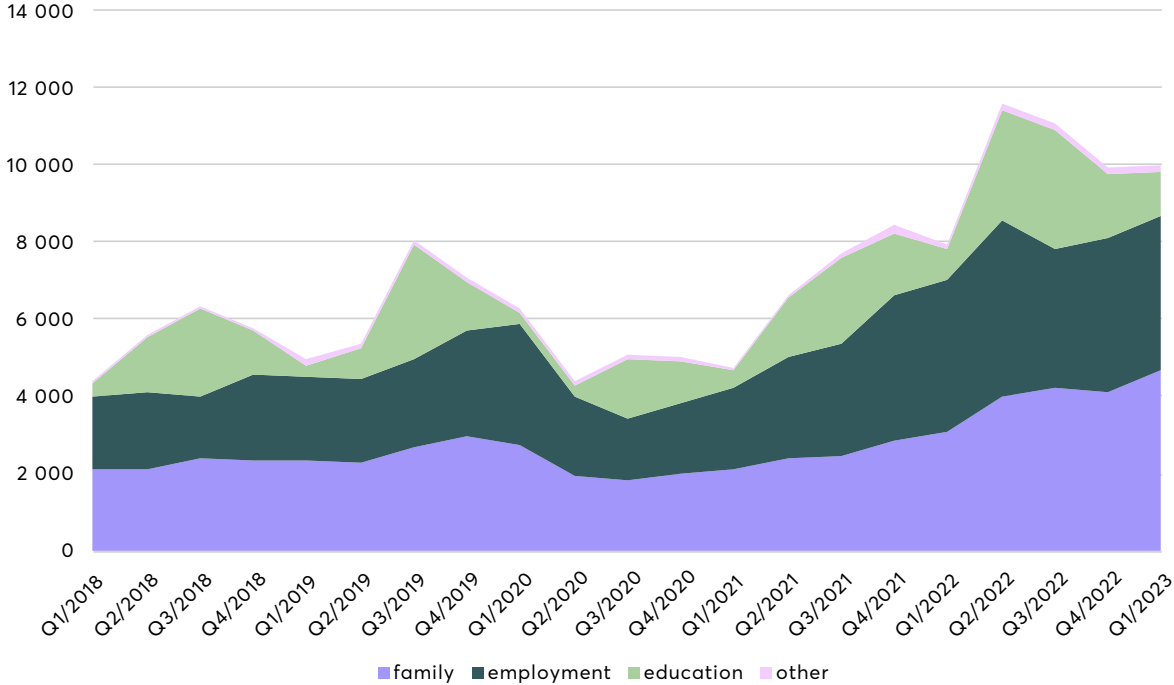
In this publication, we discuss immigration. We did not want to focus just on the highly skilled, talents or other unhelpful clichés. We hope that all immigration to Finland leads to new arrivals finding work and integrating into Finnish society. People of different backgrounds face a range of challenges. However, in this sense the division into labour, study, humanitarian and other boxes is seen more as an administrative

problem than a sensible way of visualizing immigration. All newcomers have potential.

When we think about Finland's ability to attract and retain people, we should keep in mind that immigrants do not move here to fund the Finnish welfare state. They come here to realize their dreams, start families and succeed. Everyone has their own preferences about what makes life uniquely good. Our shared task is to lay the groundwork so everyone can fulfil their dreams.

With this publication we wish to point out problems and solutions concerning immigration. At the same time, we want to especially give a voice to immigrants themselves, whose texts comprise most of this publication. We are very thankful to our fifteen writers whose views are irreplaceably important in solving these challenging problems. We also wish to express our unions' views and recommendations for improving the situation.

Issued first residence permits by applicant group



SOURCE: Migri, Akava Works

Admin and Bureaucracy

Regina Ainla



Getting to Finland – Finland's attractiveness

I am fortunate to call myself a national of more than one nation. Having been born in Estonia to then moved to Finland in search of our long-lost family that was displaced from Finland during the 1939 war, I have the pleasure to call two countries my home. However, the formation of my Finnish identity did not happen, as some might assume, automatically after hearing about my Finnish heritage as a teenager. Instead, I've come to it gradually. In the process I have travelled around and had a glimpse of the talent attraction and retention processes and the actual opportunities that international people have once they are part of society.

Finland, as the other Nordic countries, is well known for its clean nature and its technological prowess. There is the Finnish welfare state, which boasts of the work-life balance allowing people to have a career and a family, a wonderful public education, and childcare services. Overall, it has a positive image worldwide. It is only natural that people from countries where women

All the Nordic welfare states need more skilled working-aged people to fill the talent shortage.

must choose between career and family, are overpopulated, highly polluted, and expensive to raise a family in, are drawn to the Finnish and the Nordic way of life. Yet, this way of life is in fact under strain. The idea of a welfare state only works if all the pillars stand firmly. Two prominent pillars of the welfare state are the notion of near full employment and a thriving export economy.

In fact, as the Nordic Council of Ministers has pointed out in its 2019 and 2021 reports, all the Nordic welfare states need more skilled working-aged people to fill the talent shortage and fuel economic growth. Although the Nordic countries have offered political asylum to thousands of refugees during the refugee crisis of 2014–15, the need for skilled talent only increases with digitalization. The Covid-19 crisis further strained the welfare system with massive layoffs, but also pushed for faster digitalization of some lagging sectors, further increasing the need for skilled and ICT-literate talent. It is therefore imperative that Finland, alongside the other Nordic countries, deepens its retention efforts and makes Finland a welcoming place for international arrivals.

While most Nordic countries run some Talent Attraction and Retention campaigns, Finland must be commended for its exceptional efforts. Finland is the only Nordic country that has a national, cross-sectoral Talent Boost programme that seeks to systematically attract and retain international talent from abroad and better integrate the talent already in Finland into the labour market and society. The Talent Boost programme seeks to view the journey of an international talent holistically, considering all the areas of a person's life in society.

As I wrote above, Finland has a positive national brand. Should someone post online that Finland is willing to accept 'X' amount of people from 'X' nation, we would most likely have the full number of applications within minutes. However, WHERE would the applicants go upon their arrival? It is important to clarify that while Finland is a nation state, the actual integration of immigrants is not on the political state level. The integration of people takes place on the societal and individual levels. The people that come through the administrative jungle come to individual companies, their kids go to individual day cares or schools, they try to make friends with individual people on the streets and say hello to individual clerks at the store. It is not Finland as a political entity that people come but the individual and subjective experience of Finland as a whole.

Although the government is exceptional among the Nordic countries in its efforts to attract and retain the international talent that Finland needs, the individual experience of each person is what determines the actual attractiveness and the power to retain talent. Thus, reducing all possible 'pillar-to-post' experiences in migrants' journeys, which they often face when dealing with government offices, is highly valuable. There is often a fire wall blocking the information sharing between authorities, which leads to longer waiting and more confusion among service users. A one-stop-shop service could be implemented on a broader scale. Also, both companies and individual people, whether migrant or native, are residents of municipalities. They receive most of the services from the municipalities. The municipalities are in a position

to do a great deal, yet they are underfunded. Also, the services offered to migrants are often separate from the rest of the municipal functions. If the integration process and the labour market integration are to be viewed holistically, this division is redundant.

We're doing great! Are there any more problems that need to be fixed?

Navigating the labour market is still very difficult and most of the open positions move in the shadows of closed networks. The best way to get someone to integrate, which is of imperative importance in the welfare state, is integration into the labour market. Most of us want to be given the opportunity to use our skills and tap into our personal potential and be of value to our employers, colleagues, and society. It gives a sense of belonging and accomplishment that empowers us. Therefore, most of us embark on academic and professional pathways, we want to grow, contribute somewhere somehow, and be rewarded for our labour.

Finland has room to grow in retaining international students and employing international spouses. International students who study in Finland have chosen Finland and have already weathered the cold winter and seen how society works. It is a tremendous waste of talent attraction efforts to miss the opportunity and retain the students in Finland. It is common knowledge that most of the students who study here, wish to

The spouses are another pool of potential that is simply dwindling away.

stay but simply cannot find a way into the labour market. If they are outside of the EU, they are forced to leave soon after their permit expires.

The spouses are another pool of potential that is simply dwindling away. It is only natural that the highly skilled talents Finland attracts have spouses that are equally skilled. It is a shame to allow such talent to slip away due to poor integration and lack of networks. A common story in the expat communities is of the spouses of international professionals that are at home looking for opportunities to showcase their skills and become more integrated into society.

Similarly, the untapped potential lying in the reception centres is a wasted opportunity. Asylum seekers are potential international talents and future residents of Finland. It is limiting both theirs and the employers' opportunities if their labour permits and opportunities are suspended. It burdens society, is detrimental to the asylum seekers' mental health and may lead to unethical practices and deviant behaviour. This process needs to be revised.

There could and should be more initiatives that help asylum seekers find employment and grow their potential while they are in Finland awaiting their asylum decisions. Career counselling and direct cooperation possibilities with companies could be a concrete way to use this potential.

So, what can we do to help?

There needs to be more entry-level opportunities for students through internships and company cooperation. Companies should participate more actively in the service creation process. The public sector should not provide services for international arrivals or companies without engaging them in developing the service and allowing companies some ownership of the process. After all, the services shape the opportunities and with it the economic landscape of tomorrow. It should be done together.

Why not convene company 'round tables' to address these topics and hear concrete proposals from the companies? In particular, the companies and sectors experiencing the acutest

labour shortages would be valuable members as they clearly need solutions fast.

There should also be more incentive to offer international students internships starting from the bachelor's level. It improves their employability and greatly grows their networks.

Additionally, international spouses need internships and entry-level opportunities. This could be subsidized, on-the-job training, and more than wage subsidies, as they are quite low subsidies and are often not very well known or have a negative reputation among employers. We need to normalize the notion that when people are different or have a different way of working from us, they are not showing signs of sloppiness or unprofessionalism. It is simply a different way of working.

Companies that offer internships and spouse programmes or on-the-job learning opportunities for career changers and spouses should be commended for their bravery and forward thinking. As leading a company and fostering diversity is not easy, such steps should be highlighted and applauded. More leadership training and mentorship on how to tangibly bring about change in the company and how to lead diverse people should be offered to company managers systematically. It is not enough to have the HR or one diverse person in the company for cultural intelligence, when the systematic and budgetary decisions in the companies are taken by others. Decision makers need training and support in implementing diversity.

In addition to the above, there is a list of possible tangible steps that need to be taken:

- Faster and better process of recognizing degrees and skills earned abroad (especially in the medical sector).
- Understanding of permits, what they allow and how to transition from one permit to another. International arrivals need better advice about these to avoid falling into 'grey areas' due to lack of understanding of the permits.
- More spouse programmes and mentorship programmes. In addition to career mentoring, many people would

enter employment in a better way if they had therapy to support their mental health. This is a service that is greatly needed across the spectrum of socio-economic classes and for both migrants and natives. It is not offered enough.

- English day-care and school places to help companies retain the international talents that come with family and decide to leave due to the lack of study and day-care places.
- Diversity, cultural awareness, and questions of belonging should be normalized in our everyday discourse.
- There needs to be more representation and voices of the diverse and forward-looking Finland among the decision makers.

Finally, I would like to point out that it is a joy to call Finland my home and a privilege to work to make it a more welcoming place for both natives and migrants alike. It is perhaps utopian to imagine that the public sector or the government would meet all the challenges of the international community or an ever-changing society. It is, however, imperative that the ones with the legal and economic power to shape and influence the direction of the society, are intentional and forward looking in the policies that they implement. The framework that they build should be built while listening to the voices and seeing the needs of as many representatives of the society as possible. Like train tracks, the society and the administrative organs of the society are part of a big machinery, where the tracks for their movement and turns must be laid out well in advance with clear precision and understanding of future service users.

Where is our train heading and who is on it?

Applying to Finnish higher education institutions

Fon V. Krairiksh



Why did you choose Finland? Four stories about choice and future.

Finding peace and heavy metal

"I was waiting to use the toilet and this restaurant's kitchen was just pumping out heavy metal and I was like f*ck yeah – I could live here! These are my people! And the cold. I came here for the cold."

Raahim worked in Indonesia for some years after finishing his bachelor's degree. After he'd saved up enough money for a master's degree, he started to explore options. NYU offered him a place in 2015 but he couldn't afford the fees. Raahim took a little time to think. In 2017, he visited a friend in Finland and observed that people

in Finland speak English. Thinking he could get by with English, he googled his field of studies in Finland, and found the tuition fees affordable.

Raahim applied to one university in the UK, and in Finland. Finland was his first choice, though, and he was accepted. He's been in Finland since 2018.

Though Raahim has adjusted well to Finland and made a lot of friends, the ride hasn't been smooth. He was already beginning to feel the effects of burnout due to the stress of his studies and increased involvement in student associations. Then Covid-19 hit, and the result is that he's been managing burnout since 2019. "Life is totally different now compared to when I arrived. I can't push my body like I did before."

Now that he's done, the next phase of life will be searching for a job in the Finnish market. This is a little easier now that the job-seeking visa has been extended to two years for non-EU citizens. "One reason I want to stay in Finland is the work-life balance. People actually tell you to stop if you need to rest."

Raahim foresees some barriers to finding a job. Among them are language barriers and cultural barriers. "You need to be proactive. I needed to put myself in really uncomfortable positions. And you need people to vouch for you. The question of trust is fundamental here. Inclusion is not natural. There are many layers of gatekeeping here, and fear of the unknown, the other, and the foreign."

"There's an element of anger coming from frustration about the way things are socially."

**One reason I
want to stay in
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work-life balance.**

Especially in the tech sector there is a lot of prejudice and issues that prevent international students from getting employment."

Nonetheless, Raahim enjoys life in Finland. "Since I got here, it was like 'I think I found somewhere I could stay for the next 10-15 years. Finland just works on a bureaucratic level. Nature is nearby, and Europe is so close. It's a calming place for me. The vibe of the country is really good for me."

Testing the waters in Finland

Laime has lived in several countries, having moved around the world from childhood through to adult life. As she was finishing off her bachelor's degree in Seoul, she found she wanted to be closer to home, so she looked into some European programmes. Whilst in Seoul, she happened to meet some exchange students from Aalto who told her wonderful things about the Aalto community. Having done some research on her own, she set her sights on Finland. She also considered universities in Italy, Sweden and the UK. The free tuition for EU citizens, combined with the good reviews of the school and programme made Finland her first choice, and she was pleased to be accepted into her chosen school.

So far, life in Finland has been enjoyable. "I live with a friend on campus, which is really convenient and fun. And student life here is really rich. The opportunity to get sucked in really takes you."

Like Raahim, Laime decided to take the opportunity to put her studies on hold and dive into student life by joining the board of a student association. "I think right now I am testing myself, to see if I want to stay in a predominantly Finnish community. Language is a concern, of course, even though the rest of the board speak English around me. I am picking up some words in Finnish, but I am not officially studying Finnish right now."

Like many other international students, Laime has trouble finding opportunities to study Finnish alongside her studies. In addition to that, it can be quite difficult to get to know Finns. "Something I am worried about is getting into social circles. I won't say I have no Finnish friends, but I would say

I am not as close to them as I am to my non-Finnish friends. Also, the culture – I would say I am trying to learn but it's a work in progress."

All or nothing from the start

After graduating from high school, Hoc began his studies at a prestigious university in Haiphong and was enjoying his start to student life. His parents, however, thought he should expand his horizons and study abroad, and so they pushed him to apply for studies overseas. The only condition, however, was that he needed a full scholarship.

"I had an idea of what I wanted to study, but my family doesn't have that much money – so one of the criteria was to have a full scholarship. That was the only way. So, we started researching. The U.S. was out of the picture because the tuition fees were too high."

Hoc would have preferred to stay in Vietnam, where he had already completed a year of university. "It was more about my own situation than what Finland had to offer. And I didn't really want to go, so I sent only one application to one programme and now I'm here."

So far, Hoc has found the experience of living in student accommodation rather strange, and hasn't been able to make friends with his flatmates.

"I live in a flat with three other people, but we don't interact that much. So it's just me in my room. But my guild has been amazing. Lots of events and fun activities. Also, I really enjoy just going to random events where I know nobody."

After half a year in Finland, Hoc is not sure about his future here yet. "One thing I foresee could be a problem is the culture. I still don't understand it. The bureaucracy of it – I cannot speak or read Finnish or Swedish, which makes looking up bureaucracy, laws, and how to do these things really difficult unless I find someone who already knows how to do it. I am not that sure yet if I want to stay in Finland. The language is definitely a barrier. And my entire extended family is in Vietnam. It depends on what happens after my master's, if I can get a job, and what kind of job it is. And what kind of life I want to live. So, it's still up in the air at the moment."

The European Insurance No-Man's-Land

Ada was on a research stay in the USA, while completing her lab work for her bachelor's thesis, when she read a paper from Aalto.

"I found one good paper in a mass of very iffy papers around this topic, and I really liked the paper, the research, and the structure. I was curious, I checked where it was from, and it was from Aalto. So, then I looked up the lab and their research and it was very relevant to the field I want to enter. I looked up the programme, and I also liked the method a lot – there were fewer exams and more projects. I kind of fell in love with the idea, so I applied and got in. I've been here 1.5 years now."

She would have applied to a further three universities in the Netherlands and two in Germany but didn't, as she had already been accepted by Aalto. The relatively early application process at Aalto was the deciding factor, as she received her letter of acceptance before she got a chance to apply elsewhere. Other options she looked into were the UK, which was too expensive, and Italy, where the STEM universities in Italy didn't have the kinds of facilities suitable for her research. She also considered going back to the USA, but felt it was too far, and that the work-life balance in Finland was far better.

Here she has got involved in many activities. "I have my regular classes, and I also do some representative work. I'm an international tutor. I also work two days a week. I wish I could work less, but then I won't have insurance."

Getting a summer job during her first year in Finland caused Ada to fall into a European insurance no-man's-land. As she was working in Finland, Germany dropped her from the German national insurance scheme, saying she needed Finnish insurance. This was fine for the summer, but once the academic year began, and she only worked one day per week, Kela stopped insuring her.

"The thing is it is a bit complicated sometimes in Europe to get through this jungle of what you need to do. So, in a way you need to be insured where you work, but then Kela doesn't

insure you unless you earn 700-whatnot euros, which means you might need to work more than you might want. I think they check monthly, but no one knows this really – I am just guessing from talking to random people. I basically didn't know if I was insured or not for half a year, which led me to be worried and neglect basic healthcare, like for example, visiting the dentist."

Basically, there is no flexibility for students to explore work possibilities without being dropped out of basic healthcare. Barriers aside, though, Ada is considering remaining in Finland.

"I kind of like Finland – how things work, the nature, and the work-life balance. People speak English and they are willing to help me. I have relatively good opportunities here since I am already working. I might be able to continue in a PhD or find a good job here. In terms of navigating, I have an advantage because I speak some Swedish. But still, I notice that language is definitely a barrier, especially socially. I feel like it takes a lot of initiative to make lasting friendships."

Final thoughts from the author: In addition to difficulties navigating language and bureaucracy, Raahim, Laime, Hoc and Ada all raised concerns about social inclusion. Though finding a social group in which to belong is an important factor, it falls beyond the scope of work typically done in the name of the Finnish integration policy. These programmes typically aim to assimilate foreigners by teaching us how to live in Finland, instead of allowing us to contribute to communities that are meaningful to us. I have seen how effectively clubs and associations based on common interests include international students within the Aalto community. It is not by any means perfect – these associations would certainly benefit from consistent support, especially where language is concerned. However, it is my view that more investment is needed in including foreigners in free-time activities such as hobbies, culture, and sports. We should be aiming for participation and contribution, not integration, and creating opportunities for people to feel like equal members of their chosen communities.

Hard work and a bit of luck

Laura Alku



What are the chances of getting going on your career when the odds don't seem to be on your side? Well, let me tell you about it. To begin with, being a young woman in the tech industry already gives you a hard start. Now adding the fact of being a foreigner — with different ways of approaching problems and zero knowledge of the local language — sets you in an even more precarious position; you will need to work a lot harder to even get the chance to start looking for what you would love to do and develop further.

If I could summarize my personal experience on a recipe for a successful path, it all comes down to getting an opportunity to shine, networking, hard work, skills and yes, a bit of luck too. The journey has not been easy. However, I feel grateful, fortunate, and proud to have built my home in Finland and having the opportunity to live and raise my kids in a country, which despite its ups and downs has such deep roots in equality and trust.

I am originally from Bogotá, Colombia where I lived the first part of my life and studied to be an engineer. Approaching graduation as a bachelor, I won a scholarship which allowed me to continue my studies in Europe and further graduate as a

master from Italian and French universities. While in France, I met my Finnish partner and decided to move to Finland to start our life together. And this is where my story in Finland begins.

In 2010, during my last year of studies in France I started to look for a master's thesis position in Finland. Looking at my emails at that time I think I sent over 400 applications in different industries, and for most of those I didn't get a reply or just an automatic message saying they already found the perfect candidate. I still wonder what a perfect candidate would have been to get through those filters, but one thing was for sure: I didn't have the right amount or quality of experience to even get an interview.

After some applications, I changed my approach and started writing directly to people telling them about myself, what I had studied and my willingness to work. That approach worked a lot better. However, many of the positions they offered were not paid, so they were not my first choice to start my life in Finland, even if I would have had financial support from my partner, who was also a student at the time.

This was my first surprise about Finland. Accepting any of those unpaid positions was not a showstopper for me to move to Finland. What shocked me was the thought that money was not the defining factor. Thankfully, we did not have to go that route. After a few more emails and someone sending my curriculum around, I even got a chance to choose whether to move far north to Sodankylä or to Helsinki, because two different persons without personally knowing me or my work were willing to give me an opportunity.

I moved to Finland in 2011, with a 6-month contract, but with the idea of staying here, well, essentially indefinitely. And here comes my second surprise. I went to the embassy to get my residence permit and explained my plans to the person behind the glass. I feared the thought that they would see me as wanting to leech off of Finland and wouldn't give me the permit. On the contrary, they were supportive and instead of seeing me as a "problem" or a "threat" I was welcomed and encouraged to follow my plan, without the need to hide it or not say it aloud. Then, I started to realize I was moving to a place where

transparency and trust are highly valued, and I started to fall in love with it.

After finishing my master's thesis I got to continue my career as a doctoral student at the University of Helsinki. Soon after, I realized academic work was not my cup of tea, not only because I felt I didn't excel at it, but also because it didn't provide the job security and career opportunities I was looking for. However, for a few years, staying in academia was the safe and easy choice to continue having a job and to continue developing skills. However, it meant having to apply for residence permits for short periods and spending lots of time looking for jobs on the side, with no more success than my previous experience from abroad.

I was lucky enough, thankfully, to have an excellent supervisor and mentor, who helped and supported me in the early days of my career. For him the most important thing was, in his words "for me to realize what I really wanted to do". He opened a lot of networking opportunities for me, to meet people in the field and get a grasp of what changing from or staying in academic work would mean. As a side note, he was an immigrant, too. Thanks to the field I was working on at the university and its relevance in the industry, I was finally accepted to a summer internship and got my first chance to work in a company in Finland.

I enjoyed my work from the first day. The company I joined was international and even though the work I was doing was pretty much like what I was doing at the university, a new horizon opened to my eyes. Job security and support for career development opportunities are something you can get in a more structured way if you are working in a company. There are many things that from my perspective do not work to support academic careers in Finland, but my experience in that area is so limited that I won't comment much. I do think it is something that could be improved and fostered, because usually universities are one of the biggest nests for attracting foreign talent.

After the internship, I managed to stay in the company with part time contracts for some time, attaching myself to the idea that I could work on my unfinished doctoral studies in the company. I did realize quickly that that wasn't going to be

the case and decided to start looking for opportunities inside the company. My approach was simply to go talk to people. And here is another thing I like about working in Finland. There are no hard lines of hierarchy between people, and you can approach people with decision making power with no ceremonies or special treatment, which is far from the case everywhere. So, I went and talked with people. I told them what I was looking for and one of them gave me an opportunity. An opportunity that allowed people around the company to get to know me, my skills, and the quality of my work. Thereafter I got my first indeterminate contract and a breather when it came to job security. At that time I had been in Finland for three years.

Up to that point I had only concentrated on securing a job and having the means to continue living in a country I found matched my core values of transparency and trust. And of course I valued the opportunity to continue living with my partner in his home country. After that, the fun started. I quickly realized I wanted to be a leader without leaving the technical side, which meant I needed to be an expert with leadership skills. I knew it was going to be hard as many of the technical leadership positions seemed far away for a young foreign woman. It took me years to gain people's trust on technical matters, even with a master's degree in engineering and several years of experience on the subject. Leadership, on the other hand, is from my perspective something you learn with time and improves by building relationships with people. So, it required a lot of work, trials, successes, and errors.

I think what I found to be the most challenging part was gaining the trust of people inside the organization in a language that was not even my mother tongue. The business language in Finland is English, and for the most part I haven't needed to learn Finnish to further my career. However, many important conversations happen in Finnish, and it sort of becomes a must-have skill if you want to be part of non-official discussions and to get to know your colleagues better as persons. I still have some work to do on this, but it hasn't been a stumbling block. I have also always had the opportunity to

attend language courses during working hours to keep learning it.

Perhaps one of the most positive aspects of working in Finland is that even though I have been away from work for a total of 23 months due to three maternity leaves, it hasn't been a defining factor in furthering my career. In fact, two of the three times I was promoted upon my return. That, combined with the fact that in Finnish working culture family life is built-in in terms of flexibility and work-life balance, made Finland a great place for me to become a working mom and enjoy every part of both sides. This is again something that is far from the case everywhere.

All this said, I think I have been extremely lucky to have found a company that has given me the opportunity to grow and become a technical leader despite all the initial odds. Not all has been easy, as it has required a lot of resilience, people's understanding, hard work and patience. Day by day, I continue working on building my path forward. One thing I have realized is that the more I move up in the organizational ladder, the opportunities seem to shrink in the job market. Somehow it feels that even with all the experience and expertise I currently have, I would again need an opportunity to shine on a different level. This could maybe be a feeling everybody experiences when moving forward in their career, but being part of minority groups makes me feel I need to work harder to get where I want to be.

All in all, my experience as a foreigner working in Finland has been a road full of experiences, luck and relationships. I have had great leaders on my side, who value me as a person, not as a label, and who have given me the chance to try, make mistakes, grow and shine.

International students should thrive, not merely survive

Owain Hopeaketo



International students face a wide array of challenges, and need more help than they are currently getting.

I moved from the UK to Finland in 2016 to begin my master's studies. Like most international students, it was my first time living away from my home country, and it was a decision that took a lot of planning and dedication. In many ways, I had every possible advantage I could have had coming here. I already had a Finnish girlfriend, who made finding a place to live easy. My mother tongue is English, so I could study, and live much of my life, still in my native language. I am white, non-religious, and from a culture not that dissimilar to Finland. Despite all that, I can comfortably say that moving to Finland was the

hardest thing I have ever done. It was also without question the best.

As an international degree student in Finland, you quickly have a choice to make. Do you stay in groups with other international students, most of whom are only here for one semester, or do you try and break down barriers and integrate yourself with Finnish students? The height and number of the barriers depends on many factors, but ultimately there are two main ones. Firstly, especially for those who come here at master's level, the groups you are trying to integrate with consist of people who have known and studied together for many years. Becoming a part of an existing circle is extremely difficult, even without the second barrier – that of language.

When we are discussing the integration of international people to Finland, the Finnish language is an unavoidable topic. At university level, while almost every Finnish student will speak sufficient English to get by, it is understandable that they also enjoy speaking in their mother tongue. From my experience, they are generally happy to speak English, and know it will be an important language in their working life, but there is obviously a limit; a time when it is just simpler or easier to say something in Finnish. During my time here, I learned to understand that, and it's an important thing for any international arrival to remember. Just because Finns can speak English well, doesn't mean they should have to do it all the time.

On the flip side however, I have often seen it said that international students are too lazy in their Finnish learning, or in their efforts to integrate with Finland. This too is a dangerous statement, and one that leads to blaming the international students, and not the system that should be supporting them. As I began above, being an international student is difficult. You are studying full time, getting used to a new country, hunting for a job, doing your best to integrate, and trying to learn a new language, all at the same time. Even with an otherwise perfect life, and no extra struggles, that is a lot for anyone. Then consider, how often do young people, many of whom are living away from their home country for the first time, have a perfect life, with no extra struggles?

International students have all the same concerns and difficulties as everyone else, without their past support network to help them. Yes, it should be expected that someone who intends to live in a country should learn its language, and yes, there are the people who are speaking Finnish well after a year or two here. That doesn't make those who don't or can't do that lazy, or mean they are doing any less than their absolute possible best. It is up to everyone else to have patience, to have humanity, and to not blame them for something largely out of their control. It is up to all of us to do all we can to help, and to create a country that is as helpful and welcoming to everyone as it can possibly be.

There are already many things existing that can be considered as doing this, that are making Finland an easier place to live. First off, and extremely importantly, in general Finland is an amazing country to live in. It has one of the highest qualities of life in the world, and a people who are happy; at least in societal welfare, if not always in their outlook! The nature, and especially the closeness of it, is beautiful. Factors such as crime and homelessness are low, and trust levels, in other people and in authority, is high. These overall make a country that is attractive to foreigners — indeed, I have lost count of the number of times I've talked about the wonders of these things with international students.

Then, from my personal experience, is the student association system and student life in

**International
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general. Student associations and unions represent so much more than just being the organizers of fun events, although I also don't think the importance of parties and similar happenings can be underestimated. Informal events give chances to meet, to mix and integrate, and to build networks that are vital as an international student. They give the chance for life-changing opportunities, or simply work to create memories that last for decades to come. It's those kinds of positive times and experiences that make someone feel at home in a country, that bind them to it.

On a wider level, student associations are vital in so many processes, for example providing a more informal link between students and companies. My first job offer in Finland, which unfortunately I couldn't accept, was given to me in a sauna at a company event arranged by my student association. It's through my association that I learned all about the industry I was now studying in, and made a range of connections that I never could have got alone. It's how I made friends that I hope last me many more years, and how I now have the job I do. This is without getting into the topic of student advocacy, and the value with which student voices are held, which still amazes me.

However, I know from discussions with students at other universities that my very positive experiences are not universal. Even between technology campuses there are large differences, and in many areas international students struggle to integrate. A lot of this comes down to the universities, who in my opinion often don't do enough to assist the integration process. The student association system in Finland is amazing, but they need help and support in adapting to a changing student group. If international students are simply thrust onto them, without sufficient additional resources and training, it inevitably leads to a poor end result.

For a student coming at master's level to Finland, the timeframe in relation to getting a job is extremely small. Realistically, you have one summer job opportunity before beginning your thesis. Applications for that summer job begin a few months after coming to the country, when you have barely settled in, and in engineering many

master's theses happen as a direct result of a summer job in the same company. Finally, research has shown that having a master's thesis from a company, instead of just in a university research group, greatly increases your chance of having a job in industry after graduation.

We could then simplify this to saying that many international students are, after only a few months in Finland, making job applications that will decide whether they have a job after graduation, and thus whether they are able to stay in Finland at all. I think anyone would agree that that is a tough situation to be in, with an almost impossibly high bar, and that those students should have all the help they can get, from everywhere possible.

It is then the responsibility of student associations, student unions, universities, trade unions, banks, companies, governmental bodies, and so many more types of organizations, to do all they can to make this process fairer and a good result more achievable. We need international students to have greater knowledge about working in Finland, and greater opportunities to become a part of it. This isn't a simple thing to achieve, and cannot be solved overnight, but every action towards the goal is a positive one.

Ultimately, it comes down to doing actions that match your words. From the smallest student clubs to the largest governmental bodies, almost everyone agrees that internationality is the future, that international students play a vital role in the betterment of Finland on a global stage. Now is the time to make that happen; to make Finland not just be a country where international students can survive, but one in which they can thrive.

Building connections to the job market

Kamilla Sultanova



Planning a career, guidance etc.: Building connections to the job market, networking, working while studying?

Finland has become a dream, and an accessible one at that, for students worldwide. Recognized top universities, work-life balance, a trust-based society, and career prospects are all tempting promises of Finland as a study-and-work destination. Yet, in a recent survey, a sizable 47% of students considered leaving Finland, whereas 32% see their career prospects as poor. Despite that, 86% of them have settled in Finland well.

To avoid this brain drain of each highly educated talent in Finland, a structured and immersive approach is needed to use study time **for building connections to employers and networks and for getting a sense of the Finnish job market.** In the following article, I explain why anchoring international students' study period in work

experience is essential for career development, understanding the Finnish context and finding their own relevance in a competitive job market.

As a past international student, I can boast an exciting journey of learning new cultures, studying with people from all over the world, adopting new learning styles and being responsible for my own life abroad! Such a liberating jump into life as a young woman from Uzbekistan! However, the path of starting a career in the Nordic countries made me vulnerable, with difficulties entering local networks, residence permits, lack of trade-union support, being lost in translation during recruitment and overcoming language barriers. In addition, I have also followed two integration courses in both Danish and Finnish language centres that left me with mixed experiences of empowerment and disempowerment. Understanding my own identity both as a student and a transitioning working professional was a long and thorny process, in which I wished I had got more help and guidance early on. As for Finland, it is a huge waste of talent pipeline and capability when students are left alone to figure out how to navigate their future. Thus, I use my lived experience in supporting international arrivals in Finland.

Students should not be left on their own in Finland!

When you do not know how to accelerate your career options and do not know what is on offer, how can you be proactive? Students are welcomed with arms wide open but a lot of intrinsic knowledge on how to seize the opportunities right from the start is lost in translation. It is about building awareness of how the Finnish study environment functions, as well as making others' career stories readily available. Here, it is also good to be aware that Finnish students have typically amassed extensive relevant

and other work experience before graduation. International students tend to have less work experience, particularly in Finland, when they graduate, and they are not often aware of the benefits of working while studying. On the contrary, many who want to work face significant difficulties in finding a job relevant to their studies, as evinced in numerous surveys.

Career services dept — a one-stop shop for building local self

I have worked with students from Business College Helsinki (a vocational school) to graduate students from the Hanken School of Economics. Regardless of their profession, their ethnic backgrounds meant they faced similar challenges of pushing through and being recognized. Thus, in my work with Helsinki regional university co-operation at the Hanken School of Economics, my task was to help speed up students' chances of engaging with employers through internships, mentorship relationships, project work or thesis co-operation. A lot of students heard about mentoring for the first time, while others have neither an updated CV nor LinkedIn profile for positioning themselves on the Finnish job market. It is not surprising as students come from across the world with different study and working cultures.

Cities and universities are natural first points of contact with the community, as are university career services departments. When they work well, they are one-stop shops for building one's (new) local self. Because international students do not have the social networks their Finnish peers have, very few know that they should start building a CV from the very start of their studies. Looking for relevant work experience just before graduation is too late. Thus, I encourage everyone to be a conversation starter regardless of whether you are a local or a foreign student.

It is a huge waste
of talent pipeline
when students are
left alone.

Social capital as a gateway to one's career and belonging in Finland.

There is not a keynote speech or workshop that I do where I do not mention how vital social networks and building social capital are for advancing students' career, making friends, and achieving professional goals.

Everybody is responsible for their own well-being. There is help but you need to know how to get it. Living abroad is lonely before one opens a network or a community to start growing new roots. True, during one's studies there is a lot to consider and take in. New country, routines, relations, roles and reactions. However, it is important to help international students to get strategic and be willing to build relations with locals. Because it takes so much time to break the ice. I have been there. It is a painful quest for inclusion and belonging. I consider offering the buddy and mentor system to everyone crucial for the students to fully function, not sporadically, on temporary funding or on some pilot project. A teacher in Taivalkoski offered this initiative as a "Finnish cultural friend" for all newcomers.

Here are some call-to-actions given to thousands of students to build relationships and connections:

- 1. Join professional organizations such as trade unions:** Joining trade unions is a great way to learn and build connections with other professionals in the industry. These organizations have regular events and meetings to take part in and they are a space where everyone is welcome.
- 2. Attend industry events:** Attending industry events such as conferences, seminars, and trade shows, including ones hosted by universities. These events offer great opportunities to meet and network with other professionals in the field.
- 3. Use social media:** Use social media platforms such as LinkedIn to connect with other professionals in your industry.

Join relevant groups and engage with others in the industry by commenting and sharing your own thoughts and insights.

- 4. Volunteer:** Volunteering can be a great way to build connections and gain experience in the field. Looking for volunteer opportunities that are related to study field, industry, or interests, is an excellent way to give back and build your CV. It also builds confidence and opens doors to other opportunities.
- 5. Seek out mentorship.** Finding a mentor with relevant lived or professional experience can be a valuable way to gain insights and build connections. Looking for mentoring programmes or approaching a person who has success in professional interests can open doors in itself.
- 6. Attend language courses.** Attending language courses in Finnish or Swedish is a key to show curiosity and willingness towards Finnish culture, helps starts conversations and better understand Finnish working culture.
- 7. Join communities.** There are numerous online and offline communities which can become a gateway to making local friends, belonging and building a professional identity.
- 8. Do sport:** Sport is a gateway for a Finnish network. Trying sport is a long-term but a win-win solution to keeping fit and gaining access to a social network
- 9. Increase master thesis cooperation with companies.** Landing a thesis cooperation with a company increases employability and exposure to employers.

Many universities do offer support, through MOOCs and career support and mentorship, as do cities and regional hubs. However, it is not continuous, it is sporadic and not always widespread. I have come across difficulties with engaging lecturers to help students with thesis cooperation as it was not part of their job description. Working on inclusion and equity requires a whole-university approach, not just a career department.

Finnish professionals — build relationships to increase integration

During the last few years topics of diversity, equity and inclusion have become buzzwords and well researched in the job market and education.

Racism and discrimination due to language, religion and ethnic background are prevalent in higher education and in recruitment. Both international students as well as Finns with various ethnic backgrounds face similar challenges when it comes to getting access to the job market. For this, many employers, both public and private must examine the way they recruit and their workplace cultures and work with diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) systematically.

Employees in workplaces need to accept people who speak little Finnish or Swedish. Similarly, trade unions need to better support this recognized group of ethnically diverse workers and advocate for their welfare, and share the task of integration with universities. In addition, in a non-profit space, volunteering roles also need to be offered in other languages to encourage participation in civil society.

Belonging and integration do not end with language skills. It is not necessarily the Finnish language that offers career options, it is relationships that do. English can be used as a bridge to engage in learning about Finnish culture, but every professional needs to be part of creating Finnish inclusion as a reality in every single workplace.

Relationships between people is a sign of trust and wanting to be exposed to a different world view. It is a sign of valuing each other not being afraid of otherness.

Would it not be a joy to have a friend who comes from another country?!

Why developing language skills matter?

Larry Abdullai



Studying in Finland: Why developing Finnish/Swedish-language skills matters

Why do you have to bother learning the Finnish or Swedish language when it is evident that employers will not offer you job because your effort is never enough? These were the questions some colleagues posed to me when I decided to dedicate time and effort to studying Finnish. They might be right, at least to some extent, as many companies and recruiters today still demand native-level Finnish language skills from international talents. However, the beauty of language goes beyond just the sake of securing a job. In my native Ghana, over 70 languages are spoken. Within one community, there could be up to five different languages spoken and to coexist and appreciate the beauty of other cultures, it was necessary to learn each other's language. It was surprising at first

when I moved to Finland in 2015 to learn that the key to getting job was by knowing Finnish when in fact, about 70% of the population speaks English. After earning a master's degree in strategy, innovation and sustainability from LUT University in 2018, the reality about this KEY (Finnish language) dawned on me when the dozens of companies I applied to all issued a standard rejection based on my inability to speak Finnish. I worked as a cleaner and night newspaper deliverer (Posti) alongside my studies from 2016 until March 2021. There were times when I would be cleaning supermarkets and see some of my Finnish classmates, professors and provost coming to shop. I felt I had disappointed my professors and the entire university for wasting their and my time, knowledge, and financial resources.

In 2019, I registered with the Employment and Economic Development (TE Office) as I felt underemployed. At first, despite narrating my ordeal, officers at the TE Office said that I was not their priority and referred me to a recruitment consultancy firm to continue applying for jobs for three months and only if I was not successful under the firm, could I be their client. After three months, I had applied to dozens of open positions given to me by the TE Office and the consultancy firm based on my previous work experience and current qualifications. The evidence was clear as nearly all the companies cited lack of language as an excuse for the rejection, even with jobs that in my estimation did not require Finnish. I must add that I was desperate and did not discriminate whether the job fitted my qualification or previous work experience as sales and business development executive. Finally, after presenting compelling evidence that language was the only barrier preventing me from getting a job, the TE Office offered me a place to go to Sampo to a year of intensive Finnish language studies.

I was excited, highly motivated and committed and no amount of discouragement from friends and will stop me from embarking on this adventure, because I still had my eyes on that KEY to my dream job. Fast forward to 2020 after completing the one-year intensive Finnish language course and passing all four parts of the national language test (YKI test) with a B1 language level

(intermediate). I thought to myself, I now have the KEY. But I was wrong. I started applying again to many of those companies I had applied to. To my surprise, I was late, the lock had been digitalized while I was busy developing my Finnish language skills. As such, I needed that KEY plus a network to unlock the job market. In one instance, I requested an explanation from a company why I was not selected to help me work on those missing skill sets. The recruiter replied that yes, I have good qualifications and language skills, but my work experience from Ghana has been outdated because, for the past five years (2015-2020), I have not worked in Finland in my field. Meanwhile, this was the pe-

Many companies are afraid to be the first to give an international talent a chance.

riod of my master's degree and Finnish language studies. Many companies are afraid to be the first to give an international talent a chance, but nearly all of them demand that such a person has working experience in Finland: how? This was the straw that broke the camel's back, so I concluded on three last options: change my job search focus area from industry to academia, move from Lappeenranta to a bigger city or acquire Finnish citizenship and move out of Finland. Fortunately, I got a fully funded PhD position in Lappeenranta-Lahti University of Technology in 2021 and I am on my journey to becoming a Doctor of Philosophy in Software Engineering. I also acquired Finnish citizenship together with my four beautiful kids in December 2022 and Finland is now my second home. I am forever grateful to Elina Hannikainen-Himanen who is the LUT University career service coordinator, Kirsimarja Blomqvist (Professor of Knowledge Management at LUT University)

who offered me my first job contract during my unemployment struggle, and finally my current PhD supervisor, Jari Porras (Professor of Software Engineering at LUT University) who had the trust and confidence in me for the PhD position.

Lessons learned within my seven years of stay in Finland

1. To my fellow international students/ talents

I only learned at a later stage (thanks to the LUT Career service where I did an internship) that over 85% of jobs in Finland are never advertised, and the 15% are sometimes just to fulfil recruitment criteria because they already found a suitable candidate before it was advertised. As such, international students who wish to penetrate the Finnish job market should focus on these 85% hidden jobs through strategic networking as soon as they start their studies. Don't wait till you graduate to start networking and job searching. Your Finnish course mates, colleagues, and professors are your best bet to start your networking journey. Also, actively use the services offered by your university career centre and participate in recruitment events and job fairs (Duuni Day). LinkedIn is another great avenue to establish a network. Be proactive, surround yourself with positive people from diverse countries (don't hang around with only people from your country), and stay positive. Furthermore, if you intend to live in Finland, Finnish or Swedish skills become necessary, not only because of the job but also because it helps you integrate into Finnish society and appreciate the Finnish culture and its people.

2. Role of the University Language and Career Service Centre

International students have particular challenges and needs, requiring special programmes and services tailored to them. There should be a career counsellor who understands

these needs and challenges and could prepare international students for the job market in Finland. Among the challenges is the language barrier. There should be language studies including intensive summer schools to get a student's Finnish or Swedish language proficiency level to B1 level by the time of graduation. Furthermore, university career centres should actively collaborate with companies to secure internship positions for international students during their studies. Finally, after graduation, universities should find a way to continue supporting their graduates until they find a job.

3. To recruiters and employers

Job advertisements should be public information and clearly mention the job description and requirements. The job advert should state if Finnish or Swedish is a must, why the language is required, and what level of proficiency is expected. Please note that it is unfair to request native-level Finnish or Swedish language skills from foreigners. If such fluency is required, justify it, and maybe write the advert in Finnish and mention that English skill is required.

Finally, although many are of the opinion that more services should be provided in English to attract more international talent to Finland, I believe this is tackling just an aspect of the bigger problem. The main problem is that the attitude and mindset of recruiters and employers toward hiring international talents must change. At least 70% of Finnish citizens can speak English, yet employers give excuses that their customers are Finnish speakers and therefore require native-level Finnish language skills from job seekers. Unless these companies are comfortable only operating in the Finnish market forever and don't have plans to grow and expand to other countries, they can afford to keep their current status quo. Otherwise, these international talents can be a good springboard and resource for Finnish companies to internationalize and become multinational firms.

Applying for a job

Inga Chernova & Jessica Christian



Applying for a job in Finland as an international talent

Being a foreigner is never easy. One could say integrating into a new place is a job in itself. Psychologically, moving countries is considered one of the biggest stressors we may encounter. And professional integration plays one of the biggest roles in this process.

Imagine waking up in a place that is new to you. Your relatives are not around, you have no friends, you don't speak the language, and you don't understand yet how the system at this place works. On a practical level, you cannot ask your parents if you are unsure about taxes, you cannot ask a high school friend on how to get Kela benefits, you cannot ask your former study buddies for interesting job opportunities. This is the reality that almost every international arrival goes through, in every country, and specifically in Finland.

Of course, no one just wakes up at a place. Usually, it takes a long time preparing for the move and learning about the new country. But even though a lot of international migrants do their homework before arriving in Finland, the job search sets boundaries that cannot be overcome no matter how much one prepares. This is a sys-



tematic challenge that can only be solved with crucial decision makers working together.

Currently, there are almost half a million residents with a foreign background in Finland. Almost a quarter of the working population are unemployed and even more are underemployed. A lot of un- and underemployed international arrivals have a higher education and are highly skilled. The challenges they face on their professional path are seen as early as the application phase.

Finland is a club you need the key for

Almost 80% of all job openings in Finland are not publicly advertised. That means, you cannot possibly get a job unless you have a relevant contact who can introduce you and vouch for you. Naturally, that is almost impossible for people who just arrived in the country and have no network. And building a network takes time and energy.

That is why places like The Shortcut and communities like International Working Women of Finland are important since here people can acquire relevant contacts for their future careers.

Having said that, it is worth pointing out that people who recently arrived in the country will probably be at a disadvantage since, no matter how hard you network, those who were here longer have higher chances of having deeper and more connections.

That is why a systematic change is needed.

Employers should provide equal opportunities to people, regardless of their network and place of origin. Making it mandatory to have job openings advertised publicly can open doors to many people, and having anonymous applications, where people are assessed based on their merits can be a game changer.

Is language really a barrier?

In the era of globalization, English is being used as a working language in many countries around the world, with Finland being no exception.

If companies want to compete globally, they need to accept that English will become the

common spoken language, even at the Finnish workplace.

Around 70% of Finns report being able to speak English, many of them fluently.

Nevertheless, most of the job openings require applicants to speak Finnish. While it's claimed as a necessity for many jobs, often there may be no actual need for Finnish as a working language for the rest. Oftentimes this is even a "false" argument where companies for example say that their team members HAVE to speak Finnish but their work does not even include direct contact with Finnish customers.

When talking to a number of employers regarding jobs that don't require Finnish as the working language, the answer is often "we don't want small talk to be affected by the language barrier".

With that in mind, it is worth pointing out that diverse teams generate higher revenue, have higher cash flow, and have a faster decision-making process. Thus, the question is: "Does the possibility of chit chat in Finnish really compensate for all the benefits of having a diverse team at the workplace?"

On the other hand, the question should be asked: What is "good enough" when it comes to speaking Finnish?

A lot of Internationals who moved to Finland have a basic knowledge of the language and are willing to learn on the job. And quite often, a job doesn't require full proficiency.

Being more flexible with the company culture and admitting that there are different levels of proficiency we may invite a lot of people into the professional world of Finland, while making companies more diverse and inclusive.

Knowing how to apply is a skill in itself

Often we hear "I get offers from my home country but not from Finland".

Even though different countries may need different skills, quite often the obstacle lies in the way people apply for jobs.

Application expectations and customs are very different for each country. In certain

Often immigrants struggle because they use the format and style they know from back home.

countries, application forms are very official and formal, and this can feel alienating for Finnish recruiters even if the talent is equally skilled as others.

Often immigrants struggle because they use the format and the communication style they know from back home.

Learning how to apply is a skill that every person has to learn; but it's even harder for non-Finns who might have some knowledge about application ideas and preferences from their home country.

That's why we at The Shortcut offer courses on how to apply for jobs at our workshops, during the career coaching, and on our online Learning Hub.

Specific support for highly-educated immigrants is not available on a municipal level

Being grateful for the possibility of having support for people who are unemployed, we still must acknowledge the fact that current services don't always take the peculiarities of the professional profile of highly skilled Internationals into account.

For example, many people in our community have had the experience of their TE officers recommending them to become cleaners or couriers even though they hold a master's or PhD.

That shows that the services available to the job seekers may not be designed for the community of highly educated international arrivals. Some of the biggest cities are working on better services for highly educated migrants and unions support them, but there is still a lot of work to be done.

Illusion of equity in Finnish job market

Lukumanu Iddrisu



In the last two decades, Finland has become one of the countries of interest for tens of thousands of international students in pursuing higher education — to which I am not an exception. Several surveys have shown that the overwhelming majority of international students wish to stay in the country after graduation. However, there are many factors that have become roadblocks. Personally, I secured a place at the Vaasa University of Applied Sciences (VAMK) on the International Business degree nine years ago. The decision to study in Finland was born out of the positive feedback I heard about the Finnish education system such as quality, flexibility, facilities, and job opportunities. Although most of what I heard was true, the only thing lacking was relevant job opportunities for international students. I found it hard to land an internship role whilst in school. Since practical training was mandatory in the curricula of the university of applied sciences, I had to travel to my home country to fulfil that.

Secondly, the job I secured in Finland was not compatible with my qualification and it was not until 2019 that I had a job that had tasks relevant to my skills and qualification.

In essence, it took five years to finally get a relevant and suitable job. How many people can wait this long? How many can continue to stay in an environment where career dreams are hard to realize? This story of mine is a reality for many international students and highly educated immigrants in Finland; many of whom have left Finland after graduation — lack of job opportunities relevant to their specialty being one of the key drivers.

The depletion of qualified labour and a widening skill gap due to retirements and population decline is obvious and widely discussed in the industry and in the media. Interestingly, the Finnish government outlined that approximately 10,000 labour and education immigrants will be needed annually by 2030. Despite all these concerns, the skills of thousands of internationals who desire to stay and work in Finland are untapped. They are either underemployed or unemployed – of which I was once an example.

Finland is ranked as the happiest country in the world, as well as a country of equality. However, when it comes to the labour market, the story is quite different. A lot of jobseekers, especially from a foreign background, are not happy and feel they are not treated equally or fairly. Recruitment practices such as ethnic discrimination, unconscious bias as well as employers' hesitancy to invest their time and resources in developing young professionals, especially those with an international background, account for some of the reasons.

Mihin on tahto kouluttaa uusia osaajia erityisesti kansainvälisiä opiskelijoita täyttämään tätä puutetta?

There is the need for an open, welcoming and growth mindset from the labour market to foster multiculturalism, inclusion and diversity in the industry. This will attract talent, encourage a strong sense of their belonging as well as talent retention. Indeed, large companies have improved significantly with regards to job opportunities for international students. In spite of that, small and medium sized companies still have

more room for improvement. That said, potential solutions could come from a collaboration between the private and public sectors in innovative employment programmes.

Academic institutions could tailor degree programmes more closely to the actual skill demands of the Finnish labour market. For instance, does the local industry require sufficient proficiency of the local language alongside the industry knowledge from international students? If yes, how can academic institutions modify their curricula as well as intensify the teaching of the local language(s) for international students willing to charter their career path in Finland. If no, could the industry completely do away with language skills requirements in recruitment to level the playing field for both local and international jobseekers?

Schools could do more in helping the plight of international talents to maximize their chances of employability — with this, international students would be more likely to stay in Finland. For example, institutions' career service departments could include personnel of an international background. This could bring different perspective(s) to the drawing board to help international students realise their career goals. Furthermore, schools could enhance their cooperation with companies to offer thesis projects to students to include those with international backgrounds. Similarly, student unions could include international student(s) to help with acceptance. More so, there could be courses that foster diversity, inclusion, and acceptance amongst the student body as well as the faculties who may be already employers today or in the future.

Recently, there have been pilot programmes which mentor international students or highly educated immigrants and grant them internship opportunities in Finland. These initiatives have brought remarkable benefits. However, such programmes to some extent face challenges with regards to the limited number of admissions and low collaboration with companies. There is a need for more support and collaboration from companies, municipalities and other relevant institutions for the sustainability and continuity of innovative programmes like these.

Employment of spouses

Melanie Dower



When an employed person relocates to Finland, they often have family members who accompany them. For their spouse or partner, finding meaningful employment can take years, as they face various roadblocks and hurdles in Finnish society. For those fortunate enough to find a job, some eventually leave Finnish companies due to feelings of isolation. With a few key steps in mind, Finnish companies can go a long way into tapping into this pool of talent, and not only hire them, but keep them employed.

Moving country is often a family decision, with those offered jobs frequently accompanied by their spouse or children. For their spouse, this will mean giving up their own job or career path to support their partner. While Finland attracts families in terms of quality of life, the biggest question for spouses before arrival will be – *what am I going to do there?*

At first, their time will be taken up with navigating the Finnish immigration service and registering their address at the DVV. Currently this can take up to two weeks for EU citizens and if family members are processed separately, the processing time is about 15 weeks, limiting access

to basic services such as phone contracts and HSL tickets at local prices. It's a long wait for those eager to start participating in life in their new home country, only to be held up by bureaucratic processes.

While hiring companies often provide accommodation upon arrival, it will often fall upon the spouse to search and furnish permanent accommodation while their partner is at work. Finnish landlords can be reluctant to rent to foreigners and so they will generally need to sign up with housing companies such as SATO or Lumo. Once the contract is signed, furniture is bought and delivered and the family have moved in, the change of address can take up 35 days for DVV to process, creating issues if a family moves for example from Helsinki to Espoo and children need to register for school.

Non-EU citizens need to visit the police station for an ID card and return to their bank to gain strong online banking credentials so they can access online services such as Kela. While this in itself takes time, the current waiting period for a Kela card to arrive is 4-5 months, creating difficulties for families trying to access public healthcare.

Once the spouse has time to focus on their own career path, they are then faced with the task of accessing services that feel inhospitable to their needs. Registering for job support means navigating the TE Office's website, which is only available in Finnish or Swedish - an irony that is hardly welcoming for those who have just arrived and are wanting to find meaningful work in Finland.

For most spouses, this will mean being open to taking a job in another field or at a more junior level just to get into the Finnish job market. As a high proportion of open jobs in Finland are not publicly advertised, newcomers must work hard to build professional networks to access employment opportunities. For those that continue to struggle to find work, starting their own business or freelancing for companies overseas is a common choice.

Having international qualifications recognized or finding that roles they are suited for require a master's degree can also be a stumbling

block for new arrivals. Given that tertiary education is expensive and can lead to life-long debt in other countries, it's not unusual to leave education once a job is found in one's chosen career, as learning in the real world is often seen as advantageous over theoretical studies.

So why and how should Finnish companies tap into this large pool of talent already in Finland and how can they support them to stay once employed? It's a question many Finnish companies would do well to consider, least of all because having international staff can greatly improve a company's reputation on a global level.

The first step for those relocating new employees, is to include the spouse in conversations while they are still in their home country. Finding out their hopes and aspirations once they get to Finland can help with providing links to the many services that exist to support accompanying family members. Both Helsinki and Espoo have Spousal Programmes that people can contact before arriving in Finland.

When opening job roles, a good a question for Finnish companies to reflect on is do you really need someone to speak Finnish for this role? Naturally, it will take years for a newly arrived immigrant to learn enough Finnish to be able to communicate at a working level. I know of one spouse who worked hard to learn Finnish, applying successfully for a role only to be told once they started that they can just speak English instead.

Companies should also consider training in unconscious bias and diversity and inclusion. What invisible barriers are you creating at the recruitment stage that you may not even be aware of?

Furthermore, for Finnish companies who take this step, how inclusive are you once someone joins? Do you default to Finnish in meetings and internal communications? For people who've just arrived in Finland it can be very isolating if they feel excluded from both important and casual conversations. Do you all go to lunch early and forget to tell the new hire? It won't be long before they leave, as no one likes to feel left out from the crowd.

A good question to reflect on is do you really need someone to speak Finnish for this role?

The good news is that you don't have to do all the work yourself. In my role at a Finnish gaming company, we have a large Facebook spouse group, made up of Finns and foreigners who support each other. When we hire a new person, their spouse is invited to join the Facebook group before relocation so they can already introduce themselves and ask any questions they may have. By creating connections with people who understand their situation, accompanying spouses can feel a sense of belonging before they even arrive.

There are also fantastic community groups that already exist to support spouses moving to Helsinki that you can link them to. Luckan Integration holds regular CV workshops. The Shortcut offer training courses for new arrivals and International House Helsinki hold open days with information available in a range of languages. SIMHE help people with understanding their options regarding international qualifications and possible future study. International Working Women of Finland (IWWOF) have a large Facebook group with over 6,000 members, offering support and information to immigrants in Finland. Share what's available and create a positive atmosphere for people before they even arrive. You don't have to recreate what already exists.

As for social integration, it doesn't take much to include international colleagues in social activities and taking someone out once doesn't mean you have to be friends for life. New arrivals love to try Finnish activities – foraging for mushrooms, blueberry picking, and of course sauna. Try to think of the things that make Finland unique and invite your new colleagues and their

families. Where possible, introduce them to others in a similar situation, be it families with young children or those that share a country of origin.

It's no secret that Finland needs international talent; however, there's already a large group within Finnish society of potential employees that should be tapped into, with strategies not just to hire them, but to retain them. The goal here is not always to do everything for people, but to teach them so they can support themselves. Set people up for success, but remember that at first it can be overwhelming and that sometimes the smallest steps can make a real difference.

The Importance of DEI

Priyanka Banerjee



In recent years, Finland, like many other countries, has increasingly started focusing on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) in society. Many Finnish companies have also started to acknowledge the need for diverse, equitable, and inclusive workplaces. However, there is still a lot of work to be done in Finland to fully address the challenges of DEI. There are increasing statistics on discrimination faced by minorities in Finland. For example, according to the Discrimination in Finland (2017-2019) report by the Ministry of Justice, discrimination based on ethnic origin and skin colour is considered very common in Finland (65%). The same report mentions that 45% of Finns feel there is widespread discrimination against transgender people, 42% considered there was widespread discrimination based on sexual orientation, and 32% considered discrimination against intersex people widespread. There are also multiple studies showing discrimination against immigrants, non-Finnish-speaking and other minorities in Finnish workplaces. Therefore, it is of utmost importance to understand why DEI work is crucial for Finland and Finnish organizations. Addressing these structural issues requires a long-term, multifaceted approach that includes

policy changes, education and awareness-raising, and community engagement. It also requires a commitment from all members of society to work towards a more inclusive and equitable future for all. Through this article, I would like to raise awareness on this very important topic.

Let's first understand what DEI means. DEI comprises interconnected concepts that are crucial for building a more equitable and just society.

Diversity (*monimuotoisuus*) refers to differences and a spectrum of differences in a given setting, for example, in an organization or team. These differences can be demographical, experiential, and/or cognitive, visible or invisible. In the workplace, diversity means having a workforce that reflects the various identities and experiences of the community it serves.

Equity (*yhdenvertaisuus*) refers to the fair treatment and opportunity for all individuals, regardless of their background. This includes addressing systemic barriers and providing support and resources for underrepresented groups to achieve their full potential.

Inclusion (*inklusiivisuus*) refers to creating an environment where everyone feels valued and respected, and their contributions are welcomed and appreciated. Inclusion means actively working to dismantle barriers and biases that prevent certain groups from feeling fully included and engaged in the workplace or society at large. Its aim is to build psychological safety on a team level and a sense of belonging on an individual level.

Why is DEI important?

Understanding and prioritizing DEI is highly beneficial for organizations in various ways. For example:

- 1. Improved financial performance:** A 2020 report by McKinsey & Company found that companies in the top quartile for ethnic and racial diversity in their executive teams were 36% more likely to have above-average profitability than companies in the bottom quartile. Similarly, companies in the top quartile for gender diversity in their executive teams were 25% more likely to have

above-average profitability than companies in the bottom quartile.

- 2. Increased Innovation:** A diverse and inclusive workforce can lead to increased productivity and innovation, as different perspectives and experiences can lead to new ideas and approaches. A study by the Boston Consulting Group found that companies with more diverse management teams had 19% higher innovation revenues than companies with less diverse teams.
- 3. Talent attraction and retention:** A commitment to DEI can help organizations attract and retain talent from diverse backgrounds. Individuals are more likely to want to work for and stay engaged with companies that share their values. A survey conducted by Glassdoor in 2020 found that 76% of job-seekers believe that a diverse and inclusive workplace is important when evaluating potential employers.
- 4. Enhanced reputation and brand image:** Companies that prioritize DEI can improve their brand image, which can attract customers and investors. As per the 2018 Edelman Earned Brand study, 64% of consumers will buy from or boycott a brand based on its stance on social, or political issues, including issues related to DEI.

These are only a few examples of how DEI could benefit organizations in terms of business. However, DEI is much more than just a business case. It is a moral and ethical imperative for companies because it promotes respect for human dignity, fairness and equity, and social responsibility.

Despite growing awareness of the benefits of DEI, there are several factors why companies might find DEI work difficult to implement, and therefore slow down the progress. Like any other organizational change, DEI work also hits resistance as it requires people to come out of their comfort zone and take an active role in building inclusion. Most of the time, this resistance crops up due to a lack of understanding and

awareness of the topic. Leadership and employees might come across a fear of making mistakes and the complexity and width of the issue make it even harder to understand the individual role in the overall work. In addition, companies often ignore DEI as a strategic focus, and due to limited accountability, DEI initiatives do not receive the necessary attention and resources, to make a meaningful change.

In Finland, the current maturity of organizations is very low when it comes to DEI matters. This needs to change if we want to move towards a more equitable working society. This means there has to be an increased awareness of DEI, along with a strategic focus, and resources for implementing the DEI initiatives in the organization. In this process, it is essential to engage and include minority background experts in the discussion, strategy work, and decision-making on the country, and organization levels. Without bringing more diversity into the decision-making on various levels, it is impossible to dismantle existing structural barriers. For political parties, it is a moral obligation to promote and uphold policies and agendas that promote an equitable and just society.

Currently, DEI is perceived as a major trend in the workplace; however, it is more than just a trend. The changing demographic of society, increasing demand for global immigration, rapid internationalization of markets, and increasing legal mandates mean that the need for DEI work in companies is only going to increase. As the recent pandemic has shown, more inclusive teams perform better during difficult times, it is clear that companies that will survive in the future of work are those who consider DEI as a strategic priority.

In Finland, the current maturity of organizations is very low when it comes to DEI matters.

Career development

Ingrid Viitanen



Aiming for the stars – Integrating foreign workers into Finnish workplaces

I am an Australian working in Espoo. I am a lawyer by profession, and I came to Finland just over a decade ago as a "trailing spouse". Although I had worked at top-tier Australian and US law firms in Sydney and Tokyo, I had no knowledge of Finnish and no experience in the local legal market. After numerous unsuccessful tries, I had just about concluded that it would be impossible to find work as a lawyer, and that I would need to retrain in a new profession and start from scratch.

Today I hold an executive role in Nokia's legal team, as Vice President and General Counsel, Strategy & Technology and Procurement. I am here today because back in 2013 Nokia was willing to see my differences as value-adds, and offered me my first job in Finland. From day one, my colleagues have made me feel welcome and valued, and over the years Nokia has offered me varied, interesting and challenging work, as well as meaningful opportunities for advancement.

Positive experiences like my journey at

Nokia were not always the norm for foreigners in Finland. Increasingly they are. We should do all we can to sustain and build on this positive momentum.

The power of diversity

Studies show that diversity is a valuable asset worth leveraging, especially in a business context. In Finland, we are particularly aware of the need to attract talent from as broad a pool as possible. The number of Finnish nationals is finite. Within such a small pool it is unrealistic to expect deep, world-leading expertise to be richly available across all fields.

Not only that, but studies show that companies where diversity is properly leveraged innovate up to 20% more than their peers. This is no surprise. Innovation, creative thinking and intellectual property come from the minds of people. It matters that these people are different from each other and are actively encouraged to be so. It also matters that these people are skilfully brought together in a welcoming environment to collaborate and complement each other as a high-performing team.

Since 2018, Nokia has hired approximately 2,400 employees in Finland for permanent positions. About 40% of recent recruitments are of non-Finnish origin. All in all, we have over 80 different nationalities represented in Finland across our 7,000 employees. We count on a diverse workforce to secure key expert skillsets and to optimize innovation, both of which are critical to our success as a company.

Cultivating diverse teams is not straightforward. Human beings are unconsciously biased towards people who remind them of themselves. In addition, interacting with people from a similar cultural and linguistic background is typically more straightforward as commonalities tend to be more easily found. For these reasons, nurturing a diverse team requires extra willingness from the hiring manager, the person hired, the team into which they are hired and the wider ecosystem. In short, effectively reaping the rewards of diverse teams requires no less than a systemic commitment from a company,

underpinned by complementary governmental and community support.

Reflections and advice

As a hiring manager, I have these key messages for prospective foreign workers in Finland:

- Be patient. Don't stop trying. Find a strong supporter to help you in your journey.
- Listen selectively to criticism where it helps you improve your game, but don't lose confidence in yourself or try to be something you are not.
- Remember: being from a different background does not automatically give you a pass. It's up to you to show that your differences are differentiators. Coming with a sense of entitlement will not help you; coming with a spirit of optimism, enthusiasm and collaboration will get you far.
- Recognize that there are certain positions in any company which require skills you don't have. You will not be suited to every role — no one is.
- Recognize that some companies are further along their diversity journey than others. Be ready to be a trailblazer, but also recognize that not every company is ready for it. It takes two. Find a place where your value is recognized and nurtured.
- Be grateful when you succeed, and pay it forward whenever you can.

And to policy makers and prospective employers:

- Be a supporter and a mentor for foreign workers trying to make it professionally in Finland.
- Be aware of your unconscious biases. Consider how unique skills and differences could be assets to your team.
- Be an active supporter of a wider culture of diversity. Remember that the more foreigners you hire, especially to positions

of influence, the more you normalize diversity in the workforce and in society overall.

- Give constructive feedback to unsuccessful applicants to help them be successful next time.
- Appreciate the extra effort a foreigner is making and do what you can to make it easier for them. Remember that they are making a life in a new country with everything that might entail: a new language, a climate that even Finns find challenging at times, a new school system for their children (which differs radically from the system in most other countries), a high cost of living which can weigh heavily, and a culture of people tending to keep to themselves, meaning that until true friendships are forged, it is common to suffer from loneliness and feelings of being an outsider. Programmes that support the whole person and their family can really make a difference.
- Consider that “it takes a village”. Increasing workforce diversity is a commercial imperative for any company — and any nation — looking to tap into state-of-the-art skills, promote greater innovation, and be competitive in the global market. When it comes to developing strong supporting programmes, frameworks, incentives, and positive cultural messaging, industrial players can and should take some of the load, but at some point, company boundaries stop and the wider society starts. A team effort is needed across the whole national ecosystem, and particularly from local and national governmental decision-makers.

Every person deserves the chance to shine with their brightest light. Wherever we can, we should help and encourage those around us to find and realize their unique talents. We should then bring people together whose individual light complements and intensifies that of others. When we

bring shining stars together as a bright constellation, we elevate teams and outcomes, and we help our people to be happier and more fulfilled. As a leader, I find it personally rewarding and energizing to support people — especially fellow foreigners — in finding their strengths and superpowers in the workplace.

Giving diverse candidates the chance to shine means valuable outcomes for everyone. As a direct result of being given a chance, for over a decade I have been actively invested in Nokia’s success. More importantly, my contribution and that of my fellow foreign workers — as taxpayers, consumers, parents of Finnish children, and spokespeople for all that Finland has to offer — goes far beyond our immediate jobs.

Investing in foreign talent is a virtuous circle with multiple benefits. Finland is well on track, and should continue to aim for the stars.

**Appreciate the
extra effort a
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Trade unions in Finland from an international perspective

Patricia Virsinger



Trade unions play an important role in the Finnish world of work, and their impact is particularly significant for immigrants who are new to the Finnish job market. Trade unions are organizations that represent the interests of workers in negotiations with employers. They aim to ensure that workers' rights and interests are protected in the workplace. In Finland, trade unions have a long history and are an integral part of the country's social fabric. Finland has one of the highest trade union membership rates in the world.

However, quite a few international employees and students are not aware of the role of trade unions and the benefits they can provide. One reason for this might be that trade unions are not active in their countries of origin, or they don't have a significant impact, or may even have a

Quite a few international employees and students are not aware of the role of trade unions.

negative connotation. Therefore, they simply don't understand the importance for joining one here in Finland. Trade unions have an important role to play in ensuring that immigrants are treated fairly in the Finnish job market. By advocating for workers' rights, providing support and training, and shaping Finnish society as a whole, trade unions can help to create a more inclusive and equitable working environment for all workers, regardless of their background.

I was first exposed to Finnish trade unions when I started my bachelor's studies in international business in a university of applied sciences. Most unions in Finland have specific membership categories for students, which are equally open to international degree students. Also, there are often separate unions for students studying in universities and universities of applied sciences.

The union was very active from the beginning, regularly manning stands to promote membership for new students. The union's representatives even gave us a lecture in English to make sure that international students understood the significance of trade unions in Finland and the possible benefits to encourage them to join.

After joining my union, I wanted to know more and also do more, and I became involved in the board of the local student association. I participated in and organized many events, and made friends along the way. During those years I became a strong advocate for union membership among my fellow international students. Here are some of the main reasons it is worth joining a union:

- Workplace representation: by joining a union, international students can have someone on their side who can represent them in discussions with their employer. This can be especially important if there are issues related to wages, working conditions, or job security.
- Legal support: unions can provide legal support and advice to their members, including assistance with employment contracts, workplace disputes, and potential legal issues.
- Access to information and resources: unions can provide their members with information and resources related to employment rights, workplace safety, and other issues that may be important to international students who are new to the Finnish labour market.
- Networking opportunities: unions often organize events and meetings where members can connect with other workers in their industry. This can be a valuable way for international students to build their professional networks and learn more about the Finnish labour market.
- Education and training: some unions offer education and training programmes to their members, which can help international students develop new skills and improve their job prospects.

When I started my master's degree, I changed unions based on my study field and moving to study in a university. This union (Suomen Ekonomit, Finnish Business School Graduates) was also active from day one, and they provided introductory lectures and information about membership for us international degree students.

However, these unions I had experience with seem to be the exception. Unfortunately, not all unions take this much notice of international employees in their respective fields. Some of them don't even have their website fully translated in English and they don't provide any services or information in English for their international members. These language barriers

can make it especially difficult for international members to join trade unions.

While there are challenges to increasing immigrant participation in trade unions, their role remains critical to creating a more inclusive and equitable Finnish society. Here are some recommendations for all Finnish trade unions on what they should do to provide better help and services for international arrivals:

- Make non-discrimination against and inclusion of immigrants an integral part of union strategy
- Help immigrants build professional networks through mentoring programmes, especially through collaboration with NGOs that work with immigrants
- Ensure that mentors are given adequate training to mitigate narratives about immigrants' unsuitability for work
- Websites should be fully translated to English and a greater variety and number of events and workshops in English should be provided
- Provide legal advice on residence permits, especially work permits, and partner with translation companies to offer discounted translation services for documents needed for the permit application process
- Collaborate with NGOs that work with immigrants and the government to educate immigrants about their labour rights and the importance of unions in Finland
- Offer subsidized Finnish language courses, especially for courses which provide occupational-specific vocabulary
- Offer paid internship programmes and thesis positions collaborating with companies
- Expand and improve on this programme by offering paid positions, offering the programme to EU nationals too, and
- Operate a discrimination hotline in conjunction with other unions that people can call for advice or to report concerns.

The role of trade unions remains critical in creating a more inclusive and equitable Finnish society.

Top recruiters and a top workplace are needed

Fadumo Ali



I am a solution-focused person who also sees opportunities in problems. Finland and Finnish jobs have a chance to develop their norms and become even more competitive. When top international talents come to Finland to work, they are key to this transformation.

I always look at things from the perspective of improving them. Sometimes, what's normal become a problem. Times change, and so should norms. The Finnish labour force is ageing, so the country needs more people to move here for work in the future. This means that Finland must change its employment norms so people want to come and stay here. This is in everyone's interest.

I see three areas in workplaces that need to be invested in if we want top talents. The workplace should want to change; the recruitment process should be good for the applicant; and a job must be enjoyable, so that the worker wants to stay in it. I'll now expand on these topics.

Workplace

Traditionally, all the workers in a workplace have looked the same. Finland's population and employment culture used to be homogeneous. Nowadays, however, Finland is home to people from a lot of different backgrounds who do not find employment because they are different. This sows fear and negative emotions.

Workplaces need to understand that this old way does not work. Finland's labour shortage is a growing problem that needs to be addressed fast. For this, we need resilience: mental coping ability, flexibility and reorientation. Everyone in the workplace must be engaged in this change, and managers must work actively to achieve this. Every individual is necessary for this change. This brings benefits such as reduced strain, growth of the organization and competitiveness. Finland's economy will grow as a result, too.

Every organization should invest in making itself more attractive to applicants. Everyone in the workplace should help achieve this.

Recruitment

Many recruitment processes in Finland are challenging for applicants of other backgrounds. **I asked a highly skilled German colleague what experience they had of Finnish recruitment.** They replied: Finns are distant, formulaic and not interested in the applicant as a person. This can feel bad, particularly if you are from a different cultural background.

In recruitment, a focus on the candidate means that the candidate feels they are special when the employer is ascertaining whether they are the right fit. The recruiter creates an atmosphere in which they are interested in the candidate and tells them about the job. This interest can be expressed in small talk and asking about things like the candidate's cultural background in the interview. Small talk is normal in many countries. It benefits the recruiter, who learns more about the candidate, and the candidate feels seen. Recruiters should also be outwardly oriented.

Keeping people happy at work: committed, satisfied talents

When talents are engaged, valued and cared for, they want to stay in the job and in Finland. It is particularly important for employees in every workplace to do its best for job satisfaction by being good, considerate co-workers. That means workers feel they belong. Being in a foreign country is not easy, so the workplace should make holistic efforts in a good working culture.

A top talent should be seen as a richness that changes the workplace's dynamics by bringing in different perspectives from elsewhere. If a talent can feel satisfied at work, there are many benefits for the workplace. Organizations must focus on all the good things the talent brings to the workplace and on how every individual transforms as an employee.

Secret of Hoiwa's success

Hoiwa actively seeks to recruit people of different backgrounds. We see diverse traits as a strength. This is seen in how attractive we are as an employer. Diverse employees are also a reason for Hoiwa's rapid growth. They are flexible, good under pressure, and unafraid of change. This is because they are already in a foreign country, where they are often considered strange. Hoiwa has provided many people with opportunities they do not usually get.

**Finns are distant,
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person.**

The good, the bad and the ugly

Abdirisak Ahmed



The good, the bad and the ugly when working in Finland: this is a topic that a lot of people talk about. With the transformation in work being strongly felt in recent years, there has been a lot more talk about how polarized the Finnish labour market has become. People look at the labour market differently depending on their age, gender, ethnic background, profession, location and work experience.

It is important to note that each individual has their own view of work. Generalizing personal experience to others can be dangerous. For example, a teenager applying for their first summer job, a parent who's been out of the job market for ten years, and a foreign student see the labour market in different ways.

The transformation of work has been accompanied by new ways of working, such as the platform economy. The "Uberization" of work and "Instagramization" of the media have created new "entrepreneurs". However, alongside successful Wolt couriers there are people who do not thrive as freelancers in the new platform economy. Not all successful social media influencers behave like small media companies. OnlyFans is not just

The pillars of Finnish society – safety, a clean environment and a functioning society – are already pull factors.

empowerment and wealth creation, either: it has its difficult sides, too.

Each new way of working also demands that society changes. We are no longer either employed or unemployed: we can be employed at numerous workplaces and sometimes be self-employed. This raises the question of how social safety nets adapt to this new world. Can you study even when you're unemployed? And how can people combine parental leave and running a small business?

My work history is very varied. My first job was delivering free newspapers with a schoolmate. I lost that job when the company underwent a merger and let people go. Over the next few years, finding work was hard. I sent out dozens of applications a year and visited local shops and small- and medium-sized businesses. When a friend of mine got a summer job and I didn't, my primary emotion was shame. As a student, I did normal student jobs like cleaning and security. In the end, I qualified as a doctor and got a job in my field, where my meaningful work and the chance to help others make me feel good at my job.

To a Thai berry picker, the Finnish labour market can seem a laissez-faire economy that enables the brutal exploitation of foreign workers. A foreign specialist's first experience could be the Finnish Immigration Service's slow and difficult bureaucracy. Even though Finland is one of the world's most equal countries, LGBT and ethnic minorities are particularly vulnerable to blatant harassment and bullying. The costs of parenting are not yet equally distributed between

employers. This creates barriers to employment for women, in particular.

A polarized, unjust labour market is neither inevitable nor acceptable. Our society is responsible for workers' welfare and rights. We have to do everything to ensure everyone has an equal opportunity to succeed at work. This requires open discussion, cooperation and the awareness that diverse views and experiences are a richness. They can help us build better work for everyone in Finland, not just those with access to PR firms' resources. We have a choice: either we shut off the Finnish job market from foreign working-aged people and students, or we compete for the best employees on international arenas. The pillars of Finnish society — safety, a clean environment, a functioning society with schools and nurseries, four seasons — are already pull factors. Let's hope that this decade the Finnish job market will become a pull factor on its own merits.

What should be done?



Ted Apter
Special Advisor
Industrial Policy,
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Mikko Särelä
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Innovation Policy,
TEK

02

Now it is time for all of us to roll up our sleeves and take action in all areas of society.

Making everyone part of Finnish culture and society

For an immigrant, perhaps the most important thing is integration into Finnish society. A complete life is more than just working and sleeping. It is important for immigrants to meet people of different backgrounds, to be able to do hobbies and to make Finnish friends. Failed housing policy could leave people languishing in segregated areas where residents do not trust each other.

In workplaces, all employees must increase their abilities to function in a more diverse environment.

This could cause social problems. We need significantly more immigration, but we should also learn more about other countries' mistakes in integration.

If and when we see a sizeable increase in study and labour immigration, the mainstream population has to understand its role and responsibility in engaging newcomers in Finnish society, communities and circles of friends. In addition, racism must be boldly weeded out. Finland has to choose: do we want to be an open, international and growing economy or a fading backwater. In the former, there is no place for structural racism, which strongly frustrates our efforts to attract and retain foreigners.

In workplaces, all employees must increase their abilities to function in a more diverse environment. Public, private and third-sector employees and supervisors must be trained in diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI). Uprooting unconscious biases is one way workplaces can ensure they enjoy all the benefits of a diverse team. A Finland aimed at economic growth is possible, but reaching it is everyone's responsibility. To ensure that growth can happen in

future, Finns must increase their language skills and cultural awareness.

Access to services is vital for becoming a part of society. In Finland's growing cities, at least, public services must also be offered in English in future. Crucial services include early childhood education, elementary schooling and employment services. All educational levels must significantly increase the number of places offered in English, Finnish and Swedish. There must be more opportunities for completing vocational degrees in English, either as a competence-based qualification or otherwise. The matriculation exam must also be possible in English. All this will make life significantly easier for people who speak some English, and above all will allow their families to quickly become part of Finnish society and the labour market.

Another key pain point is banking. Students coming here face a particular headache. They need to get their affairs in order, but opening a bank account and getting electronic authentication takes a long time. The start of a short stint as a student is full of pressure. Getting the basics right is vital. This problem is considered about as large an obstacle to integration as making friends, which shows how serious the problem is.

The third issue that needs to be fixed is housing supply. Workers moving to Finland concentrate in urban centres where planning and construction are not done with enough consideration for a significant increase in newcomers. As Finland urbanizes, large cities are seeing high net immigration from abroad. The state needs to engage with cities in considerably more ambitious dialogue than the current land use, housing and transport negotiations. They need to discuss how to create sufficient incentives and obligations to counter insufficient construction goals.

The rate of housing construction forms a bottleneck for faster economic growth. By contrast, sufficient residential construction could be a competitive advantage for Finnish cities. In many attractive foreign cities, housing costs have spiralled to unreasonable levels. Sufficient house-building would rein in housing costs rises.

People often move to Finland with their entire family, which we should not forget. If and

Changes in work should not surprise unions

We already have significant numbers of workers with an immigrant background in Finland to whom the trade unions offer too few services. As immigration increases, the unions have to seriously examine their own operations. We may suddenly find ourselves in a situation where workers with an international background who have been neglected by the unions start to organize themselves. At the same time, there is a growing risk of a parallel labour market emerging if the unions do not get their act together in forming a community for workers from elsewhere.

Some unions and umbrella unions already offer services in English, such as counselling. However, the unions should increase their service offering to the same level as in Finnish and Swedish. This is often a chicken and egg problem: it is not worth offering services for which there is not enough demand.

However, members will not join if services are not offered or marketed to them. Newcomers to the Finnish labour market need career guidance, legal advice, advocacy of their interests and networking support — the same services as everyone else. Many services are highly crucial for arrivals to Finland who do not know employment law, culture or ground rules here. Immigrants present a vast member potential which would be foolish to ignore.

when spouses have trouble finding jobs, Finland becomes a less attractive destination. Nowadays, Finns moving back home already have problems finding work. According to the International Talent Finland report, two thirds of spouses who move here feel their integration is hindered by a difficulty finding employment. The employment of spouses is a problem shared by the public, private and third sectors that requires effective collaboration. The largest cities are now beginning to realize the problem, but there is still much to do. More broadly, it is a question of whether the Finnish labour market opens up internationally or withers.

The provision of crucial basic services has not been scaled to the goals of study and labour migration. For example, the provision of language tests necessary for citizenship must be increased from the present level. The criteria for the teaching of Finnish as a second language (S2) in elementary school must be reviewed and targeted more precisely at the pupils who truly need it. This would enable every immigrant to build their competence successfully. Workers must be able to develop their language skills on the job.

In general, the provision and quality of Finnish and Swedish language teaching must be increased. We also need to create, develop and use new, scalable opportunities for teaching Finnish and Swedish.

Two thirds of spouses who move here feel their integration is hindered by a difficulty finding employment.

A diverse workforce is more than the sum of its parts

Immigrants will change the Finnish labour market for the better. Teams with diverse backgrounds are more profitable than homogeneous ones. Somewhat contrary to popular belief, teams with many different views and diverse experiences are more successful, even if their communication and interaction takes more time and effort. A slightly new skill set is demanded of employees, which could mean anything from raising their language skills to cultural understanding. When teams become more diverse, new management skills are required of supervisors. Investments in employees' and supervisors' skills pay off: they are recouped in the better results that diversity offers.

As workplaces become more international, working culture also often needs refreshing. This requires good leadership on two levels. First, official guidelines and practices can be overhauled, when issues such as language change how work is done. Second, the culture that is not contained in rules and instructions changes, which requires managers to lead in a sufficiently flexible manner. The process may be difficult: the familiar way of doing things and achieving a result may become problematic in some regards. That is

when openness and transparency become irreplaceable trump cards for correcting the course.

Not everyone has yet realized the benefits of diverse teams. Firms, the public sector and the third sector all need a new kind of skill set. Social skills, cultural understanding and language skills will change from strengths to competitive edges at work, and sometimes even to requirements. Diversity needs to be made a strategic goal in the way that suits each company or community. That will bring every worker's skills and strengths

Teams with diverse backgrounds are more profitable than homogeneous ones.

to the fore. The result will be both better results and happier workers. One practical way of unveiling this hidden potential is to encourage more experienced team members to become mentors to support colleagues with different backgrounds on their career path.

Finnish working culture already has many good, high-quality traits compared to other countries. Hierarchies are low and few in number, people trust each other relatively highly and workers even want to get feedback. Specialists can truly operate independently at work. Balancing work and family is comparatively easy. These things, which are everyday to those of us from here, can be significant pull factors and reasons to come specifically to Finland.

Skilled recruiting to make the best use of everyone's talents

As the workforce diversifies, new kinds of skills are required of employers, too. They cannot assume that candidates and employees from many different backgrounds will fit into the same mould. Recruitment decisions are among the most important ones made by organizations, because employees generate profit. That means recruitment skills are a vital success factor. Developing them should be high on every employer's to-do list.

One key area for improvement should be visible before anyone is hired. The hidden job openings so typical for Finland make it very difficult for arrivals from elsewhere to find work and progress in their careers. When employers recruit internally or in another easy way, they may fail to consider whether they would have reached a better result by advertising the opening.

If skilled candidates do not have strong enough networks or knowledge of the Finnish labour market, they may never hear about job openings. There may even be barriers in house if an employee does not realize they should chat with their supervisor regularly. The low hierarchies in Finnish workplaces, which are otherwise

broadly liked, may be confusing. Learning about something new takes time. Meanwhile, the people who already know how to play the game overtake the newcomers left and right.

However, new recruitment skills do not come out of thin air; employers need to be supported in refining them. Reviewing and enhancing recruitment practices are examples of skills that can probably be honed endlessly. They are worth reviewing on a broad basis. Individual good practices do not necessarily work as well as promised. Anonymous recruitment is hoped to tackle name discrimination, for example, but in practice, studies show it performs feebly. Easy shortcuts are hard to find.

One of the most obvious areas for improvement is language. Right at the start of recruitment, employers should give serious thought to what languages are needed in the role and the level at which candidates really need to speak them. Old habits and employers' failure to think the requirements through can lead to exaggerated language requirements in job postings. Skills can often be discussed and exceptions made to requirements, but if employers lock the language

skill requirement right at the start, they exclude many potential candidates. Equally, the public sector needs to review and update its language skill requirements.

Language skills develop quickly. When recruiting, employers should consider throughout the process whether the levels required are suitable. Many Finnish companies are adept at recruiting potential, at investing in employees over a short period. Employers could apply this perspective more boldly to language requirements, too.

Developing language skills on the job benefits both the employer and employee. We can make flexible arrangements about language learning. At the same time, the provision of Finnish and Swedish teaching in particular should be developed on market lines. The teaching currently on offer is designed according to the needs of the government agencies that provide it. A more customer-focused market better oriented to private companies would significantly improve supply.

Another area for improvement is identifying skills. People are often suspicious of anything strange. No single recruiter can have a full picture of the world's universities and businesses. The danger is that when experience from abroad is not recognized, a lot of potential goes to waste. There are even signs to suggest that the degrees and work experience earned by Finns who have lived abroad are not valued, as they are not from Finland. Neither Finland nor any employer should be able to afford this attitude.

Equally the public sector needs to review and update its language skill requirements.

Sure steps to employment for international students

Finland has set ambitious targets for attracting third-level students. The target is to triple the number of students moving to Finland to study and significantly increase the percentage of those who stay here and enter the labour market to at least 75%. The goals are reasonable. With purposeful action from educational institutions and stakeholders, they are achievable.

When we assess students' transition to employment, we should consider job quality. In addition to monitoring whether graduates find work, our aim should be that they find jobs that match their skills and goals. Too many employees with a foreign background are underemployed: they do work that is too easy for their skills and experience. To measure high-quality employment, metrics are necessary. They could be used to evaluate the real impacts of employment in addition to the employed-unemployed metric.

Graduates' biggest problems related to language skills and integration into the Finnish labour market and culture. Students do not have time to learn enough Finnish or Swedish while studying, which hinders their success on the job market and interaction with society. As with lan-

guage skills, students do not often form strong enough job market skills and networks while studying. To reach the goals, we need stronger links between employers and international students. Trade unions and companies should be used to create these connections. International students need to be provided with information about the Finnish labour market as soon as they start their degrees.

Contacts formed and work experienced gained while studying are among the key factors in students' employability. This is seen in areas such as technical universities' theses. International students who write theses for companies find work after graduation just as well as their native Finnish course mates. Creating close links to companies is an extremely significant factor in a successful job hunt and thereby remaining in Finland.

While it is good to be aware of differences between industries, third-level institutions should invest more in links with employers during studies. A two-year master's course offers very little time for anything else than completing coursework and learning the language. Students should be forming making contacts sys-

tematically throughout degree courses, from beginning to end. Employers can be involved through courses about employment, high-quality internships and theses.

More informal events could also be needed to bring different people together. A well-oiled mentoring system is an effective way of creating contacts and understanding, even in the short term. It takes effort to forge the connections between students and typical graduate jobs before graduation, but these connections benefit everyone involved.

Expanding activities requires resources. The third-level institutions' financial management should have a stronger role in graduates' integration and transition to employment. Alternatively, they be a dedicated financing indicator or a strategic financing focal point. That would secure continuity and ensure resources were aimed at important activities.

Several universities have also recently invested in creating bachelor's degree programmes in English. This is a way of responding to demand and easing students' integration and transition to employment. When a student completes both a bachelor's and master's degree, they have more room for manoeuvre when specializing their studies and time to complete language courses, for example. The universities of applied sciences already offer a large number of bachelor's places. Significant additions to these require dedicated financial investments.

From barrier to competitive edge: a smooth path to employment with the world's smoothest processes

The Finnish immigration system is designed to keep outsiders out. This is in many ways an outdated approach in today's world. The premise should be "how do we get this person to Finland" rather than "how can we keep them out of Finland".

Securing the resources of the Finnish Immigration Service, Migri, is one of the first steps towards a better system. Migri has managed to streamline its operations recently. Further efficiencies can be achieved through steps such as automation. It is a case not of increasing re-

sources but rather guaranteeing continuity and improvement of operations.

Labour and study immigration are first and foremost objects of business, employment and educational policy. The Ministry of Employment and the Economy should receive responsibility for immigrants' permit processing in these areas. That would allow the ministry to rapidly develop services and processes with a priority on labour availability.

One critical area for improvement is processing times for work permits. The goal should be to

reduce processing times permanently to no more than two weeks. For specialist experts and researchers, the times should be reduced to a maximum of 48 hours. This would ensure the most severely needed people can get to work in companies fast. Companies have already assessed the risk when making the hire. There is no sense in delaying the start of employment when the decision has already been made.

Graduates from Finnish third-level institutions should be granted a permanent work permit. Our key problem is that graduates do not stay in Finland permanently. Granting permanent work permits would reduce unnecessary bureaucracy, which is good both for the system and the individual. In addition, a permanent permit gives international students in Finland a future prospect of employment and encourages them to learn Finnish or Swedish. Doing this would not have any significant drawbacks.

The longer-term goal should be for all residence permits to as a rule and automatically grant the right to work and run a business. This would cut red tape, speed up employment and encourage enterprise at a low threshold. At the same time, the labour market needs test for people from outside the EEA should be scrapped. This would unleash resources and accelerate employment.

Foreign investors can find it difficult to immigrate to Finland, as the general residence permit's criteria are not flexible enough. However, when investors can reside and operate here easily, Finland will gain more capital, which will boost employment and business growth. The solution is a new permit category for investors who set their sights on Finland. Alternatively, a general permit category should be developed with the grounds for investors' immigration to Finland in mind.

Recommendations



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03

These are the 5 most important things that need to be fixed.

01

Making everyone part of Finnish culture and society

- Strengthen the position of English as a service language and significantly increase the number of early childhood education and elementary school places in growing cities
- Task the public sector with strengthening the Finnish and Swedish teaching market
- Create a national strategy for Finland's retention of international talent

02

A diverse workforce is more than the sum of its parts

- Encourage more experienced employees and supervisors to act as mentors and allies and to support minority co-workers' career development
- Bolster the language skills and cultural understanding of workplaces' management, supervisors and employees
- Encourage organizations to make their own DEI strategies

03

Skilled recruiting to make the best use of everyone's talents

- The language requirements in both the private and public sector should be assessed individually for each job and communicated clearly when recruiting
- Support employers to prepare their teams to welcome international recruits
- Educate employers' upper management on the benefits of diverse teams and make this a competitive advantage for Finland

04

Sure steps to employment for international students

- Create English-language internship and thesis client fairs for English language degree programmes, allowing students, employers and trade unions to meet and network
- Third-level institutions must support and encourage student societies to involve international degree students in events and student activities
- Task and resource third-level institutions to be responsible for forming international students' stronger links with employers before graduation

05

From barrier to competitive edge: a smooth path employment with the world's smoothest processes

- Grant international third-level graduates an automatic permanent work permit
- Launch a digital Virtual Finland service platform to enable simple immigration
- Transfer responsibility for permits in labour and study migration to the Ministry of Employment and the Economy

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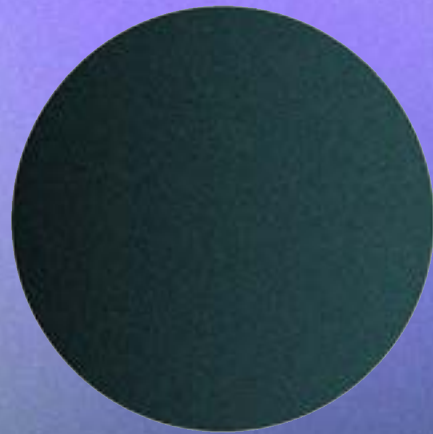
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