Language, Work, and Belonging -

Insights from the MISAS Project



October 2026









MISAS - Modell för integrering av utländska studerande via språkbadsstudier och arbetslivssamarbete
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FOREWORD

Migration and Integration in Finland – Perspectives from the MISAS Project

This e-book examines migration and integration in Finland. It is linked to the MISAS project—Model for Integration of Foreign Students through Language Immersion Studies and Work-Life Collaboration—implemented by Novia University of Applied Sciences and Arcada University of Applied Sciences in 2025–2026. The publication gives a voice to educators, project experts, international students, and alumni, who share their thoughts and feelings about integration and how it can be strengthened.

The History and Future of Migration in Finland

In my childhood in the 1970's, Finland was a relatively homogeneous country. Its recognised minorities and including the Sámi in Lapland and the Roma, and most people spoke Finnish, Swedish, or Sámi. At that time, Finland was largely a country of emigration: many Finns left for the United States and Canada, and later for Sweden, in search of better opportunities.

Even before and after independence in 1917, Finland granted asylum to some Russians, Estonians, and Russian Jews. A small number of other foreigners arrived for study, work, or marriage. In the 1970s, Chilean refugees came to Finland, and from 1979 onwards Finland also received refugees from Vietnam (Finland 100, n.d.; Koikkalainen, 2021). In the 1990s, Ingrian Finns—descendants of Finns from the Soviet Union—were allowed to return to Finland (Koikkalainen, 2021). The arrival of a larger refugee group from Somalia in the same decade, marked an important shift in the balance between incoming and outgoing migration (Kananen & Haverinen, 2019; Koikkalainen, 2021). Gradually, Finland began to see itself as a country of immigration, and its policy orientation moved from assimilation towards multiculturalism (Koikkalainen, 2021).

Today, the number of first residence permit applications is influenced by the political and social situation in key countries of departure, and Finland's labour market conditions, the intake in international degree programmes, and overall attractiveness as a place to live and study. (Finnish Immigration Service, 2026). In 2025, a total of 13,565 applications for a first residence permit for studies were submitted—4% fewer than in the corresponding period the previous year (Finnish Immigration Service, 2026). The Finnish Immigration Service anticipates that the number of applicants for study-based residence permits will remain high, although applications are not expected to increase in the next few years (Finnish Immigration Service, 2026). The introduction of full-cost tuition fees in higher education and upper secondary education is expected to reduce the number of international students, at least in the short term (Finnish Immigration Service, 2026; Ministry of Education and Culture, 2025).

Forecasting trends in work-based immigration involves considerable uncertainty, as the number of residence permit applications depends primarily on economic developments (Finnish Immigration Service, 2026). Nevertheless, population ageing and persistent skills shortages are likely to sustain demand for foreign labour in Finland, even during periods of economic fluctuation (Finnish Immigration Service, 2026).

Migration and Integration Here and Now

Current immigrant populations are even more diverse and complex, and we can speak of superdiversity. This also applies to students. Some migrants intend to settle permanently, others plan to return, and some lead transnational lives, moving between countries and maintaining ties in more than one place.

Finnish education enjoys a strong international reputation, even though the current economic situation is challenging. Each year, Finland welcomes international students—sometimes together with their families—who leave their home country behind, pay tuition fees, and must demonstrate sufficient funds to enter the country. They need to find affordable housing and ways to support themselves. They must also learn the language and navigate a new culture, often while trying to secure employment to stay. In other words, student migration and integration is a multifaceted phenomenon. Therefore we have compiled this collection of texts to explore the topic from multiple perspectives and to give voice to the target group itself, whose members have generously contributed their own writings to this publication. —There is still much work to be done to strengthen integration.

The Publication – Why is it Crucial?

The publication is divided into three parts. The first explores working life, addressing themes such as alumni entrepreneurship, migrants' often invisible skills, and the value of gaining local work experience. The second examines the local language as a key to access and participation. The third highlights the role of onboarding and networking in fostering integration. The publication aims to give the target group a voice by including writings that its members have generously contributed. However, much work remains to be done to strengthen integration.

With this publication, we warmly thank and pay tribute to Ms. Camilla Ekman, our former Dean of the Faculty of Business Administration at Novia, who initiated the project and prepared the funding application. We are also deeply grateful to Dr Pia Jünger, the MISAS project manager, for her commitment and guidance throughout the project, as well as to Ms. Hanna Guseff, the current Dean, and Mr. Kenneth Nordell, Research Manager, for their support. Our heartfelt thanks go to all authors and respondents who contributed their time and experiences, and to the faculty editor, Ms. Maria Engberg, and the graphic designer, Ms. Emilia Nuottimäki, at Novia. Finally, we thank our generous financers and their active representatives and the steering group for the project for their engagement.



Reija Anckar
Head of MBA Programmes at Novia

FACTS AND FIGURES ON MISAS

Projektet MISAS – Modell för integrering av utländska studerande via språkbadsstudier och arbetslivssamarbete

The project MISAS - Model for integration of foreign students through language immersion studies and work-life collaboration facilitates the integration of international students at the following partner universities:

Novia University of Applied Sciences and Arcada University of Applied Sciences

Better inclusion in working life is achieved by linking language immersion studies with workplace collaboration.

FINANCIERS

European Social Fund Plus (ESF+)

Svenska kulturfonden

TOTAL BUDGET

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PERIOD

1.1.2025 - 31.12.2026

LINKEDIN

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Partnerskap i integration

Medfinansieras av Europeiska unionen

Svenska kulturfonden

Yrkeshögskolan Novia

ARCADA



Immigrant Entrepreneurship, Invisible Skills and the Local Work Experience

MISAS
MODELL FÖR INTEGRERING AV UTLÄNDSKA STUDERANDE VIA SPRÅKBADSSTUDIER OCH ARBETSLIVSSAMARBETE



Bridging Language and Work

- Stories of Alumni Immigrant Entrepreneurial Journeys in Finland

Finland is changing. Our population is ageing, the workforce is shrinking, and at the same time more international students and newcomers are arriving with skills, ambition, and families. The MISAS project is all about supporting these individuals at Novia University of Applied Sciences as they learn the language, find their place in working life, and build a sense of belonging.

As Head of the MBA programmes at Novia UAS, I work closely with many of these students. Over the years, I have seen how international talents often bring not only degrees and professional experience—but also ideas, creativity, and an entrepreneurial mindset. This blog post shares the stories of four of our MBA alumni who have chosen entrepreneurship as their path in Finland.

Why Immigrant Entrepreneurship Matters

Immigrant entrepreneurship does not just create businesses—it creates connections, opportunities, and new ways of contributing to Finnish society. With Finland's dependency ratio rising and labour shortages growing, people who come here with skills and motivation play an important role.

But for many, entrepreneurship is also something deeply personal. It is a way to build a career when language barriers slow traditional employment pathways. It is a way to use one's talents. And often, it is a way to belong.



Four MBA Immigrant Entrepreneurs, Four Journeys

I interviewed four alumni in February 2026.

Based on their interviews, following personas could be created to visualise the stories.

CHAMINDU

From Architect to Circular Economy Innovator

Chamindu moved from South Asia to Finland with his family and completed his MBA in Service Design. With nearly two decades of experience as an architect, he now works in Finland, while planning a circular-economy business built around refurbishing used furniture.

Learning Finnish and understanding work cultures has been challenging, as it is for many. Still, he continues to study because he wants to build a future here.



Picture 1 Chamindu's persona

LAHIRU

A Multitalented Doer and Entrepreneur

Lahiru has worked in textiles, media in South Asia, in jewellery Dubai, and in the service sector in Finland. Together with Chamindu, he is developing a business based on giving old furniture a new life and selling them—something valued much more in Finland than in South Asia.

He is energetic, full of entrepreneurial ideas, and eager to combine sustainability with practical solutions for customers.



Picture 2. Lahiru's persona.

SACHINI

Craft, Creativity, and a Love for Teaching

Sachini ran an embroidery business in South Asia before completing her MBA in Service Design in Finland. Here, she has founded a new handicraft business and holds popular embroidery workshops. She is fascinated by how much joy Finns find in repairing their clothes rather than throwing them away.

As a woman and an immigrant entrepreneur, she navigates more barriers than most—but she also brings a unique creativity that resonates with her customers.



Picture 3. Sachini's persona

KARIM

A Designer Who Builds Connections

Karim came to Finland with only a backpack and a determination to start a new life. Today he runs a design studio where he creates products and experiences that bring people together.

His rapid growth on social media, early success at events, and plans to expand into European markets demonstrate the power of design-led entrepreneurship—especially when combined with courage and relentless experimentation.



Picture 4. Karim's persona

Learning, Adapting, and Finding One's Place

Across all four stories, a few themes stand out:

1. **Education and Experience Matter**
   These entrepreneurs are highly educated and draw heavily on their international backgrounds. Their MBA studies gave them tools, networks, and confidence to pursue their ideas.

2. **Language is Both a Barrier and a Bridge**
   Every one of them highlights language as a challenge—whether in understanding customers, navigating work culture, or being invited to job interviews. At the same time, immersing themselves in Finnish or Swedish has helped them connect, communicate, and grow.

3. **Cultural Differences Spark New Ideas**
   Things that surprise them—like Finland's love for second-hand shops or the joy of repairing clothes—quickly become business opportunities.

4. **Entrepreneurship Supports Integration**
   Running a business provides purpose, independence, and networks. It enables the immigrants to build a life here on their own terms.

5. **Social Ties Open Doors**
   Co-ethnic networks offer support and shared understanding. At the same time, learning to build bridges beyond these networks is key for business growth.

What These Stories Tell Us About Finland's Future

Finland needs more people like Chamindu, Lahiru, Sachini, and Karim—skilled individuals who come here, learn, create, and start something new. Supporting immigrant entrepreneurship is not only about labour markets or statistics. It is about enabling people to build meaningful lives in Finland while contributing to the vitality of our society.

If we want a sustainable future, we need to make it easier for international talents to start and grow businesses. That means clearer paths, better recognition of skills, more visibility, and a stronger belief that entrepreneurship is for everyone.



Text: Reija Anckar



Invisible Skills of Immigrants:

- From Hidden Value to Recognized Potential

Seeing What Is Not Immediately Visible

As an international student who has recently immigrated to Finland, it becomes evident that the skills of immigrants often remain unrecognized, even when they are clearly valuable in everyday life and work. These reflections build on conversations, observations, and shared experiences gathered in Turku through "Turku International House" and the "International Women Community Turku & Southwest Finland", where many immigrants describe similar patterns of invisibility and underutilization of their competences.

Invisible Skills in a Merit-Based System

Modern labor markets often describe themselves as merit-based systems, where the best skills should lead to the best opportunities.

In practice, recruitment systems tend to recognize only familiar signals: local degrees, local experience and native-level language skills. In this essay, invisible skills refer to competencies developed through migration and cross-cultural experiences that are valuable in professional contexts but are not easily recognized through standard recruitment signals. These include adaptability, multilingual thinking, cultural flexibility and resilience; competencies increasingly important in global workplaces.

The Paradox of International Talent in Finland

International talent plays a crucial role in Finland's economy. In 2023, approximately 32% of new IT jobs were filled by international professionals.

At the same time, structural barriers persist: limited networks, language gaps, and difficulties in recognizing foreign qualifications. This paradox becomes even more visible in the current economic context. The Finnish job market is stable and trust-based, yet highly competitive and the job search process can take up to 16 months on average. For many immigrants, this long process intensifies uncertainty and delays integration.

Skills Developed Through Migration

Many of the most valuable skills immigrants possess are not easily measurable on a CV. Adaptability is developed through navigating unfamiliar systems and rebuilding professional identity. Multilingual individuals develop flexible thinking patterns, while cultural flexibility supports collaboration across diverse contexts. Resilience emerges from continuous uncertainty and adjustment.These are not abstract personality traits, but practical competencies developed through lived experience.

When Skills Become Invisible

Traditional recruitment systems are built around standardized career paths. Employers often rely on familiar signals because they reduce uncertainty. This creates a bias toward predictability rather than potential.

As a result, international careers are often difficult to interpret and valuable competencies remain overlooked; not necessarily due to intentional exclusion, but due to systemic risk-averse practices.

Lived Experiences: Between Capability and Invisibility

Experiences shared within community spaces reveal how this invisibility affects real lives. A 57-year-old woman from the Philippines, who moved to Finland with her family, described her situation after completing a year of Finnish language courses through Kela and TE services. Despite her efforts, she has not been able to secure a full-time job:

> **My husband and my son are working, but I still cannot find a full-time job. Sometimes I feel disconnected, like I don't belong anywhere.**

Her experience highlights that integration is not only about employment, but also about belonging and participation. The inability to use one's skills can lead to a loss of identity and social connection.

Another participant, a Russian scientist with international experience, compared Finland to other European countries:

I have worked in different countries, but here it feels more difficult. The labour market is more closed to immigrants.

This perspective introduces an important tension: while Finland positions itself as a knowledge-based and global economy, access to this system can remain limited for those without local validation.

The Psychological Dimension of Invisibility

Beyond structural barriers, invisibility also has psychological consequences. The workshop highlighted how prolonged job search can affect identity and wellbeing. When individuals are reduced to the role of "job applicants," their broader professional identity becomes fragmented. Feelings such as frustration, uncertainty, and loss of confidence are common, especially when previous achievements are not recognized. At the same time, community spaces provide emotional support and opportunities to reframe experiences, helping individuals translate their skills into more visible forms.

Making Invisible Skills Visible

Several approaches can help address this gap. Mentorship programs connect immigrants with local professionals, helping them understand workplace culture and build networks, an essential factor in Finland, where networks play a key role in accessing opportunities. Trial work periods allow employers to evaluate candidates through real tasks rather than relying only on documents, reducing uncertainty and bias. Skills-based recruitment focuses on actual capabilities through practical assignments, portfolios, or case-based tasks. This shifts attention from past credentials to present performance.

From Invisibility to Strategic Advantage

Immigrants often possess valuable but invisible skills that are overlooked by traditional recruitment systems. These include adaptability, multilingual thinking, cultural flexibility and resilience. Recognizing these skills is not only a matter of fairness, but also a strategic advantage. Diverse teams bring new perspectives, creativity, and access to global markets. At the same time, the experiences shared in Turku show that integration is not only about entering the labor market, but also about being seen, valued and included. In an increasingly global world, the ability to recognize invisible skills may become one of the most important competencies of future labor markets.

Text: Nasimsadat
Ebrahimnejad Rahvar and Reija Anckar



The Paradox of Finnish Work Experience

Many immigrants hear the same advice when they start looking for work in Finland: Start by gaining work experience in Finland and then learn the Finnish language!

I moved to Turku about six months ago as an international student. Like many newcomers my first months in Finland were mostly about adapting to a new environment. Everything was new to me such as the university system, everyday life, and even small things like understanding how different services work. My spouse and I have not entered the Finnish labor market yet.

As I have not started working in Finland, I often hear people talk about employment and job opportunities. In a city like Turku, where many international students live and study, conversations about jobs and future come up quite often. In many of these conversations one idea appears repeatedly: Finnish work experience.

At first, I did not think too much about this phrase. It sounded normal. In many countries employers prefer candidates who already understand the local system and workplace culture. After hearing more people talk about their experiences, I started to realize that this expectation can sometimes create a challenge for newcomers.

As a newcomer, I am still observing how the Finnish labour market works and learning from the experiences of people who have lived here longer than I have. When I talked to different people about their experiences, I noticed that many of them described very similar challenges.

One question appeared again:

How can someone get Finnish work experience if employers expect it before offering a job? For many immigrants this situation feels like a paradox.

Understanding Finnish Work Experience

When people talk about Finnish work experience the meaning is not always very clear. Sometimes it seems to refer to language skills. Sometimes it may mean understanding Finnish workplace culture. In other cases, it may simply mean that a person has already worked in Finland before.

For immigrants who recently arrived, this expectation can be difficult. Many people already have education and professional experience from their home countries. This experience is sometimes viewed differently from local experience. Because of this some newcomers feel that they are starting again from the beginning, even if they already have strong professional backgrounds.

Experiences from Immigrants in Turku

Since I moved to Turku, I have had some conversations with immigrants about their experiences in the Finnish labour market. Some of them are international students like me, while others have lived in Finland for several years. I also spoke with some Iranian immigrants who have been living here longer and have already gone through the process of entering the labour market.

Many of them described similar situations when they first arrived. Some explained that they applied for many jobs before receiving their first invitation to a job interview. Others said that employers sometimes preferred candidates who already had Finnish work experience.

In one of my conversations in Turku, a person mentioned that it took several months to get their first job, even after graduating in Finland.

In some cases, people accepted jobs that were not directly related to their field of study just to gain local experience. After some time, this experience helped them move to better opportunities. This suggests that the problem is not a lack of skills, but rather the difficulty of accessing the first opportunity.

Of course, every person's story is different. Hearing similar experiences from different people made me think more about how common this challenge might be for newcomers.

Why Employers Prefer Local Experience

There may be several reasons why employers prefer candidates with local experience. From an employer's perspective hiring someone is always a decision that involves uncertainty. Employers want to feel confident that a new employee will adapt well to the workplace and communicate effectively with colleagues.

Local experience may signal that a person already understands how workplaces function in Finland. Workplace culture can be different in every country, including communication styles, teamwork and professional expectations. If someone has already worked in Finland, employers might assume that the person is familiar with these aspects.

The Language Challenge

Language may also play an important role. Even though English is widely used in universities and in some international companies, Finnish language skills are still important in many workplaces. Learning a new language while studying and adapting to a new country naturally takes time.

Another possible factor is professional networks. People who have lived in Finland longer may have more connections that help them learn about job opportunities. For newcomers building these networks takes time and it may be more difficult. It is often discussed that many international graduates in Finland face similar challenges when trying to enter the labour market without local work experience.

When these factors come together the first step into the labour market may become more difficult for immigrants and international students.

Possible Solutions

Even though this situation can be challenging there may be ways to make the first step easier for newcomers. For example, internships during studies could help international students gain their first work experience in Finland. This kind of opportunity could make it easier to transition from university to working life.

Mentorship programs could also be helpful. When newcomers have the chance to connect with professionals who already understand the Finnish labour market they can learn more about job searching and workplace expectations.

Another idea is that employers could focus more on skills rather than only previous local experience. Many immigrants bring valuable knowledge, international perspectives and different professional experiences. These skills can also contribute to Finnish workplaces.

Conclusion

As someone who has recently arrived in Finland, my understanding of the labour market is still developing. I am still learning how things work here and observing the experiences of others.

These observations come from my first months living in Finland.

Based on the conversations I have had with immigrants and international students in Turku, the paradox of Finnish work experience seems to be a real challenge for many newcomers, especially alongside language barriers. Many people arrive in Finland with motivation, education and professional experience. Yet entering the labour market can sometimes take longer than they expect.

The most important step is simply creating more opportunities for newcomers to gain their first experience. Once people are given the chance to show their abilities, it may become much easier for them to continue building their careers.



Sometimes the biggest challenge is not the lack of skills, but simply the lack of the first opportunity.

Text:
Vida Moghaddam and Reija Anckar



Integrating International Talent into the Finnish Labor Market:

Trust, Challenges, and Practical Solutions

Again and again, the same advice appeared throughout the responses in this survey: learn Finnish, gain Finnish work experience, and build networks. None of these expectations seemed unreasonable. Language matters. Employers value familiarity with local workplace practices. Professional connections often open doors that qualifications alone cannot.

Yet, reading the responses, I kept returning to the same question: where is a newcomer supposed to begin?

How do you gain Finnish work experience without first finding someone willing to hire you? How do you improve your professional Finnish without opportunities to use it in everyday working life? And how do you build meaningful networks when those very connections are often formed through work itself?

The people who shared their experiences with me were not inexperienced job seekers trying to enter the labor market for the first time.

They had managed procurement processes, led teams, worked in engineering and information technology, developed software, taught students, and built careers over many years. They knew how to work.

What many struggled with was turning their existing expertise into local credibility.

This challenge extends beyond individual frustration. Finland's labor market is evolving, and internationally educated professionals have become an increasingly important part of the country's economic landscape. By 2024, one in ten employed person in Finland was of foreign origin, a considerable rise from 4% in 2010 (Statistics Finland, 2025). Many of these professionals arrive with strong qualifications and a genuine desire to contribute. Yet their labor market outcomes remain weaker than those of Finnish-background workers. Although people of foreign background represent around 12% of the working-age population, unemployment is considerably more common among them (Statistics Finland, 2025).

The experiences shared in this survey suggest that integration is not only about language skills, local experience, or professional networks. It is also about trust, how it is built, how it is recognized, and why so many internationally educated professionals feel they must earn it all over again.

When Experience Is Not Enough

The 18 respondents represented a broad range of professions, including engineering, software development, IT management, architecture, business administration, finance, education, and maritime industries. They included professionals who had completed part of their education in Finland as well as others whose degrees were obtained entirely abroad. Participants were reached through a mix of personal connections, sessions at Turku International House, classmates and their spouses, friends within the international community in Turku, and a survey link placed at the Turku City Library for anyone who wanted to take part. Participation was voluntary and all responses were kept anonymous. Many had built substantial careers before arriving in Finland, some with more than a decade of professional experience. Yet only a few had secured positions that reflected their qualifications and expertise. This pattern is consistent with broader evidence showing that underemployment among internationally educated professionals is shaped not only by individual qualifications, but by how employment systems are structured to recognize them.

One participant captured the situation in a single sentence:

> **My career is at a standstill as I cannot find a job despite my education.**

What stood out across the responses was not a lack of competence, ambition, or willingness to adapt. Participants described attending language courses, rewriting CVs, applying for jobs, volunteering, and trying to understand the expectations of an unfamiliar labor market. Still, many felt that the professional identity they had spent years building, no longer carried the same weight.

From an employer's perspective, caution is understandable. Recruitment always involves uncertainty, and employers seek reassurance that a candidate can perform effectively within local working environments. Yet the ways trust is assessed can unintentionally disadvantage professionals with foreign degrees and work experience.

Language proficiency, Finnish work experience, and personal recommendations often become signals of credibility. For those who arrive without these locally recognized markers, proving competence can feel like starting over, not because they are beginners, but because they are strangers.

The Different Ways Trust Is Built

The responses showed that language, work experience, and networks are closely connected. Rather than separate barriers, they are three key ways through which trust is built and can be supported. The three sections below examine each of these in turn, exploring the barriers to access and how they could be made more accessible.

Language Beyond Communication

Language emerged as the most frequently discussed challenge. Most participants who had searched for employment in Finland reported that Finnish language requirements shaped access to opportunities consistently, and across almost all types of roles. One participant noted that Finnish language proficiency appeared in almost all job advertisements, including summer positions, with only a limited number of roles in international companies as an exception.

One participant, who has remained unemployed despite two years in Finland, described the reality plainly:



I am still not able to enter the Finnish labor market after two years. Language is the main barrier.

Another reflected on the structural dimension of this challenge:



Most positions in Finland require fluent Finnish, usually at a native or C1 level, so having that skill would make me eligible for many more roles. But that is not the level we can reach while completing a degree or in just a few years.

The survey also shows that language is more than a practical communication requirement. One participant, whose previous job relied mainly on English, still experienced Finnish as a key requirement for further opportunities, indicating that language can also signal commitment and belonging. The main difficulty concerns timing. Advanced Finnish is often expected before hiring, even though workplaces are among the most effective environments for language learning. In several cases, participants reported that real progress happened when language study and work progressed side by side, rather than Finnish being treated as a strict prerequisite for employment.

The First Opportunity Dilemma

Finnish work experience emerged as another recurring theme. Employers understandably value familiarity with local workplace practices. Yet this creates a difficult situation for newcomers. Finnish experience is often needed to secure employment, while employment itself is needed to gain that experience.

Some participants took jobs outside their professional fields as temporary stepping stones rather than destinations. Others remained unable to secure an initial opportunity despite meeting all formal credential requirements. One participant, an architect with internationally recognized qualifications and full membership of the Finnish Association of Architects, described still being unable to find a position in their field. The credential was recognized. The opportunity was not.

The first opportunity, therefore, becomes less about determining whether people can do the work and more about finding someone willing to give them their first chance. In this sense, trust is required before individuals have a chance to demonstrate their competence.

Networks as Bridges

Professional networks appeared repeatedly throughout the responses and their role in the Finnish labor market was described as decisive. One participant summarized this directly:



It is very hard to create a network in Finland. But if you do, it can be a great advantage. Specially when you are looking for a job, their recommendation can change anything.

Recommendations do more than share information about vacancies. They transfer confidence. Someone familiar with a candidate's abilities effectively vouches for them, extending trust before an employer has had the opportunity to form their own judgement. For newcomers without established local connections, these pathways can remain difficult to access. Opportunities may depend not only on what people know, but also on who has had the opportunity to know them.

Moving Beyond Individual Responsibility

The experiences shared by participants suggest that integration cannot rely solely on individual effort. People were learning languages, attending courses, rewriting applications, networking, volunteering, and adapting to unfamiliar systems, yet many continued to encounter the same obstacles. What emerged from the survey was not simply a need for more support, but a need for better coordination between the institutions already involved in integration.

Connecting Language Learning with Work

Some participants felt that workplace exposure was more effective than classroom learning alone, and described real professional interactions as the setting where their language skills developed most.

One solution could be that companies, with public funding and in cooperation with the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment (TEM) and TE Services, could offer short integration programmes of three to six months that combine part-time work, occupation-specific training, and everyday Finnish. Participants would gain practical experience, become familiar with workplace culture, and develop their language skills at the same time. When recruitment is based on observed performance rather than assumptions about foreign degrees, employers can hire international candidates more confidently. In such programmes, trust grows through shared work experience rather than prior reputation, which is precisely what they are designed to create.

Flexible Language Expectations

The findings also point to the need for more flexible approaches to language requirements. Finnish is often required for employment but not consistently used in everyday work tasks, suggesting it functions as a signal of integration as much as a practical skill. Applying identical language requirements across all occupations can create unnecessary barriers for qualified candidates. As one participant put it directly: employers could be more open to hiring international professionals in specialized roles where English is the working language, with professionals gradually developing Finnish proficiency over time. Language development, in this model, becomes part of the employment relationship rather than a condition for entering it.

When professionals are hired for what they can do rather than how well they speak, trust can develop through the work itself.

Universities as Integration Hubs

Several participants struggled to build professional networks without an existing local circle to draw on. Universities and universities of applied sciences are well placed to address this structurally.

A practical approach would be to organize a series of informal gatherings where international students and their spouses come together in a relaxed setting, sharing their professional backgrounds, experience, and career goals with university staff and career advisors.

Over time, staff get to know the people behind the CVs, their strengths, their experience, and what they are looking to build. As a natural conclusion, universities could then invite recruiters and recruiting agents they are already connected with to a final session, where those personal introductions and recommendations can be made. For recruiters, hearing about a candidate from someone who already knows them and understands the Finnish work context is far more useful than reviewing an application from a stranger. Trust, in this model, is not something candidates have to build from scratch. It arrives with the introduction.

Recognizing Competence Through Practice

A couple of participants felt that employers were hesitant to fully trust foreign education and work experience, and what they needed was simply a chance to demonstrate what they could do. Two practical approaches could help address this. The first involves professional organisations developing field-specific assessments, supervised tasks that test real skills in relevant contexts. A mechanical engineer could complete a design assignment using CAD software, a software developer could work through a technical case. The outcome would be a locally recognized signal of competence that goes beyond what a CV can show. The second approach is more direct, employers and public institutions, coordinated through TE Services, could offer short-term placements and trial periods where candidates work in a Finnish context and demonstrate their abilities in practice.

As one participant put it, programmes that give international professionals the opportunity to demonstrate their suitability for a role would make a real difference. Both approaches move from evaluating candidates on paper to giving them a fair chance to demonstrate their abilities in practice.

Conclusion

The professionals who shared their experiences were not asking for shortcuts. They were willing to learn the language, adapt to unfamiliar norms, build new relationships, and contribute their knowledge. Many were already doing exactly that.

What many seemed to seek was something more fundamental: a fair opportunity to transform existing expertise into local trust.

Integration is often described as an individual journey of adaptation. The experiences shared here suggest another perspective. It is also a collective process, shaped by the structures through which societies recognize potential, assess competence, and extend opportunities. When language development, work experience, and professional connections are designed to work together rather than treated as separate prerequisites, the path into working life becomes more navigable for everyone involved.

The question is not whether internationally educated professionals are ready to contribute. The question is whether the system is ready to let them in and contribute with their expertise.



Text: Niloufar Etminan



Vieraskielinen työ suomalaisessa työelämässä

- epävarmuuden kasautuminen ja hyväksikäyttöön johtava kehityskulku

Mistä epävarmuus alkaa

Suomessa puhutaan paljon työvoimapulasta. Monilla aloilla tarvitaan työntekijöitä, ja työperäistä maahanmuuttoa pidetään tärkeänä osana talouden ja hyvinvointivaltion tulevaisuutta. Samalla keskustelussa jää usein vähemmälle huomiolle se, millaiseen asemaan Suomeen muuttavat ihmiset päätyvät työmarkkinoilla.

Monelle arki on epävarmaa. Työn löytäminen voi olla vaikeaa, osaaminen ei aina tule käyttöön ja elämä saattaa tuntua väliaikaiselta. Vaikka työtä olisi, se ei välttämättä johda pysyvään asemaan, etenemiseen tai turvaan.

Tässä artikkelissa tarkastellaan vieraskielistä työtä suomalaisessa työelämässä. Vieraskielisellä työllä tarkoitetaan työtä, jossa työn kieli ei ole suomi tai ruotsi.

Usein kyse on englanninkielisestä asiantuntija- tai opiskelijatyöstä, mutta tarkastelu ulottuu myös muihin vieraskielisiin työmuotoihin, kuten kausi- ja alihankintatyöhön. Näitä töitä yhdistää se, että työntekijän asema on usein epävarmempi kuin kotimaisilla kielillä työskentelevillä.

Artikkelin keskeinen näkökulma on epävarmuuden kasautuminen ja hyväksikäyttöön mahdollisesti johtava kehityskulku. Tämä tarkoittaa, että epävarmuus ei synny yhdestä syystä, vaan monista pienistä tekijöistä, jotka kasaantuvat ajan myötä. Vieraskielisen henkilön integraation polku saatta katketa jos hänellä ei ole mahdollista hyödyntää omaa osaamistaan. Kun integraation polku katkeaa, työntekijän asema heikkenee. Äärimmillään tämä kehitys voi johtaa tilanteisiin, joissa hyväksikäyttö ei ole poikkeus, vaan osa arkea.

Epävarmuuden kasautuminen: lupajärjestelmä ja työmarkkinoiden lähtökohdat

Epävarmuus alkaa usein jo ennen ensimmäistä työpäivää. Maahanmuuttoviraston katsaus 'Maahanmuutto Suomeen 2026' antaa kuvan siitä toimintaympäristöstä, jossa vieraskielinen työ tapahtuu. Vuonna 2025 työperusteisten oleskelulupahakemusten määrä laski selvästi edellisvuodesta. Erityisesti työntekijän oleskelulupia haettiin aiempaa vähemmän, ja kielteisten päätösten osuus kasvoi. Taustalla olivat heikentynyt taloustilanne, saatavuusharkinta ja lainsäädännön tiukennukset. Lisäksi pysyvän oleskeluluvan ehtoja kiristettiin vuoden 2026 alussa, mikä teki pysyvän aseman saavuttamisesta entistä hitaampaa ja epävarmempaa (Maahanmuuttovirasto, 2026).

Kun oleskeluoikeus on tiukasti sidottu työntekoon, työntekijän vaihtoehdot ovat rajalliset. Työpaikan menettäminen voi tarkoittaa myös oleskeluoikeuden menettämistä. Tämä heikentää työntekijän neuvotteluasemaa jo lähtökohtaisesti.

Kausityöhön perustuva maahanmuutto on kasvanut. Tämä ohjaa monia vieraskielisiä työntekijöitä lyhytkestoisiin ja matalapalkkaisiin töihin.

Moni ulkomailla koulutettu joutuu aloittamaan avustavista tehtävistä, koska tutkintojen tunnustaminen ja kielivaatimusten täyttäminen vievät aikaa. Epävarmuus ei siis ole sattumaa, vaan seurausta rakenteista, jotka määrittävät työmarkkinoille pääsyn ehtoja.

Kun osaaminen ei pääse käyttöön

Epävarmuuden kasautuminen jatkuu usein sillä, että osaaminen ei pääse täysimääräisesti käyttöön. Tilastokeskuksen aineistoon perustuva Tarja Baumgartnerin (2023) tutkimus osoittaa, että tämä on Suomessa yleistä. Ulkomailla syntyneistä työllisistä naisista joka viides ja miehistä lähes joka neljäs kokee tekevänsä Suomessa vähemmän osaamista vaativaa työtä kuin aiemmassa työssään lähtömaassa. Ilmiö korostuu erityisesti vanhemmissa ikäryhmissä sekä ammatillisen tai korkea-asteen tutkinnon suorittaneilla.

Tilanne ei välttämättä näytä ulospäin vakavalta. Ihmiset ovat töissä, maksavat veroja ja elävät arkeaan. Silti koulutus, työkokemus ja työn vaatimukset eivät kohtaa. Pitkittyessään tämä heikentää taloudellista turvallisuutta, urakehitystä ja tunnetta siitä, että oma osaaminen on arvokasta ja tunnustettua.

Integraation katkeava polku

Kun osaaminen ei pääse käyttöön eikä etenemismahdollisuuksia avaudu, integraation polku työelämään voi katketa.

Työllistyminen ei johda vakaampaan asemaan, vastuullisempiin tehtäviin tai pysyvyyteen. Englanninkielinen tai muu vieraskielinen työ voi mahdollistaa pääsyn työmarkkinoille, mutta samalla se voi muodostua umpikujaksi.

Työnantajien varovaisuus, kielivaatimukset ja tutkintojen tunnustamisen hitaus vahvistavat tunnetta umpikujasta. Työntekijä on työelämässä mukana, mutta ei täysivaltainen toimija. Suomalaisen työelämän normaali on vakituinen kokoaikainen työsuhde Vieraskielisten työsuhteissa korostuvat työn kausiluonteisuus, määräaikaisuus ja osa-aikaisuus. Epävarmuus syvenee: vaihtoehdot kapenevat ja riippuvuus yksittäisestä työpaikasta kasvaa.

Integraation katkeava polku ei tarkoita täydellistä syrjäytymistä, vaan pysyvää välitilaa. Ihminen on töissä, mutta vailla vaikituisen työpaikan tuomaa turvaa, etenemismahdollisuuksia ja mahdollisuutta vaikuttaa omaan tilanteeseensa.

Haarautuvat polut: lähteminen tai jääminen epävarmuuteen

Kun integraation polku katkeaa, kehityskulku voi edetä eri suuntiin. Ylen (2026a) laaja reportaasi ukrainalaisten tilanteesta Suomessa havainnollistaa tätä. Lähes puolet Suomeen saapuneista ukrainalaisista ovat jo lähteneet maasta. Pääsyy on työttömyys ja vaikeus päästä työmarkkinoille, erityisesti ilman suomen kielen taitoa. Suomessa ukrainalaisten työllistymisaste on selvästi alhaisempi kuin monissa muissa EU-maissa. Osa ihmisistä reagoi epävarmuuteen lähtemällä. Toiset jäävät, mutta hyväksyvät yhä epävarmempia työehtoja. Maahanmuuttoviraston tilastot osoittavat, että tilapäisen suojelun ja työperusteisten lupien kytkeytyminen työntekoon lisää painetta ottaa vastaan lähes mikä tahansa työ. Epävarmuuden kasautuminen ei siis purkaudu, vaan ohjaa ihmisiä eri tavoin haavoittuviin asemiin.

Harmaa metsätalous esimerkkinä hyväksikäytöstä

Epävarmuuden kasautumisen ääripäässä kehityskulku johtaa hyväksikäyttöön. Ylen artikkeli 'Harmaa metsätalous' osoittaa, miten työehtojen polkeminen ja pimeä työ ovat yleistyneet metsäalalla samaan tapaan kuin rakennus- ja ravintola-aloilla.

Metsätalouden Ilmiö näkyy erityisesti Itä-Suomessa ja kohdistuu ulkomaisiin kausityöntekijöihin (Kalliovaara, 2025).

Aluehallintoviraston tarkastusten perusteella yli 20 yritystä on rikkonut syrjinnän kieltoa kansalaisuuden perusteella viime vuosina. Käytännössä tämä on tarkoittanut alipalkkausta, työehtosopimusten sivuuttamista, puutteellista työterveyshuoltoa ja vakavia työturvallisuuspuutteita.

Osa yrityksistä on lopettanut toimintansa viranomaisvalvonnan lähestyessä ja jatkanut toimintaansa uudella nimellä ja y-tunnuksella, mikä tekee valvonnasta hidasta ja vaikeaa.

Metsätalous toimii esimerkkinä Paavo Teittisen kuvaamasta modernin orjuuden logiikasta. Hyväksikäyttö ei perustu avoimeen pakottamiseen, vaan työntekijän heikkoon neuvotteluasemaan, kielimuuriin, lyhytaikaiseen oleskeluun ja alihankintaketjuihin, joissa vastuu hämärtyy (Teittinen, 2025). Hyväksikäyttöön johtava kehityskulku ei ole poikkeus, vaan epävarmuuden kasautumisen looginen seuraus.

Johtopäätökset: miten kehityskulku voidaan katkaista

Epävarmuuden kasautuminen ja hyväksikäyttöön johtava kehityskulku eivät ole väistämättömiä. Ne syntyvät tunnistettavista rakenteellisista tekijöistä, joihin voidaan vaikuttaa.

Ennakoitavampi lupapolitiikka, sujuvampi tutkintojen tunnustaminen, kielivaatimusten kriittinen tarkastelu ja selkeät urapolut ovat keinoja kehityskulun katkaisemiseksi.

Ilman tällaisia tukirakenteita vieraskielinen työ voi toimia osallisuuden sijaan porttina pysyvään epävarmuuteen. Kestävä ja oikeudenmukainen integraatio edellyttää, että epävarmuuden kasautuminen tunnistetaan ajoissa – ennen kuin se ehtii johtaa hyväksikäyttöön.

Harmaantuvassa Suomessa ei ole varaa jättää koulutettuja ihmisiä työelämän ulkopuolelle. Suomalaisten työnantajien olisi syytä tutustua muiden eurooppalaisten yritysten rekrytointi- ja henkilöstöpolitiikkaan ja kehittää taitoja, joita monikulttuurinen työyhteisö edellyttää.

Suomalainen yhteiskunta tarvitsee keskiluokkaisia vieraskielisiä työntekijöitä ja heidän osaamistaan. Jos vieraskielinen työntekijä Suomessa sijoittuu vain ääripäihin, suuryritysten johtajiksi tai matalapalkkaisiksi pätkätyöläisiksi, Suomelta jää hyödyntämättä valtava osaamispotentiaali, jonka avulla myös hiipuvaa taloutta voitaisiin vahvistaa.



Text: Maria Pick



Language as the Key to Entry to Working Life



Language Learning as a Path to Finnish Working Life:

International Talents Perspective

Moving to an entirely different country is a delicate and transformational decision and adjusting to the country's work environment is rarely straightforward. For international students and professionals in Finland, this is more than just adjusting to new weather conditions or accepting new cultural norms, traditions, and values. The success and acceleration of this process are dependent on one critical factor: language. Even if Finland is widely recognized as one of Europe's most English-speaking countries, fluency in one or both local languages is nevertheless vital for successful communication, networking, gaining employment, and successfully integrating into the workforce. A recent Finnish study reveals that native language ability is a significant facilitator or barrier to professional integration. According to the findings of semi-structured, qualitative interviews with international students and educators (Lu & Everson Harkala, 2024), inadequate local language competency impedes employment acceptance, professional recognition, and effective participation in the workplace and cultural affairs.

This article explores some literature on integration definitions and reflects on firsthand experiences of studying and integrating into Finnish working life, with a strong focus on the importance of early language learning and methods. It also includes interviews with two international professionals who moved to Finland for studies, have already learned or are learning the language, and have either built a successful career or are actively searching for a workplace. Through these combined experiences, the article explores the challenges and opportunities tied to learning the language, settling into the workplace, and accessing support during studies.

Finally, recommendations for educational institutions, language tutors, employers, and policymakers to better support international talents in their integration journey are presented.

What is Integration

Integration refers to a systemic and holistic process through which individuals become active and impactful in the social, cultural, and institutional structures of their immediate community or organization by taking part in shared norms, communicative practices, and meaningful interactions.

Drawing on Esser's (2001) institutional viewpoint, integration means inclusion in key areas such as job opportunities and professional networks, where language serves as a significant bottleneck. Ager and Strang's (2008) portray language as both a vital skill and a facilitator of employment, social connection, and cultural awareness in the workplace. Penninx and Garces-Mascarenas (2016) define integration as a collaborative adaptation between individuals and organizations, emphasizing the importance of workplace discourse practices and institutional language support. From a social & structural integration perspective, Castles, de Haas, & Miller (2014) describe integration as the extent to which migrants can take part in key areas of social life, including employment, education, and social relations.

Moving to Finland

Leaving my country was more than just packing my bags and boarding a plane; it was stepping away from the life I had built over the years, the career, familiar faces, warmth, and my ability to navigate fast-paced environments with limited resources. But life has a way of nudging us towards new chapters, and for me, that chapter began with a dream to further my education in an environment that challenged me differently. That dream led me to Finland, a land I had only seen in pictures. I had heard it is the happiest country in the world, and I looked forward to exploring and telling wonderful stories to whoever cared to listen.

My First Language Experience

As I stepped out of the airport in Vaasa, Finland, pulling my luggage toward the taxi stand, I braced myself for the unfamiliar but did not expect the moment to feel quite so soon. A driver approached me and asked, "Minne meet?" words that I could only guess what they meant yet somehow carried all the weight of being far from home. I remember standing there, caught between confusion and curiosity, unsure of what to say. I tried answering in English, comforted by the idea that Finland was known for its high English-speaking population, but he simply gestured for another driver to help me instead. It was a small interaction, but it made me realize not everyone understood English and how the language journey was beginning long before I reached my accommodation.

First Attempt at Learning the Language

Faced with the challenges of adapting to my new unfamiliar environment and lots of assignments at the beginning of my studies, I considered language learning as something to be useful but not essential at that moment. Like many international students, good grades and strong professional skills combined with fluent English would be enough to build a career in the international companies in Finland while learning the language at a pace that was comfortable. Over time, this assumption proved overly optimistic.

Struggling to understand conversations in your environment can contribute to feelings of isolation, even in a friendly setting. On the other hand, even a basic ability to speak Swedish or Finnish can enhance our sense of connection and inclusion. Having noticed how language influences confidence. I started out with popular apps like Duolingo and Babbel to learn the basics like greetings, days of the week, names of food, etc., as that was the closest and available option that fitted my situation, and I had hopes that I would fully commit to language learning after my graduation.

Job Search Journey

My first impressions of job searching and recruitment in Finland was that the job market was stable, innovative, and rich in opportunities, and the demand for skilled labor keeps growing, thereby making long-term prospects more encouraging.

However, I also recognized the presence of a major underlying barrier, which might be invisible to newcomers. This barrier is linguistic rather than technical or professional. While most job advertisements may say that English is sufficient, the everyday reality of the final recruitment process often tells a different story, as the person who gets the job is always the one who speaks the local languages and English. In my bid to confirm this, I sent out several job applications to companies in Helsinki, some in English, and some I translated into Finnish. In some cases, I sent in both versions to the same company and received calls or response messages for those applications sent in Finnish, only to be stalled when they realized I did not speak the language. This, however, confirms that even when a native language is not needed in carrying out daily job assignments, employers are more comfortable with those they can communicate with in the local language.

Working Life

Language in Finnish working life functions as a gateway. It affects recruitment decisions, access to professional networks, and daily workplace interactions. Even when English is used in official settings, the local language often dominates informal spaces, where relationships are built and opportunities appear. Even though I receive support in my current workplace and my presence is taken into consideration, I still experience a feeling of guilt when the language of communication in meetings, internal emails, informal conversations, or workplace humor shifts from Swedish to English because of me.

This realization marked a turning point in how I viewed integration. I began to understand that working life is not only about formal tasks and responsibilities but also about informal interactions that create trust, teamwork, and a sense of belonging. Without sufficient language skills, it is easy to feel like an outsider present but not fully active or included.

Challenges in my language learning

Learning Finnish or Swedish presents its own set of challenges. For me, the grammatical structure and vocabulary of European languages are hugely different from both my mother tongue and the English language. This makes learning progress feel slow, and motivation may fluctuate, especially when opportunities to practice speaking are limited.

During my academic studies, language courses were not part of the curriculum. This makes it difficult to see immediate relevance, which can reduce motivation. Many students also struggle with balancing external language studies alongside demanding degree programs. Post graduation, I started out with Finnish, which I found challenging because the grammar, vocabulary, and structure differed significantly from the English language I had grown up with. The Finnish language has very few similarities to English. Swedish has similar vocabulary and linguistic characteristics to English. Because of all these similarities, I switched to Swedish, which has been considerably simpler to grasp.

Emotional and Psychological Challenges of Language Learning

Learning Finnish as an adult has been one of the most challenging aspects of my integration process. Complex grammatical structure, wide vocabulary, and new sounds slowed progress. Beyond technical obstacles, emotional and psychological factors are also critical. Self-doubt or fear of making mistakes can hinder willingness to speak or practice the language. Feelings of embarrassment or frustration are common when expressing oneself at an infancy level, especially in professional or social contexts, which can feel embarrassing and challenging.

Balancing Life Needs and Language Learning

For middle-aged internationals, who are mostly faced with financial struggles, they might have limited learning time, and the unavailability of flexible learning places after work significantly hinders language learning. With work, family, and social obligations, there is rarely as much time and motivation for constant practice, which is essential to grasp Swedish or Finnish complicated grammar and pronunciation. Short, irregular study sessions reduce retention, slow progression, and limit exposure to practical speaking and listening, while a lack of accessible courses or community spaces after work limits social interaction and guided instruction, increasing reliance on potentially insufficient self-study methods. These factors, when combined, may result in less successful learning, lower motivation, feelings of solitude and even the danger of abandoning language study.

Flexible Language Learning Centers

Although online language-learning resources are easily accessible and offer flexible study options for international residents in Finland with demanding work schedules, classroom instruction remains important. Face-to-face teaching can help learners develop accurate intonation and understand the grammatical nuances of the language—areas that may receive less attention in online resources designed mainly for self-study.

For people like me who work irregular hours, this can be particularly challenging, as language integration classes are scheduled for regular work hours, leaving out those day workers who want to study the language after work. This leads to slower language immersion, thereby making integration into Finnish society and the workforce prolonged.

Interview: Personal Views of Language and Integration

It is often acknowledged that language skill is essential for international talents transitioning into local job markets. The significance of ability in the Finnish or Swedish language has changed from being an unambiguous employment prerequisite to an increasingly important integration tool in the Finnish environment. With a particular focus on employability, workplace confidence, and long-term integration, I examined qualitative survey responses from three internationals who have completed their master's program. Respondents 1 and 2 have successfully entered Finnish working life, while Respondent 3 is job hunting. This is aimed at investigating how language learning supports entry into Finnish working life and how this is achievable.

Language: Access to Employment and Integration

According to the responses, the language skills of Respondents 1 and 2 were not a deciding factor in their employment.

Both individuals work in multinational, English-speaking work contexts, with Respondent 1 saying that "functional language level is sufficient and realistic," which implies that English ability alone can be sufficient for labor market access in certain industries. However, she pointed out that she believes her job opportunities are limited because of her limited language skills, as she is still learning. Respondent 3 is of the opinion that he is yet to achieve the B2 level, which has been identified as his language ability level for his industry; hence, he is yet to secure a place. Earlier studies have shown a divided labor market, with English-speaking professions providing entry points for internationals and local companies still being less accessible. Thus, language serves as a differentiator for employability, sustained engagement, and mobility in the labor market, rather than a barrier to access.

Despite the low significance of language ability for the first employment of Respondents 1 and 2, both underlined that language abilities greatly improved workplace confidence, informal communication between colleagues, social inclusion, and networking. Notably, Respondent 2 saw language skills as just as vital for successful professional integration, while Respondent 1 thinks they are beneficial but not needed. Meanwhile, respondent 3 cannot figure out the effect of language, as he is yet to secure a job despite his level of ability.

This discrepancy shows that considerable exposure raises awareness of the sociocultural relevance of a language, encouraging its role beyond functional communication.

Importantly, both Respondents 1 and 2 emphasized that functional ability is sufficient for professional integration and that they view language ability as a gatekeeper. Respondent 3, however, disputes that narrative, thereby showing that ability is industry or company specific. Based on my observations, language ability depends on the role and industry. Customer-facing roles, be it in the English-speaking multinationals or local companies, will require native language ability, while office or backend roles might not.

Learning Methods and Integration Challenges

All responses show that methods that combine physical courses, self-study, and practical experience are the most effective. None of the respondents considered classroom education alone to be sufficient. Instead, language competency is gradually achieved through real-world applications and support.

Expected institutional aid like language courses, career mentorship, and internships during their studies was assessed as necessary but lacking, which shows a lack of organized integration paths and insufficient coordination between students, educators, and employers, which is important for direct occupational exposure during studies.

This reveals a systemic divide between studies and working life, in which language studies and labor market integration are considered separate rather than integrated processes.

Conclusions

Both employed respondents work in international companies, where English is used as their official language, thereby implying that language serves as a bridge between labor market segments rather than a first entry barrier. However, based on my opinion and experiences of Respondent 3, this situation is completely different in local companies where the language of communication is either Finnish, Swedish, or both. International talents are, however, affected by this bottleneck, due to limited or no language skills at graduation.

The general finding is that language ability is linked to stronger integration and projected long-term career potential and mobility. The level of fluency is decided by the industry or employers in some cases. This, however, shows that there is no "one size fits all" in the language requirements for employment. While Finland currently has about 400 companies where the English language is the mode of workplace communication (Get Hired in Finland, 2024), fluency in the native languages is considered an advantage in the hiring requirements, which invariably narrows the chances for applicants with little or no ability in the native languages.

The most effective way found to learn the language is through combined means of study and practical exposure to locals, and this can be easily achieved through first support from the educational institutions and then workplace assimilation, encouragement, and support. However, the challenges of course workload and flexible language learning support during studies have been identified as major bottlenecks in integration journeys.

Overall, this article reveals that language competency is beyond just a technical skill; it is an essential process by which internationals navigate professional affiliation, integration, and efficient functioning in workplaces. Despite the challenges in my language learning process, my experiences and observations suggest that persistence matters more than speed. Language learning is a long-term investment, and even small steps in the form of daily commitments can have a meaningful impact on learning.

Recommendations

Effective communication skills are considered the most crucial elements for successful workplace integration. Language limitations, on the other hand, may inhibit professional engagement, diminish confidence, and lead to miscommunication, all of which can influence efficiency and social cohesiveness. Because workplace integration is a collective responsibility of the education sector, business organizations, and the government, collaborative effort is needed.

Educational institutions play a pivotal part in exposing their international students to communicate adequately in different professional environments. There is a need to emphasize the importance of language learning to students during the application period in the bid to encourage early commencement of pre-arrival learning. Industry specific language learning should be integrated into the existing curriculum, and its importance to employability should be clearly emphasized. Incentives can also be provided to local students involved in mentor programs with international students, recognizing those who have made progress with their international counterparts. Apart from this, developing coordinated relationships with employers to offer internships and work-based language traineeships.

Employers can encourage bilingual workplace practices by setting up cultures in which all employees with international backgrounds can thrive by reducing the symbolic hurdles associated with "fluent level" linguistic expectations, recognizing limited language ability as an effort rather than a limitation, and implementing inclusive communication techniques and ongoing language growth opportunities. They should act as integration supporters, not job market regulators. Encourage bilingual workplace practices without completely requiring complete fluency in Swedish or Finnish.

The Finnish government influences national integration outcomes through its language policies, funding, and inclusive workforce plans. The educational institutions can receive help from funding language teachers and collaborations between educational institutions and employers aimed at workplace language immersion. Incentives should be made available for workplaces that have set up language learning and improvement cultures to encourage and sustain their drive. Finally, language learning centers with flexible schedules should be made accessible to internationals for intensive learning opportunities.

In a world that is becoming more global, one element of a nation's developmental drive is its recognition, willingness, and capacity to combine diverse ideas and perspectives into a shared vision. This makes integration of skilled professionals, not a debatable choice, but a futuristic strategy for development.



Text: Benedicta Edovia



Language as a Gateway:

Personal Reflections and Interview Insights on Integrating into Finnish Working Life

Integrating into Finnish working life extends beyond finding employment—it is deeply shaped by language learning and cultural adaptation. Drawing on personal experience and interview insights, this article explores how proficiency in Finnish or Swedish influences access to work, workplace participation, and long-term career development for international students and immigrants. By combining lived experience with research, the article highlights both individual effort and the structural factors that shape successful integration.

Behind the Merit-Based Ideal: Language, Belonging, and the Integration Experience

Finland is often described as a country that values equality, education, and social welfare.

From the outside, Finnish working life may appear transparent, merit-based, and well-organised.

However, for individuals with foreign backgrounds, integrating into Finnish working life is often a complex and stressful process. What is then integration? Integration into working life can be defined as a gradual process through which migrants gain access to employment, participate fully in workplace practices, and develop a sense of belonging, supported by proficiency in the host-country language. Language skills function as both a practical tool for communication and social resource that enables inclusion, career development, and long-term labour-market integration. (OECD, 2023; Council of Europe, 2025; Finnish Government, 2025.)

Despite high levels of education and motivation, many immigrants and international students struggle to access employment that corresponds to their qualifications (Arajärvi, 2020). Based on my own experiences, integration into Finnish working life is not a single event but a gradual process shaped by language proficiency, cultural understanding, professional networks, and personal spirit. While official integration policies emphasize employment as a key indicator of successful integration, everyday experiences often reveal invisible barriers, such as unspoken workplace norms, indirect communication styles, and the strong expectation of Finnish or Swedish language skills (Busk et al., 2021)

The importance of language cannot be overstated. Although English is widely spoken in Finland, particularly in academic and international business environments, Finnish working life still largely operates in Finnish or Swedish. Many job advertisements clearly require "excellent Finnish skills," even when the job tasks themselves could be performed in English. This creates a paradox for international professionals: language is necessary for employment, but employment is often necessary to truly master the language.

This article has two main objectives. First, on my personal experience and thoughts regarding integration into Finnish working life. Second, it presents insights from an interview with a person who successfully learned the Finnish language and entered working life.

Through this combination of personal reflection and interview data, the article seeks to deepen understanding of how language learning, institutional support and individual spirit interact in the integration process.

Learning to Belong: My Personal Experience of Integration into Finnish Working Life

Beginning Again in Finland

I moved to Finland in 2023 with my family to pursue an MBA, relocating from Sri Lanka, where I worked as a professional architect for eighteen years. Arriving in Finland was both exciting and challenging. It was my first time living in a Nordic country, and I had to adapt to a new culture, a new language, and a completely different climate as a non-European migrant.

I completed my MBA in 2024 and took basic Finnish and Swedish self-study elective courses offered at my university alongside my studies. However, I soon realised that basic language skills were not enough to communicate effectively within Finnish working life.

My first work experience in Finland was a summer job in a restaurant during my studies. Finnish language skills were not required there, and English was commonly used among the staff. After graduating, I applied for many jobs related to both my degree and my architectural background, but most applications were rejected mainly due to my limited Finnish language proficiency. In the meantime, I took a part-time distribution job to earn some income.

I registered as a job seeker with the Employment Service of the City of Turku and applied for Finnish language courses. Since I needed financial stability, I also applied for jobs outside my professional field and eventually worked as a cleaner, where local language skills were not required. Later, I joined my university as a project assistant – a part-time position related to my field of study- which I continue in at present. The university is a Swedish-speaking institution. Although English is the official working language, the staff often communicate with one another in Swedish. This makes me feel somewhat excluded from the workplace subculture, which in turn motivates me to learn the Swedish language.

I began my working life in Finland with only basic Finnish and Swedish skills, using English as my main working language. I am now enrolled in a Finnish language course to improve my Finnish language proficiency, and willing to learn the Swedish language as well.

Although I was able to function in English in academic settings, I quickly realized that Finnish or Swedish language skills were crucial in professional contexts. Informal conversations during coffee breaks, internal emails, internal social media groups and workplace humour often took place in Finnish or Swedish. Without understanding the language, I felt excluded from important social interactions that help build trust and professional relationships.

Research supports this experience, showing that language proficiency is strongly linked to social inclusion and career progression in Finland (Suni, 2017). Even when English is accepted as a working language, employees who speak Finnish or Swedish are often perceived as more committed and "integrated," which can influence hiring and promotion decisions.

First Encounters with Finnish Work Culture

My initial encounters with Finnish working life were characterized by both admiration and confusion. I admired the emphasis on punctuality, trust, and independence. In Finnish workplaces, employees are often given significant autonomy, and micromanagement is rare. At the same time, this independence can feel overwhelming for newcomers who are unfamiliar with implicit expectations.

One of the most striking features of Finnish work culture is communication style. Finns are often described as reserved and direct, valuing clarity over small talk. While this can be efficient, it may also feel distant to someone accustomed to more expressive communication cultures. In meetings, people may stay quiet not because they disagree or are not interested, but because they are thinking. It took me time and experience to understand this.

Job Seeking and Structural Barriers

Searching for employment revealed structural challenges beyond languages. Many positions are filled through informal networks, which are difficult for newcomers to access. Finnish employers often value local work experience but newcomers cannot gain that experience without being hired.

Despite these challenges, I also encountered supportive individuals, such as university lecturers, supervisors and colleagues who encouraged language learning and explained cultural norms. These interactions reinforced my belief that integration is not solely an individual responsibility but a shared process involving institutions, employers, and society.

Language as the Key to Integration - Why Finnish or Swedish Matters

Learning Finnish or Swedish is often described as the key to integration, and my experience confirms this perspective. Language is not only a tool for communication but also a gateway to understanding cultural values, humour, and workplace etiquette. According to the Finnish Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment (2021), strong language skills significantly improve employment outcomes for immigrants.

However, Finnish is widely recognized as a challenging language due to its complex grammar and vocabulary. For many international students, balancing language studies with degree requirements and part-time work is demanding. As a result, language learning may be postponed or treated as secondary, even though it is essential for long-term integration.

Emotional Aspects of Language Learning

Language learning is not purely cognitive; it is deeply emotional. Speaking Finnish as a non-native speaker can involve fear of making mistakes, embarrassment, and feeling of inadequacy. I have experienced situations where switching to English felt safer when I wanted to practice Finnish.

Creating environments where mistakes are accepted and encouraged is therefore crucial. Supportive workplaces and educational institutions can play a significant role by normalizing imperfect language use and recognizing effort rather than fluency alone (Northrup, 2020).

From Italy to Finland: An Architect's Journey of Language, Work, and Belonging

To examine the language-based integration, I conducted interviews with international people who have managed to integrate in Finland. The first interviewee, an Italian architect, who moved to Finland in their late twenties, describes a multi-year integration journey shaped by language learning, professional challenges, and gradual adaptation to Finnish culture and working life. The move was motivated by both personal reasons—starting a family—and professional aspirations for better working conditions than those available in Italy's highly competitive architectural sector.

Initial impressions of Finland were positive, marked by admiration for the natural environment, long summer light, and the ease of handling practical daily tasks in Turku thanks to widespread English proficiency.

However, despite strong personal support from their partner's family, the interviewee faced early challenges such as lacking a professional network, limited Finnish skills, and uncertainty about how to launch an architectural career in a new country.

Finding a Voice in Finnish: Language Learning as a Long-Term Process

Language learning emerged as a major theme. The interviewee focused on Finnish, recognizing its importance in a field deeply tied to the local market. They began with evening courses and benefitted most from immersive classes taught entirely in Finnish. Vocabulary acquisition was especially crucial. Developing confidence in the language took several years, supported by consistent participation in language cafés, community events, and active engagement on social media. Over time, Finnish language skills significantly enhanced their sense of belonging, enabling them to understand everyday interactions and participate more fully in both social and professional settings.

Taking the First Steps into Finnish Working Life

Entering the Finnish labour market was challenging. Early employment was outside their field and did not require Finnish skills. Their first architectural job came through proactive outreach and monitoring of opportunities on social media.

Even basic Finnish proficiency, combined with a willingness to learn, was valued by employers. Supportive colleagues helped the interviewee build professional vocabulary and navigate industry specific communication. Cultural differences in the workplace were minimal, especially compared to northern Italy. The most notable difference was Finland's strong emphasis on work–life balance, efficiency, and valuing human resources. Overtime is rare, compensated fairly, and avoided through careful planning.

Workplace communication in Finland was described as clear, direct, and result-oriented. A multinational environment meant English was the primary working language, although the interviewee regularly used Finnish and Italian as well. Social inclusion at work was smooth, further strengthened by the interviewee's ongoing language development. Certain informal practices—such as maintaining the office coffee pot—were learned over time.

Challenges Faced by Highly Skilled Migrants in Finnish Working Life

The biggest challenges in integration were finding the right career path and securing employment in the field. Although support from family, educational institutions, and employers was appreciated, the interviewee emphasizes the importance of personal initiative in navigating opportunities. More exposure to others' career paths during their studies would have been helpful.

They suggest tailoring language education more closely to specific professions to foster motivation, community, and peer learning.

A Message to Newcomers: Advice from Experience

For newcomers, the interviewee highlights two priorities: strengthening technical skills to match local job market demands and committing to learning Finnish to support long term career growth and a sense of belonging. They view language learning as a balanced combination of grammar and five core skills—reading, listening, writing, speaking, and vocabulary—best developed through both structured classes and self-directed practice.

They describe Finnish working life as balanced and healthy, emphasizing productivity during work hours and meaningful personal time afterward. They encourage newcomers to make Finland feel like home, even for shorter stays, and to engage with national events and communities beyond their immediate city. Looking back, they wish they had joined a professional union earlier to benefit from informal language practice and networking opportunities.

Overall, the interviewee feels positive about their integration and life in Turku. While they acknowledge the ongoing effort required to bridge the gap between themselves and long-term residents, they appreciate Finland's culture of lifelong learning and envision continuing their career in the country.

Discussion: Bridging Personal Experience and Interview Perspectives

Both my personal reflections and the interviewee's experiences highlight the central role of language in integration into Finnish working life. While individual motivation is important, structural support strongly shapes outcomes, particularly when language education is disconnected from professional contexts.

Despite differing backgrounds, our experiences reveal shared patterns: the importance of Finnish or Swedish language skills, difficulties accessing the labour market, and the role of social networks and cultural understanding. Although English is widely used at work, informal communication, social inclusion, and career progression often depend on local language proficiency. Confidence in using Finnish developed gradually through practice, supportive colleagues, and real-life exposure.

Both accounts also point to structural barriers, such as limited access to professional networks and repeated job rejections linked to language skills and lack of local experience.

At the same time, Finnish workplace culture—characterised by autonomy, efficiency, and direct communication—required cultural learning. Integration emerged as an emotional and social process, shaped by vulnerability, support from others, and personal agency. Overall, the findings suggest that meaningful integration is achievable through sustained effort combined with institutional and social support.

Implications for Education and Policy

Educational institutions should integrate language learning more closely with professional studies, even if this costs. Offering field-specific language courses and expanding internship opportunities could enhance employability. Additionally, employers should be encouraged to recognize multilingualism as an asset rather than a deficiency.

From a policy perspective, integration should be viewed as a long-term process requiring collaboration between educational institutions, employers, and public services. Simply offering language courses is not enough, the quality, relevance, and accessibility of these courses matter.

Conclusion

Viewed through both personal experience and interview insights, this study shows that integration into Finnish working life is complex but achievable. Despite different backgrounds, shared challenges emerge—most notably language proficiency, unfamiliar workplace norms, and limited access to local networks, highlighting that integration is a gradual process of building linguistic, social, and cultural competence.

Language stands out as the central factor. While English allows basic participation, Finnish or Swedish proficiency enables deeper inclusion, stronger career prospects, and a sense of belonging. Successful language learning requires time, resilience, and supportive environments that encourage practice. At the same time, integration depends on both structural support and individual agency. Employers, educational institutions, and networks play key roles, but newcomers must also actively seek opportunities and engagement.

Ultimately, despite early obstacles, Finland offers a supportive context for those willing to invest in learning and adaptation. With sustained effort, language development, and social support, international professionals can move beyond participation to fully thrive in Finnish working life.



Text: Chamal Jalath



Integrating International Students into the Finnish Workforce:

Rethinking Language, Education, and Employment as a Unified Pathway

Finland has become an increasingly attractive destination for international students due to its strong education system and growing demand for skilled labor. At the same time, the country is facing demographic challenges and workforce shortages, making the successful integration of international talent an important priority. Finland's labour shortages and aging population have increased the importance of retaining skilled international graduates within the Finnish workforce (YLE Labour Shortage). Despite this demand for skilled workers, many international graduates in Finland continue to face difficulties entering the labor market. Reports and public discussions have highlighted that international students often struggle to find employment opportunities that match their education due to language expectations and limited professional integration pathways.

A common pattern observed in my research is that students graduate with strong academic qualifications but face difficulties in securing jobs that match their skills. Similar concerns have been reflected in Finnish public discourse, where many highly educated immigrants remain employed in low-skilled sectors despite their qualifications (YLE Educated Immigrants in Low-Skilled Jobs). While several factors contribute to this issue, language consistently emerges as one of the most significant barriers. However, it is important to recognize that the problem is not simply a lack of language proficiency. Instead, the way language learning is structured within the education system often does not align with students' academic and career timelines.

Currently, language learning is often treated as an additional requirement rather than an integrated part of professional development. This creates a disconnect between what students learn and what employers expect.

As a result, students are required to meet workplace language expectations without having had sufficient opportunities to develop those skills in relevant contexts.

This paper argues that integration challenges should be understood as a structural issue rather than an individual limitation. Specifically, the lack of coordination between language learning, higher education, and employment pathways creates barriers that slow down or prevent effective integration. To address this, a more integrated approach is needed—one that connects these elements throughout the student journey.

Language as a Structural Factor in Integration

Language plays a central role in shaping integration outcomes. It is not only a tool for communication but also influences confidence, participation, and access to opportunities. In many cases, language proficiency determines whether international students are able to enter the labor market and build professional networks.

In my research, students frequently described how limited Finnish language skills restricted their job opportunities. Even when positions were advertised in English, Finnish was often expected during the hiring process. This created a sense of uncertainty and exclusion, as students felt they were being evaluated based on criteria that were not clearly defined.

At the same time, language appears to function as a signal of integration. Employers may interpret language proficiency as an indicator of cultural understanding, long-term commitment, or adaptability. In many workplaces, language also functions as a practical risk-reduction mechanism. Employers may associate shared language with smoother communication, stronger workplace cohesion, and reduced onboarding challenges. In environments where organizations lack structured support for multilingual integration, language proficiency can become a simplified way to assess perceived readiness for employment.

This dual role of language—as both a practical requirement and a symbolic filter—makes it a key factor in shaping integration outcomes. Without structured opportunities to develop language skills in real-world contexts, many students remain excluded despite having strong potential.

Challenges in the Transition from Education to Employment

The challenges international students face are interconnected and often reinforce each other. Language barriers limit access to job opportunities and professional networks. Without these networks, students struggle to gain local experience, which further reduces their employability. This creates a cycle that is difficult to break.

Another issue is timing. Many students only begin to focus seriously on language learning toward the end of their studies, when they start applying for jobs. By this stage, it becomes difficult to reach a level of proficiency that meets employer expectations. Public discussions in Finland have also highlighted how many international graduates balance survival jobs alongside their studies, making consistent language learning and professional integration more difficult (YLE Survival Jobs and Language Learning).

There is also a gap between classroom learning and real-world application. Students may complete language courses and pass exams but still feel unprepared to use Finnish in professional settings. This affects both confidence and performance in interviews and workplace interactions.

Cultural adaptation adds another layer of complexity. Understanding workplace norms, communication styles, and expectations requires time and experience. Without structured guidance, students must navigate these challenges independently, which can slow down their integration process.

Taken together, these issues highlight the need for a more coordinated approach that addresses multiple factors simultaneously.

A Structured Integration Pathway

To address these challenges, this paper proposes a structured integration pathway that connects language learning, education, and employment. Instead of treating these elements as separate stages, they should be designed to function together throughout the student lifecycle.

The model is based on the idea that integration should be continuous and progressive. Students should develop language skills alongside academic knowledge and gain practical experience before entering the labor market. By aligning these components, the transition from education to employment can become more gradual and effective.

Academic, Practical, and Career Integration

The first component of this model focuses on academic integration. Language learning should be embedded within degree programs through mandatory courses distributed across the duration of study. These courses should emphasize field-specific communication and practical usage.

The second component is practical integration. Universities and employers can collaborate to provide internships, part-time roles, and project-based learning opportunities where students actively use Finnish in real contexts. These experiences help students build confidence and apply language skills in meaningful ways.

The third component is career integration. Employers can adopt more flexible language requirements and support workplace-based language learning. Instead of requiring full proficiency at the point of hiring, organizations can allow employees to develop language skills gradually while working.

Together, these three components create a more realistic and supportive pathway for integration.

Conclusion

Finland has been successful in attracting international students, but integrating this talent into the workforce remains a challenge. This paper argues that the issue lies not only in individual language proficiency but in how the system is designed.

By adopting a structured integration pathway that connects language learning, education, and employment, it is possible to create a more inclusive and effective system. Such an approach would improve outcomes for international students while also helping Finland address labor shortages and strengthen its economy.

Ultimately, integration should not be viewed as the responsibility of individuals alone. It requires coordinated efforts across institutions, employers, and policymakers to create pathways that support long-term success.

Text: Sana Saleem and Reija Anckar



From Finnish Classrooms to Finnish Workplaces:

Rethinking Language Learning as a Service

This blog text is based on the Master's thesis by Dung Phuong Nguyen, supervised by Reija Anckar.

Why This Topic Matters Now

The reason why the author of the thesis has selected this topic, among others, stems from her language background and personal fascination with the role language plays in shaping our lives. Language is more than just rules of grammar, dictionary entries, or even pronunciations. Language defines the right of a person to ask for help, make friends, understand the corporate culture, and feel like an integral part of the community. This theme has become highly relevant to Finland in connection with the increasing number of international students who come to Finland to study in English-language educational programs to create a career in the future.

The Hidden Gap Between Studying and Working

It would be too simple to say that Finnish is just an extremely hard language. This would make for an overly simplistic and frankly rather unfair conclusion. The more complex reality is that learning Finnish is divorced from workplace interaction. People can take classes in Finnish, acquire some linguistic skills, pass required tests, but then still feel unprepared when applying for jobs, interacting at work, or performing other related tasks. This research posits that there is an absence of a certain kind of service: learning language to employment.

The Finnish Language as a Gatekeeper

One of the most significant results of the study is how Finnish operates as a gatekeeper in terms of employment. As can be observed in the netnography conducted for this study, international students reported having submitted many applications unsuccessfully for low-level jobs. Even in some job ads where it seemed like an English-speaking individual was eligible for the position, the international students felt that Finnish-speaking candidates would be preferred perhaps. It should be noted that Finnish should be significant; for example, workplaces certainly need communication, security, and teamwork.

What Students Actually Experience

As we saw from the results of the interviews, the international students do not lack motivation for learning the Finnish language. Many of them are eager to learn it since they realize its significance in finding work, being independent, and socially accepted. However, the process of Finnish studies remains inconsistent. The students come to Finland full of desire to learn something new. However, due to English being the primary language used during everyday classes, they may feel that Finnish is a subject to be postponed until later.

A Service Design View

That is when the concept of service design comes into play. Rather than posing a question like "What is preventing students from acquiring Finnish more quickly?" one ought to be wondering, "How does the learning service let down students?" The thesis utilized interviews, netnography, persona development, and journey mapping to explore the students' experiences through time and touchpoints. Such an approach was important since language acquisition does not take place solely within classroom walls. Language acquisition takes place during orientation, temporary employment, internships, socialization, job hunting, and even seemingly minor activities such as conversing in a store or drafting an e-mail.

What Needs to Change

The approach to Finnish language learning needs to be completely changed into something that will work on the continuity principle and not be limited to one-off courses. What would help the most here is combining basic Finnish with communication, specialized vocabulary, and actual social situations. So, nursing students may require communication with patients while those who study business will have to learn how to communicate at meetings and write emails.

The implementation of this process might take place using a mobile app for learning; however, it will succeed only with the involvement of universities, employers, and integration services.

From Learning Finnish to Belonging in Finland

To the author of the thesis, the key point is that Finnish language acquisition does not solely rely on the individual's effort. It is also an issue of service design, employability, and social inclusion. International students require motivation, commitment, and persistence, but none of these can solve the problem of a disjointed system alone. Even if students go to Finnish language courses, do homework, and genuinely desire to learn; their studies, social activities, and job search experience are largely irrelevant to the use of Finnish, even in the cases that they should be.

That is precisely why Finland must start looking at Finnish language classes as an ongoing process, rather than something extra that one can do alongside the course. Learning ought to take place from enrolment to internship, even working part-time, thesis conducting, and being employed fully. Universities could even offer lessons in Finnish that go beyond classroom-level conversation and touch on interviews, industry-related vocabulary, writing emails, and even small speaking assignments with the local community or even prospective employers.

This would remove the intimidation factor and help people realize that language is more of a bridge than a wall.

However, the responsibility is placed solely on the shoulders of international students or educational institutions. Employers, integration facilities, and communities will all play a part in determining whether international students could use Finnish and integrate into the job market. For Finland to remain an attractive destination for international talent, language facilities must be made more practical, relevant, and humane. The issue is not whether international students need to learn Finnish, they do. What needs to be asked instead, is whether it is providing international students with a realistic and fair chance to learn Finnish.

Author bio: Phuong Dung Nguyen completed her master's thesis in Service Design about Finnish language learning, international students, integration and employability prospects in Finland.



Text: Phuong Dung Nguyen & Reija Anckar



Enabling Everyday Language Learning and Inclusion in Working Life

- A Shared Responsibility

It has happened quickly - over the course of just a few decades - when Finland has developed into the multicultural society that it is today. Those of us who were studying or in working life during the 1980s and 1990s can probably still remember how homogeneous we all were, whether we are talking about colleagues, customers, or students. A concrete example of this societal development is Vaasa, a traditionally bilingual – Finnish and Swedish – city. Despite being a relatively small city with its about 71 000 inhabitants (Statistics Finland, n.d.), the city nowadays has a linguistic landscape that includes around 100 different languages, as nearly 10 per cent of the city's residents have a foreign background (City of Vaasa, n.d.).

As society has become more international, we Finns have become used to having more opportunities to speak English in our everyday lives, which many of us appreciate. At the same time, it is also a fact that many people who have moved to Finland are working hard to learn Finnish or Swedish.

Many who have moved here know that local language skills are essential for integrating into our society. Many are also aware that employers very often require language skills in Finnish or Swedish, or even in both languages. Moreover, it is not uncommon for these language requirements to be set at an unreasonably high level considering the job tasks in question.

At the same time, those struggling with language learning often feel great frustration that their language learning is progressing far too slowly for their needs. This raises the question: Can those of us who already know the languages help in their learning – and do we have that kind of responsibility in the first place?

Projects Contribute with Solutions to Societal Challenges

That Finnish universities of applied sciences within their faculties educate individuals in different degree programmes at various levels for working life is a relatively well-known fact. However, it might come as a surprise that Novia University of Applied Sciences also has specialised teams at its faculties that work on projects contributing to socially important research, development, and innovation. So, when President Alexander Stubb, in his 2026 New Year's speech, highlighted the need for labour-related immigration and pointed out that the key question is how we as society can prepare for this change, the topic felt highly relevant. Novia has solid experience in managing development projects focused on helping students with an international background to prepare for Finnish working life. Our projects generate knowledge that can be transformed not only into information for dissemination, but also into concrete solutions and tools that individuals and workplaces can use to develop new, smarter, and better ways of doing things. One of these projects is "MISAS - Model for integration of foreign students through language immersion studies and work-life collaboration", co-funded by EU.

Within the MISAS project, we test and develop different ways to help students learn Swedish or Finnish and practice the language in various contexts. Opportunities for language learning range from information about local languages and individual guidance to optional language courses at different levels, informal language cafés that focus on the courage to speak, and online courses that can be completed at one's own pace in one's free time, but with regular meetings with a teacher. Together with working life, we also test the "Work and Study" concept, in which students who have reached basic language skills combine work and studies in a structured way as part of a curriculum module.

Not only as a society, but more concretely in our roles as employers, colleagues, and fellow human beings to those learning our language, there are some important things to keep in mind. We cannot simply expect people to acquire the necessary language skills on their own. Moreover, it is often a major and time-consuming challenge for an adult to learn a new language well enough to feel that his or her personality and professional competence can be fully expressed. This is where all of us – at different levels of society and in our various roles as individuals – can make an important contribution. We should actively encourage and enable people to practice the language in real-life situations.

What Can the Shared Responsibility Look Like in Practice?

Apart from educational institutions, also workplaces as well as everyone of us in our different roles can take responsibility for building bridges across language and communication barriers. Language skills develop when people are given the opportunity to use the language in interaction with others, in everyday situations in a supportive environment.

As individuals, we can easily support people who are learning our language by remembering not to automatically switch to English when we notice that someone is not yet very proficient. We can give the person the opportunity to practice the language without hurry and without feeling the need of grammatical perfection. We can remember not to let ourselves be misled by a language learner's limited language proficiency, as it does not automatically reflect the true personality or professional competence of that person.

What comes to the support that workplaces and work communities can provide, this is where the above-mentioned MISAS project has made an exciting contribution. Our project has had the opportunity to introduce in Finland a well-established concept and tool from Sweden, namely the språkombud – in English language advocate – concept.

This concept is owned since 2018 by Vård- och omsorgscollege but has been successfully developed and implemented mainly in the Swedish health and welfare sector during more than 15 years. Since 2018, more than 6,500 language advocates have been trained across Sweden. (See e.g. Språket på jobbet, n.d., Vård- och omsorgscollege, n.d.).

During spring 2026, Finland's first group of language advocates were trained by Novia's two language advocate trainers (Sw. språkombudsutbildare) – the first of their kind in our country. Within the MISAS project, we expanded the training to include participants also outside the health and welfare sector.

Language advocates work at their workplaces with language and communication issues alongside their regular work tasks. They do not only support the employee who is learning the language of the workplace but work with the entire work community. Management support is a key factor for the language advocate to succeed in his or her role. It is important that everyone understands both the challenges of learning a new language as an adult and the fact that language and communication are about more than just words. Language advocates in the workplace can, among other things, raise awareness of how we can communicate more clearly with each other in different situations and help prevent misunderstandings and frustration that may arise at work due to cultural differences and unspoken social norms. Based on the positive experiences in Sweden, we see the language advocate concept as a potentially important tool here as well.

The Language Advocate Concept – Finally Introduced in Finland

The first group of language advocates was trained between February and April 2026. Initially, the group consisted of 14 participants; however, a small number withdrew at an early stage due to the strict adherence to the guidelines and criteria established by Vård- och omsorgscollege.

The participants came from Vaasa, Helsinki, and Turku, which provided a valuable geographical spread. The training programme consisted of four intensive full-day sessions combining theoretical input with collaborative and reflective discussions. Three of the sessions were held in Tampere, selected as a geographically central location, while the final session, which also served as the concluding and graduation event, took place in Vaasa.

Participants who opt to become language advocates typically demonstrate a strong commitment to promoting inclusive and supportive workplace environments. This includes facilitating communication not only for employees who are in the process of acquiring the local language, but also for the staff as a whole. All participants were employed in multicultural settings and entered the programme with prior awareness of the challenges associated with language learning in professional contexts.

Some Reflections by the Language Advocates from the Training

Despite this existing knowledge, many participants reported experiencing significant moments of insight during the training. These were often linked either to exposure to perspectives from other professional domains or to a deeper understanding of structural and communicative challenges within their own workplaces.

Participants also reflected on the limited timeframe of the training, noting that four days felt far too short given the breadth of content covered. At the same time, they clearly appreciated the full-day workshop format, emphasizing how much more they gained compared to shorter sessions. Some even suggested that the training should be extended beyond four days – which speaks volumes about the strength and relevance of the concept developed by Vård- och omsorgscollege.

A recurring theme in the participants' feedback concerned the duration of the programme. While the four-day format was experienced as intensive, participants generally perceived it as both necessary and valuable in relation to the breadth and complexity of the content. Several participants noted that the scope of the material and the richness of the discussions could have justified an even longer training period.

Importantly, participants emphasized that the programme contributed to increased awareness of the limitations of shorter training formats. In contrast to brief afternoon workshops, the full-day sessions were regarded as essential for developing a more comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted challenges related to language use in the workplace. The extended format allowed for deeper engagement, reflection, and the integration of theoretical and practical perspectives.

In this sense, the training not only conveyed content but also reinforced the importance of sufficient time allocation when addressing complex workplace phenomena. The positive reception of the programme was further reflected in the participants' appreciation of the structured training process and the formal recognition provided through the final diploma. This feedback can thus be interpreted as an indication of both the perceived relevance of the content and the overall strength of the model developed by Vård- och omsorgscollege.





Text: Pia Jünger and Terese Herrgård-Backlund



Why Networking and Onboarding Matters in Integration



Designed Onboarding:
A Pathway to Engaged International Students

Student mobility has increased worldwide because of globalization, which has transformed international education into a fast-growing global industry. Students from all over the world choose to study abroad to achieve academic success, new experiences and prerequisites for better professional careers. (Xu, 2025) Thus, every year, international students embark on their higher education journey in a new home country. Also, Finland attracts more international students than ever before. Finland's attractiveness as a country for studies is based on the quality and reputation of the higher education institutions (HEIs) and the educational system in general. (SYL, 2025)

Finnish HEIs have received international students through programs like NordPlus and the Erasmus+ for decades. These students come to Finland for a semester or two and study together with local students. What is rather new is that students from outside Europe choose Finland as a place for studying a full degree and that these students pay tuition fees.

Students coming from a completely different background to study for two to four years means that these students must make Finland their home. For this to happen proper onboarding of the students become a critical task for universities of applied sciences and traditional universities as well.

This chapter discusses the importance of sufficient onboarding practices as well as list services to be offered and actions to be taken to make the journey of the international students as smooth as possible.

The onboarding concept

The onboarding concept evolved in a company context. Bigger companies recruit several new employees throughout the year and there is a need to get them to know the organization as quickly as possible.

Over the years the process of integrating new staff members has become commonly referred to as onboarding (Gregory et al., 2022). In a company setting onboarding is not merely a formal process of welcoming new employees, but a comprehensive strategy that introduces new recruits to the organization's culture, values, and goals while introducing the digital systems and providing them with the knowledge necessary to thrive (Rani et al., 2024; Pinco et al., 2025).

Thus, in companies onboarding activities comprise all actions that will help an employee to adapt to the organization (Lourenço & Rodrigues, 2025). Onboarding is especially important when international talents join a new organization. In international companies the onboarding is usually a collaborative effort involving HR, managers, and supervisors.

The focus is not only on getting to know the company, its processes and experts but also on being prepared for life in a new country. (Bhadane et al., 2025) It can thus be stated that onboarding is even more crucial for international employees as a structured program helps them adapt and succeed in a new work environment that may be vastly different from their previous experiences. (Bartram, 2026) International employees need to understand compliance such as employment laws, health care system and cultural nuances to be able to navigate their new life in a country unfamiliar for them (Pewett, 2025).

During the last years the onboarding concept has been applied also in a HEI context and especially in the context of international students moving to a new country and to study at a HEI to get a bachelor's or master's degree.

Onboarding of international students at universities

Recent estimates suggest that the number of international students worldwide has approached seven million (ICEF Monitor, 2025). For the students in their first year, cultivating a sense of belonging and community is critical to their academic and personal growth. When students are distanced from social identities and support networks associated with their home environments, connecting with peers who share similar transitional experiences can ease the challenges of adaptation (Study International, 2026).

Figure 1 describes the typical journey of an international student in a new country.

As can be seen from Figure 1 the life as international students can be divided into three phases:

- Pre-arrival
- Arrival and orientation
- Transition

The onboarding program offered by the HEIs should focus especially on the first and second phases, the pre-arrival as well as the arrival and orientation phases. In the next part of this paper, recommendations on how to structure a successful onboarding program for international students coming to study for a whole program will be given. The recommendations are based on discussions during an Erasmus+ staff week at the Thomas More University in Belgium, interviews with current and former colleagues who have worked with international programs at different universities as well as own observations from working more than 15 years with international students at two different Universities of Applied Sciences in Finland.

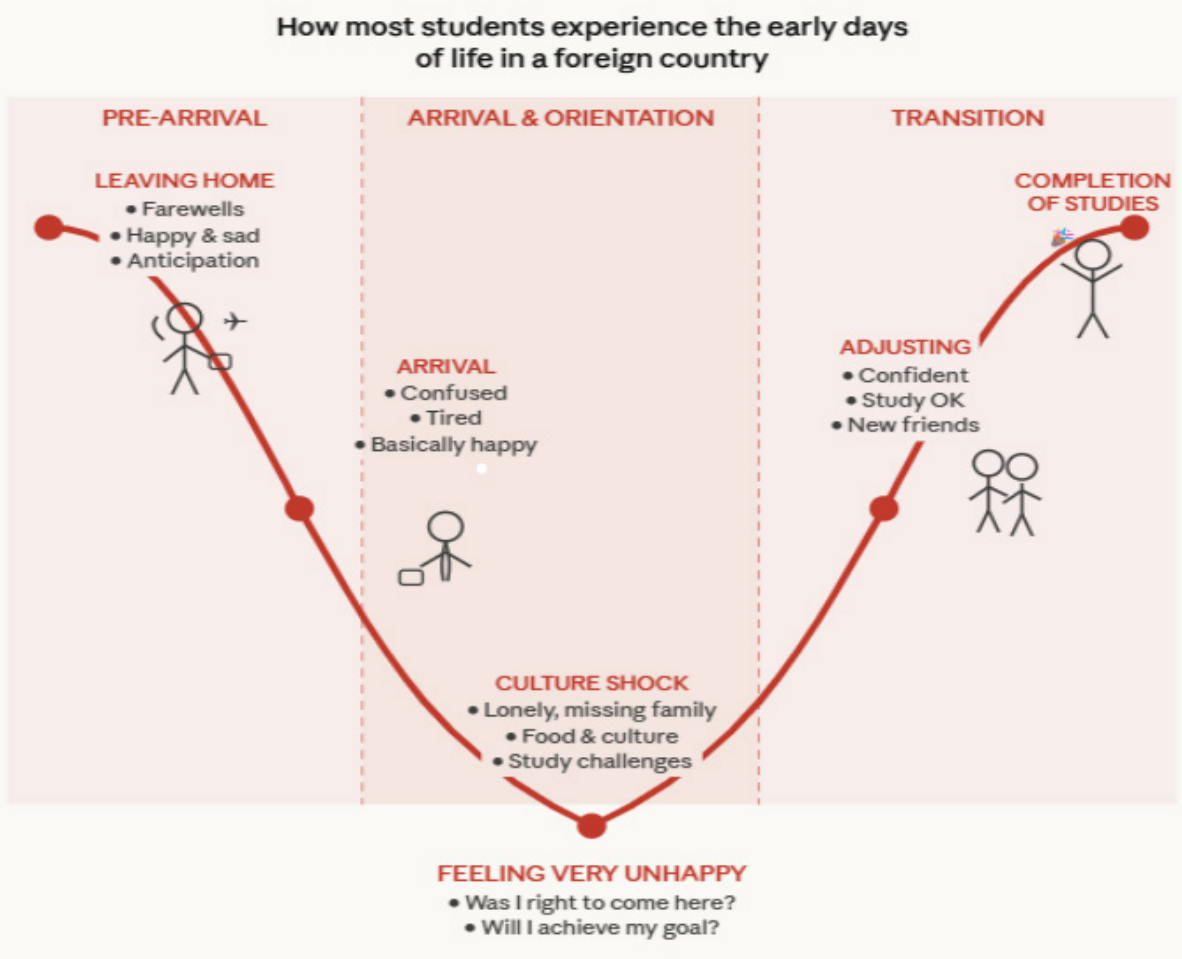


Figure 1. The typical journey of an international student (modified from Duncan, 2024)

Building a successful onboarding program for international students

From a student perspective successful studies require commitment and hard work. To enhance the commitment of international students the HEIs need to support them from the beginning of their journey (Opetushallitus, 2021). Different HEI actors such as student services office staff, international coordinators, key lecturers in the international programs and student advisors should preferably be involved in developing the program. The onboarding process can be studied from the phases of pre-arrival, arrival and orientation, and transition phases. The following part will discuss how the HEIs can support the onboarding during these phases.

Pre-arrival

The most important tool in this phase is a warm welcome e-mail that is a well-structured information package. For instance, Vrije University Amsterdam has created a visually appealing guide1 that discusses everything new students need to know to cope the first months in Amsterdam. It is also important that all important dates are communicated well in advance at the same time as the new international students also need to get information about all the required documents (Arya, 2025).

Digital solutions like Zoom and Ms Teams make it also easy for the HEIs to organize a Webinar for all international students a couple of weeks before the first semester begins (see Holmberg, 2025). A webinar offers the newcomers a valuable opportunity to gain insight into the HEI and the international student experience. As a webinar offers potential for interaction, students can gain deeper insights into what it means to be an international student at the HEI by asking questions. Thus, by organizing a welcoming webinar HEIs can ensure that students feel fully prepared for their academic journey ahead.

Arrival and orientation

The first week of the semester should preferably start with orientation days or even a full week of information sharing and activities aimed at strengthening the relationships in the student group. Orientation programs (from 2 days to a week) are designed to give incoming students the opportunity to become familiar with their campus, transition to HEI life and meet their peers. Here the newcomers could also be offered opportunities to meet HEI staff both from administration as well as some lecturers. Attending a formal orientation program has a positive impact on students, for instance 95 percent of students studying in the UK were satisfied with their face-to-face orientation week (Brown, 2024).

There is also a need for support with how to navigate in a society that is completely unfamiliar to the new international students. This support includes life outside campus life such as finding housing, buying furniture and all the bureaucracy related to moving into a foreign country etc. (Tran et al., nd). For instance, at the Thomas Moore University in Belgium, there is an international support team that helps students with practical matters such as opening a bank account (see Thomas More, 2026b).

Loneliness among international students is a persisting challenge contributing to mental health issues and declining functional performance (Xu, 2025). During the first semester it is important to create platforms to meet up with peers, i.e. other international students. The platforms could be digital but also traditional events and activities are highly appreciated as social belonging is crucial for international students' commitment to a HEI and their own program (Moilanen & Wallenius, 2026).

International students study in an education system and live in a culture that is new to them. Thus, these students would highly be benefiting from support from local students or international students who have stayed in the country longer. Many universities offer a "buddy program" to international students (see for instance Thomas Moore, 2026a). An onboarding buddy is a local student designated to help a newcoming student to acclimatize to the HEI and to the society as whole.

The buddies can help the newcomer with practical matters related to the studies, but they can potentially also take the international students to different activities and events to support their social belonging. The buddy program could also take the form of a mentorship program (Moilanen & Wallenius, 2026). Through a mentorship program senior students and volunteers could help new international students to cope with their studies and to integrate into the local community.

Many students also need help with cultural adaption and language training (Xu, 2025), sometimes also help with English but mostly with the local language. Providing orientation, information, and support for international students to develop their language skills and cultural understanding is an important means to facilitate intercultural engagement (Tran et al, nd). Lapland University of Applied Sciences has for instance developed a Finland path (Suomi polku) supporting learning Finnish, career planning and integration into the Finnish society (Partanen et al., 2025). As in Finland lack of language skills have been identified as a major barrier for internships and employment, there is a need to offer international students language studies parallel with the study program itself.

As can be seen from Figure 1 many international students are extremely unhappy when the cultural shock hits at the same time as they realize that the life in their new home country maybe isn't as rosy as they imagined when they decided to study abroad. It is evident that mental health is one of the leading contemporary concerns in the discussions related to welcoming international students from other parts of the world (Forbes-Mewett, 2019). Studies show that international students report more psychological distress such as anxiety, sleeping problems and stress than local students (Chu et al., 2026; Song et al., 2026). In a Finnish research project it became evident that international students need help with identifying what important for them to find meaningful activities that could reduce symptoms of anxiety, stress and depression. Except meaningful activities, mindfulness exercises, i.e. practicing being focused on the present moment can also increase the resilience and the overall wellbeing of the student. (Brandolin et al., 2023) It is also important that the HEI offers information about where to go in the first place to get help with mental health related challenges as the Finnish service system for health-related issues is complex.

Transition phase

During the transition phase international students have already adapted to their new home country, the HEI and the learning approach.

To strengthen the commitment of the students to graduate on time the HEI should continue activities already offered during the arrival and orientation phase such as support for housing and coping with bureaucratical issues. Support for learning the local language as well as career planning services are crucial for further enhancing integration of the students into society.

Moreover, universities need to offer platforms making it possible for local and international students to meet and make friendships. This could be around cultural, and sports activities or events designed to enhance interaction between different student groups. Too often, international students at Finnish higher education institutions live in their own bubble comprising other international students. Here different student associations have an important role to play as they typically offer activities such as movie nights and parties.

Pedagogical approaches can also support the onboarding of students. Approaches such as inquiry learning and project learning (see Holmberg et al., 2022) where students work with real projects given by industry partners help international students to understand how Finnish companies work from an organizational perspective. These courses should ideally mix local and international students, by making the students work together for one semester with a complex task that will strengthen the relationships in the student teams.

Ideally international students should be offered their own teacher tutor who will have a "development discussion" with them every semester. There is a risk though that these teachers end up being a parent, mental support and career planner. Thus, if a system of teacher tutors is introduced it is important to clearly define the role of the teacher tutor and how many hours can be given to each student.

As the transition phase also is the phase towards graduation, career planning services become more important than during the previous phases. Finnish HEIs lack a strong tradition in offering career services compared for HEIs in countries like UK (see for instance Careers & Employability | Sheffield Hallam HEI).

International students though need help with navigating job seeking and career planning as everything from what is expected in a CV might be very different from their hoe country.

Conclusion

Successful onboarding is crucial for making international students enjoying their journey as students at a Finnish HEIs. The onboarding process should preferably start when the students receive their official letter of acceptance as especially students residing outside Europe must apply for a student visa. The visa process typically takes at least 2-3 months. Figure 2 summarizes the activities and actions recommended in this chapter.

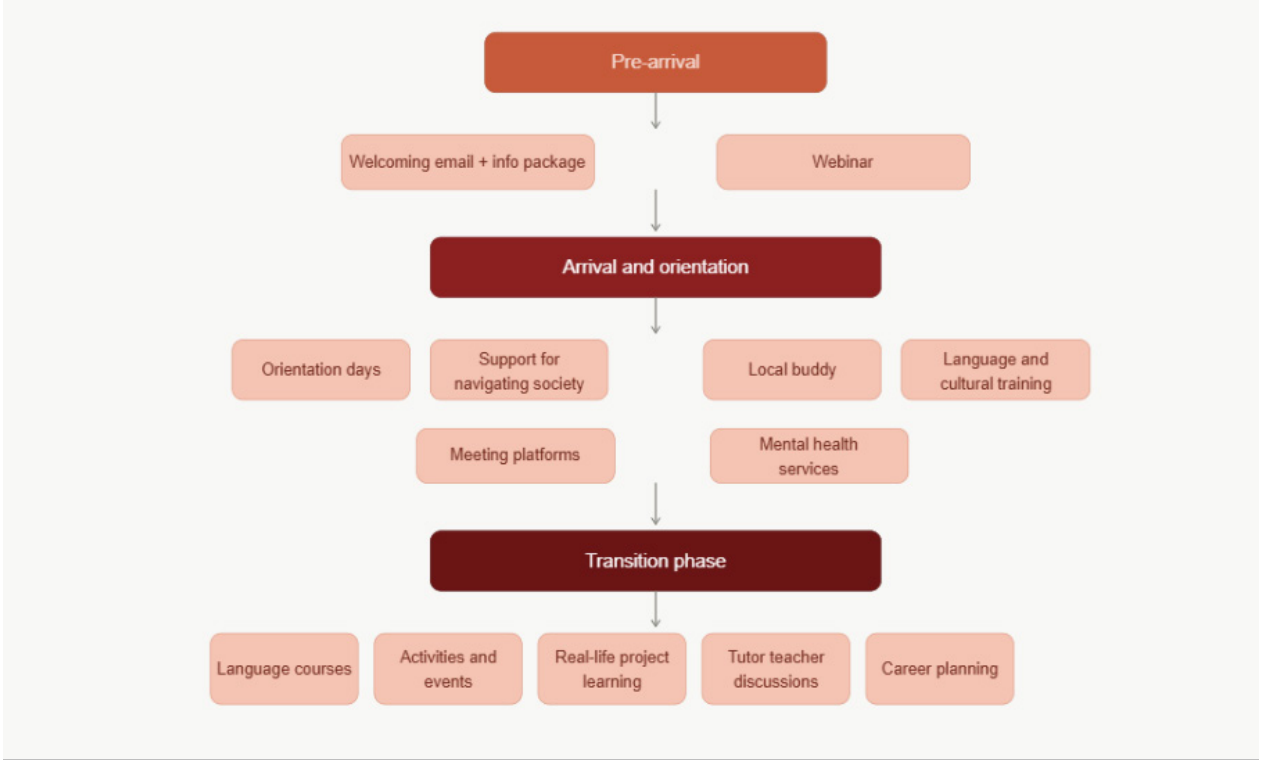


Figure 2. Summary of activities and services in an onboarding program for international students

From an onboarding perspective the arrival and orientation phases are most important. During this time the students need introduction to all the systems used at the HEI, the approach to learning and teaching as well as platforms for making friends. Many students suffer from cultural shock, they miss their friends and families, and they struggle with navigating a society that is very different to the one they are used to. Thus, without support from the HEI mental health issues become widespread among the newcoming international students.

In the transition phase the most important onboarding activity is career planning. In Finland universities lack a strong tradition of offering career planning service compared to for instance universities in UK. Many international students would like to stay in Finland after graduation. Finding an expert level job would make staying possible, but successful job seeking often requires good networks and at least basic Finnish skills. As professional who has been working with international programs at Finnish higher education institute stated:

Finnish universities should strive for improving the whole onboarding process but especially crucial is career planning services.

From a Finnish perspective successful onboarding of the international students enrolling into our universities is a crucial factor for the future of international HEI programs. Happy international students will spread the word of how well they were taken care of when they moved to Finland and by that word-of-mouth will spread that the experience as an international student in Finland is transformational offering personal growth and competency for the future career. Universities could learn a lot from the onboarding practices of international companies as these have been developing onboarding practices for decades.



Text: Eva Holmberg



Työhön ei hypätä
– kotoutuminen rakentuu yhteyksistä ja luottamuksista

Tässä artikkelissa keskityn erityisesti, miten onnistuneempi kotoutuminen voisi edistää musliminaisten pääsyä työelämään Suomessa. Tämä essee perustuu keskusteluun kansanedustaja ja ihmisoikeusaktivisti Eva Biaudet'n kanssa 14.4.2026, sekä toiseen kolmen musliminaisen kanssa käytyyn keskusteluun, jossa he ottivat kantaa Biaudet'n kanssa läpikäytyihin teemoihin.

Minulla on pitkään ollut ajatus siitä, miten maahanmuuttajien, ja erityisesti maahanmuuttajanaisten, tilannetta voitaisiin parantaa. En väitä ymmärtäväni kaikkia nyansseja, mutta olen seurannut aihetta pitkään, tehnyt yhteistyötä maahanmuuttajanaisten kotoutumista tukevien toimijoiden kanssa ja ystävystynyt useiden maahanmuuttajanaisten kanssa.

Korostan, etten näe maahanmuuttajanaisia yhtenä homogeenisena ryhmänä. Taustat ja kokemukset ovat hyvin erilaisia, eikä yleistyksiä voida tehdä kevyesti.

Mutta jotkin asiat yhdistävät meitä kaikkia ihmisiä, myös maahanmuuttajanaisia, ja yksi sellainen asia on kaipuu omaan turvalliseen yhteisöön.

Monet muslimi- ja pakolaisnaiset tulevat Suomeen yhteiskunnista, joissa tasa-arvo ei ole ollut itsestäänselvyys ja joissa luottamus viranomaisiin on ollut heikko tai kokonaan puuttuva. Joissakin maissa viranomaiset ovat olleet jotakin, mitä on pitänyt pelätä, ei jotakin, mihin voi tukeutua. Tämä lähtötilanne vaikuttaa väistämättä siihen, miten ihminen suhtautuu uuteen yhteiskuntaan – myös Suomeen.

Kun tällaisesta todellisuudesta tullaan maahan, jossa oletetaan vahvaa luottamusta järjestelmään, syntyy helposti kuilu. Meille hallintoon, kouluun ja viranomaisiin luottaminen on lähes huomaamatonta. Uudelle tulijalle sama järjestelmä voi näyttäytyä kylmänä, vaikeaselkoisena tai jopa uhkaavana. Tämä voi johtaa vetäytymiseen, hiljaisuuteen ja siihen, ettei uskalleta kysyä, osallistua tai hakeutua mukaan eri tilanteisiin.

Tästä syystä huomio pitäisi kiinnittää ensimmäiseksi siihen, miten ihminen pääsee kiinni arjen yhteisöihin. Yhteisöihin, joissa kohdataan ihmiset ihmisinä – ei asiakkaina tai tapauksina. Tällaisia yhteisöjä voivat olla esimerkiksi koulut lasten kautta, harrastukset, järjestöt, vapaaehtoistoiminta tai muut matalan kynnyksen kohtaamispaikat. Näissä syntyy usein ensimmäinen kokemus siitä, että kuuluu joukkoon ja että omaa taustaa ei tarvitse selittää koko ajan.

Luottamus ei synny suoraan järjestelmiin, vaan ihmisten kautta. Kun luottamus yhteen ihmiseen vahvistuu, on helpompaa alkaa luottaa myös siihen tahoon, jota tämä ihminen edustaa. Vasta tämän jälkeen luottamus viranomaisiin ja koko meidän yhteiskuntaamme voi kasvaa. Tämä prosessi on hidas, mutta välttämätön.

Kun perustava luottamus on syntynyt, seuraava askel on verkostojen rakentuminen. Suomessa työelämä toimii vahvasti verkostojen varassa, ja työpaikkoja löytyy usein tuttujen, suositusten ja epävirallisten kontaktien kautta. Koulutus ja kielitaito ovat tärkeitä, mutta ilman verkostoja ne eivät yksin riitä. Monet korkeasti koulutetut maahanmuuttajanaiset päätyvät matalapalkkaisiin töihin siksi, ettei heidän osaamisensa tule nähdyksi eivätkä vaihtoehdot tunnu heistä saavutettavilta. Työelämään kiinnittyminen ei siis ole yksittäinen askel, vaan viimeinen etappi pitkällä polulla. Ensin syntyy yhteys, sitten luottamus, sen jälkeen verkostot, sitten tulevat osaaminen ja kieli – ja vasta lopulta työ. Kun tätä polkua yritetään oikaista, tulokset jäävät laihoiksi.

Jos halutaan tukea musliminaisten ja pakolaisnaisten työllistymistä, on kiinnitettävät huomio laajempaan kuvioon. Kyse ei ole vain siitä, miten heidät saadaan töihin, vaan siitä, miten heidät saadaan mukaan eri yhteisöihin, yhteyksiin, tapahtumiin, ryhmiin ja niin edelleen.

Lopulta on kuitenkin tärkeää muistaa yksi asia. Tätä polkua ei voi määrittää valmiiksi ulkopuolelta käsin. Niiden, joista puhumme, tulee olla mukana kertomassa, miltä tämä polku heidän näkökulmastaan tuntuu. Vasta heidän kokemustensa kautta voidaan arvioida, mitkä osat tästä polusta toimivat, mitkä eivät toimi – ja miten niitä pitäisi muuttaa.

Pienet mahdollisuudet – ja yhtä usein puuttuvat mahdollisuudet

Esseen toisen osan pohjana toimii keskusteluni kolmen musliminaisen kanssa heidän arjestaan ja suhteestaan suomalaiseen työelämään, sillä halusin myös heidän äänensä kuuluviin. Puhe ei pyörinyt yksittäisten esteiden ympärillä, koska kyse ei ole yhdestä ongelmasta tai yhdestä ratkaisusta. Sen sijaan edessämme on huomattavasti laajempi kokonaisuus, jossa kieli, työ, perhe ja yhteiskunnan odotukset limittyvät toisiinsa. Kotoutuminen ei näyttäydy suorana polkuna, vaan sarjana pieniä mahdollisuuksia – ja yhtä usein sarjana puuttuvia mahdollisuuksia.

Halu osallistua yhteiskuntaan ja työelämään ei ole ongelma. Päinvastoin - kiinnostusta ja motivaatiota löytyy, mutta keinot eivät aina tunnu sopivan yhteen tosielämän kanssa. Järjestelmät näyttävät usein pohjautuvan oletukselle, että ihmisten tulisi mukautua niihin, vaikka arki on monille jo valmiiksi täynnä vastuuta, aikatauluja ja reunaehtoja.

Suomen kielen merkitystä ei voi, eikä pidä vähätellä. Se on keskeinen väylä osallisuuteen ja työelämään. Ongelmalliseksi tilanne muuttuu silloin, kun kielestä tulee ehto, eikä väline. Kieltä oletetaan osattavan hyvin jo, ennen kuin ihmiselle tarjoutuu tilanteita, joissa sitä voisi aidosti käyttää ja kehittää. Ainoasta oppimistilassa tai verkossa kielen opiskelu ei kanna pitkälle, jos kielellä ei ole yhteyttä arkeen ja sitä ei käytetä aktiivisesti formaalisen oppimisen ulkopuolella. Työssä, vapaaehtoistoiminnassa ja eri yhteisöissä kieli alkaa elää. Sitä käytetään, koska kielen avulla tehdään asioita yhdessä ja virheistä tulee osa oppimista. Silloin virheet eivät estä oppimista.

Kielen oppiminen ei kuitenkaan ole yksisuuntainen prosessi. Se edellyttää myös sitä, että kieltä sujuvammin puhuva osapuoli malttaa kuunnella, selittää kerta toisensa jälkeen asioita ja olla kärsivällinen. Kun uskaltaa kohdata ihmisen, jonka kielitaito vielä kehittyy, syntyy tilaa oppimiselle ja luottamukselle. Ilman tätä kieli muuttuu helposti kynnykseksi, vaikka sen pitäisi toimia yhteisenä välineenä.

Koulutukseen kohdistuu paljon toiveita, mutta myös pettymyksiä. Erityisesti ammatillisessa koulutuksessa teoreettiset vaatimukset korostuvat ajoittain myös aloilla, joissa työn ydin on käytännöllinen. Tämä voi johtaa tilanteisiin, joissa osaaminen jää näkymättömäksi ja tutkinto jää saamatta syistä, joilla ei ole suurta merkitystä itse työelämässä. Kun tähän yhdistyvät perhevastuut, joskus hyvinkin pitkät välimatkat kouluihin ja tiukat aikataulut, opiskelu voi tuntua kohtuuttoman raskaalta. Kyse ei ole motivaation puutteesta, vaan siitä, ettei koulutusjärjestelmä aina tunnista opiskelijoiden arkea sellaisena kuin se todellisuudessa on. Tässä piilee myös yhteiskunnallinen riski; motivoituneet ja osaavat ihmiset passivoituvat aivan turhaan.

Perhe ja äitiys ovat monille keskeinen osa elämää, mutta niitä tulkitaan ulkopuolelta usein yksinkertaistavasti. Perhekeskeisyys saatetaan nähdä esteenä työelämälle, vaikka todellisuudessa kyse on tasapainottelusta eri elämänvaiheiden välillä. Työtä halutaan tehdä, mutta ei lasten tai perheen hyvinvoinnin kustannuksella. Joustavat ratkaisut, osa-aikatyö ja vaiheittainen eteneminen työelämään lasten kasvaessa isommiksi voisivat toimia siltoina työelämään, jos ne tunnistettaisiin aidosti hyväksyttävinä vaihtoehtoina.

Suomi koetaan monessa suhteessa turvallisena maana, mutta pysyvyyden tunne ei ole itsestäänselvyys. Kansalaisuus näyttäytyy usein ulkopuoliselle teknisenä (juridisena) asiana, mutta todellisuudessa sillä on myös suuri psykologinen vaikutus. Se tuo uskallusta rakentaa tulevaisuutta juuri täällä. Jos täällä asuminen vaikuttaa jäävän väliaikaiseksi, myös sitoutuminen jää helposti pinnallisemmaksi. On inhimillistä, että kielen opetteluun, kouluttautumiseen tai työelämään panostaminen tuntuu raskaalta tai epämotivoivalta, jos ei ole edes varma, saako jäädä maahan.

Monissa perheissä lapset ovat konkreettinen silta suomalaiseen yhteiskuntaan. Koulun, harrastusten ja arjen kautta syntyy paljon kontakteja, jotka ulottuvat myös vanhempiin. Kotoutuminen tapahtuu tällöin vähitellen, arjen kohtaamisten kautta, ei niinkään virallisten ohjelmien avulla. Tämä sivuttainen, arkinen tie on usein kestävämpi kuin mikään yksittäinen kotoutumishanke.

Kotoutumisessa on lopulta kyse siitä, miten hyvin arki ja yhteiskunnan rakenteet saadaan sovitettua yhteen – ja siitä, annetaanko ihmisille aikaa ja mahdollisuuksia löytää paikkansa. Olemme ottaneet askelia oikeaan suuntaan silloin, kun ammatillinen koulutus joustaa eri elämäntilanteiden mukaan ja kun näemme jokaisen musliminaisen, kuten kaikki muutkin, ennen kaikkea yksilönä, jolla on paljon annettavaa.

Luottamus syntyy silloin, kun ihmiselle annetaan mahdollisuus osallistua, kokeilla ja tulla kohdatuksi omana itsenään. Jos katse kiinnittyy vain siihen, miten ihmiset saadaan töihin, jää helposti huomaamatta tärkeämpi kysymys: Millaista yhteiskuntaa rakennamme – ja kenelle siinä on oikeasti tilaa?

Text: Laura Johansson



Why Networking is Crucial for Immigrants in Integration

When I arrived in Finland on a crisp October night, the first thing that hit me wasn't the cold, it was the silence. A peaceful, almost meditative silence that felt welcoming and intimidating at the same time. I was 36 years old, starting an MBA program in a new country, carrying a master's degree in a completely different field and a suitcase heavy with both belongings and uncertainty.

People say that moving abroad is a fresh beginning. They are right, but what they don't say is that beginnings often feel like standing at the edge of a map with no lines, no markers, no familiar faces to point you in the right direction. Finland was beautiful, organized, safe, and full of opportunities. But on that first day, I felt like I was stepping into a story where I didn't yet know my role.

Very quickly, I learned that integration is far more than paperwork, language courses, or academic success. It is a human process. And the heart of that process, though I didn't know it at first, is **networking.**

A Plan Meets Reality

Before moving, I had a plan. I would study, improve my skills, understand the Finnish system, and then, somehow, new opportunities would naturally appear. I assumed that integration would be linear: step one, step two, step three.

But reality had a different rhythm.

In class, I was surrounded by students, experienced professionals and people who had lived in Finland for years. Many of them already seemed to know how things worked. They understood the academic environment, the local job market, the cultural nuances. I admired their confidence and wondered how they fit everything together so quickly.

I, meanwhile, was adjusting to a new academic field, a new social environment, and a new way of living. The transition from my previous master's background to an MBA felt exciting but overwhelming. I often questioned whether I would catch up, whether my previous experience was enough, or whether people would take my new academic direction seriously.

And slowly, I began to understand something important: **My plan was not wrong, it was just incomplete.**

The First Step: Being Seen

The turning point came at a simple networking event organized at the university. I almost didn't go. I told myself I was too tired, too new, too unsure of what to say. But something pushed me to attend, maybe curiosity, maybe courage, maybe the quiet understanding that staying in my comfort zone wouldn't take me anywhere new.

I introduced myself to a small group. I mentioned my background, the shift to an MBA program, my arrival in Finland. I was ready for polite nods or awkward silence. But instead, someone said:

"You have a unique profile. I know someone who might want to speak with you."

In that moment, I realized that networking wasn't about having the perfect story; it was about showing up and letting people see me as I am.

That one introduction led to another conversation, which led to guidance, which led to more confidence. It was the first spark in a very long, very meaningful chain.

Understanding Finland Through People

Finland has its own rhythm, its own unwritten rules. I learned very quickly that silence is not a sign of indifference here; it is a sign of respect. People value clear communication, punctuality, and mutual trust. Those conversations do not need to be loud to be meaningful.

But none of this was written in a handbook.

I learned it through:

- classmates who shared how Finnish workplaces value equality and independence
- local students who explained how academic expectations differ from country to country
- professionals who talked about the importance of humility and reliability in Finnish business culture
- international friends who learned through trial and error, just like me

Every conversation became a window into understanding how life and work truly function here.

Networking was not only helping me integrate professionally; it helped me understand the soul of the country.

From Isolation to Belonging

Winter arrived, and the days grew shorter. I had moments when the silence felt too silent, when the distance from home felt heavier than my new responsibilities. Many immigrants experience this, the sudden dip between excitement and loneliness.

But networking shifted this for me.

A coffee invitation from a classmate.
A friendly conversation at a student union event.
A shared laugh with another newcomer struggling with Finnish pronunciation.
A mentor who said, "I was once exactly where you are now."

Little by little, the city felt warmer.
Faces became familiar.
Foreign streets became places I recognized.

Belonging does not arrive with a residence permit; it grows through human connection. And every connection became a thread tying me more deeply into my new life in Finland.

Finding My Voice and Confidence Again

Coming from a different academic background, I initially doubted whether I belonged to an MBA program. Would my previous studies be seen as irrelevant? Would employers find my combination of skills confusing?

Networking slowly dissolved those fears.

People began to point out strengths I had overlooked:

- The diversity of my academic journey
- The richness of my international experience
- The courage it takes to shift fields
- The value of interdisciplinary thinking

Their perspective helped me see myself with kinder, clearer eyes. I began to speak more confidently about my goals, my strengths, and what I wanted to build here. Networking was not simply expanding my contacts; it was reshaping my sense of self.

A Network Becomes a Bridge to the Future

As months passed, networking opened more doors. I found mentors who offered guidance, professionals who shared opportunities, and peers who became close friends. I discovered events, workshops, and collaborations I would never have known about on my own.

Through these connections, I learned that professional growth in Finland is deeply relationship driven, not in a transactional way, but in a human one. People value sincerity, reliability, and genuine curiosity. When you show these qualities, doors open.

Integration - I realized - is not something that happens to you. It's something you build, with people, one conversation at a time.

The Human Path of Integration

Today, when I look back at the woman who arrived in October, unsure, overwhelmed, curious, I feel proud. Not because I figured it all out on my own, but because I allowed myself to reach out, to speak, to listen, to connect.

Networking did not just help me integrate, it helped me grow. It helped me understand Finland not through books, but through people.It helped me rebuild confidence, direction, and belonging.

Integration is a journey, and every journey is easier with companions. For me, networking became the bridge between who I was when I arrived, and who I am becoming now.

Text: Sara Razmju & Reija Anckar



Karriärvägledning som stöd för språkinlärning och arbetsmarknadsintegration

Antalet internationella högskolestuderande och deras familjemedlemmar har ökat under de senaste åren; 2024 studerade cirka 37 000 internationella studenter i Finland med uppehållstillstånd för studerande. På bara fem år har antalet nya utländska studenter mer än fördubblats och den största ökningen syns inom utbildningar som leder till yrkeshögskoleexamen (Arbets- och Näringsministeriet, 2026).

En högre utbildning i Finland gör det sannolikt enklare för internationella studenter att ta sig in på den finländska arbetsmarknaden. Fördelen begränsas dock av att utbildningen oftast ges på engelska, medan arbetslivet i regel kräver kunskaper i finska eller svenska (Mathies & Karhunen, 2020). I Otus enkätundersökning (Lauronen, 2025) kartlades de internationella studenternas upplevelser och åsikter om studierna på grundutbildningsnivå och framtiden i Finland. I undersökningen framkom att språkkunskapskraven var de främsta hindren för att få arbete, vilket fyra av fem svarande angav.

Därefter nämndes faktorer som i högre grad är kopplade till konjunkturen, som den hårda konkurrensen på arbetsmarknaden och bristen på arbetstillfällen (Lauronen, 2025). Krav på flytande kunskaper i finska eller svenska utestänger många, även i roller där engelska i sig skulle räcka, konstaterar Alho (2020).

Av de internationella högskolestudenterna vill två av tre stanna kvar i Finland för att arbeta efter sina studier, men för tillfället får ungefär hälften av dem arbete efter studierna, uppger Arbets- och Näringsministeriet (2026). Den nuvarande svaga ekonomiska situationen och sysselsättningsläget försvårar dock för dem att ta sig in på arbetsmarknaden. Samtidigt har en betydande del av ingångsjobben försvunnit i ett läge där internationella studenter behöver dem som mest (Sitra, 2026).

Vi vet också att en högskoleexamen inte automatiskt leder till jobb, vilket innebär att kunskaper i finska och svenska spelar en avgörande roll för att förbättra sysselsättningsmöjligheterna och hjälpa internationella studenter att känna sig hemmastadda, engagera sig i sin omgivning och skapa nya möjligheter.

Regeringsprogrammet (Statsrådet, 2023) och högskolornas finansieringsmodell betonar sysselsättning och kontinuerligt lärande och många högskolor erbjuder karriärvägledning och stöd för jobbsökning för alumner i upp till ett år efter avlagd examen. Guiden för livslång vägledning (2025) lyfter fram att goda karriärkompetenser minskar antalet avbrott i studierna och påskyndar övergången till arbetslivet. Syftet med vägledningen är att stärka de studerandes karriärkompetenser som ska bära dem genom studierna. Högskolorna har däremot inte en lagstadgad roll i integrationen, och ingen aktör ansvarar heller för övergången från studier till arbetsliv (Sitra, 2026).

Karriärvägledning kopplar språkkunskaper till karriärmål

Inom MISAS-projektet är karriärvägledning en central integrationsinsats för internationella studenter och en drivkraft för internationella studenters språkinlärning.

Trots detta behandlas språkinlärning och karriärvägledning ofta som separata områden, vilket riskerar att försvåra studenternas etablering efter studierna.

På samma sätt som karriärplanering, ses språkinlärning och språklig kompetens ofta som något individuellt som är beroende av individens ansvar och grad av ansträngning. Men ansvaret för språkinlärning kan inte bara läggas på individen utan den sker i interaktion med andra (Jonsson, Olvegård och Tingsell, 2021). Internationella studenter är en heterogen grupp och deras behov av stöd för att utveckla språkkunskaper i finska eller svenska varierar.

Människor är ofta motiverade att lära sig ett nytt språk för att klara vardagen och därför ska språkinlärning ses som en långsiktig investering snarare än något som enbart bygger på motivation. Motivationen stärks när språkinlärningen ger konkreta resultat, såsom arbete, stöd i barnens skolgång eller nya relationer (Jonsson et al., 2021).

Internationella studenter har inte tillträde till integrationsutbildning med tillhörande språkkurser, vilket kräver en integrationsplan. Personer på studentvisum förväntas ta del av högskolans utbud och utöver det finansiera sina språkkurser själva. Formell undervisning, som nybörjarsvenska på en högskola, hjälper de flesta att lära sig ett nytt språk effektivare, särskilt vuxna vars livs- och familjesituation kan begränsa inlärningen. Men studenter behöver också utveckla sin arbetslivssvenska och arbetslivsfinska i kontakt med arbetslivet.

För att nå en funktionell nivå krävs också regelbunden användning av språket i vardagen, kontakt med personer som talar språket samt en trygg lärmiljö, tid och engagemang. Olika typer av aktiviteter på högskolan, som grupparbeten tillsammans med lokala studenter, språkbuddy-aktiviteter, språkduschar och språkcaféer, kan sänka tröskeln för att använda språket. Sahradyan och Virolainen (2026) betonar vikten av att kombinera det formella lärandet som sker inom det traditionella utbildningssystemet med non-formellt, som sker organiserat utanför det vanliga utbildningssystemet och informellt lärande som sker spontant och ostrukturerat i vardagen.

Att ta sig in på arbetsmarknaden är en språklig process

Att ta sig in på arbetsmarknaden är en språklig process. Själva jobbsökandet kräver att man kan förstå arbetsannonser, skapa ett CV och skriva ansökningar. Dessutom måste man stärka sina yrkesnätverk och göra ett övertygande intryck vid anställningsintervjuer. Arbetsgivare kräver ofta att de arbetssökande har goda kunskaper i finska eller svenska. I många yrken och arbetsuppgifter kan man dock arbeta med språkkunskaper som utvecklas, men språkliga förväntningar under arbetssökningsprocessen kan utgöra hinder för att få en praktik- eller arbetsplats.

Kovalainen (2026) menar att om språkkunskaperna är osäkra kan jobbsökningsprocessen kännas särskilt svår. I sådana fall handlar det inte bara om vilken kompetens den sökande har, utan också om huruvida denna kompetens kommer till uttryck. En norsk studie (Sonnenschein & Wiik, 2025) visar att kunskaper i det lokala språket är avgörande för rekrytering och integration (”att veta hur”), nätverkande på karriärmässor (”att veta vem”) och förmågan att föreställa sig framtida karriärmöjligheter (”att veta varför”). De hävdar att språkkunskaper, som en del av studentens karriärkompetens, kan erbjuda en trygghet som möjliggör rörlighet i karriären.

Språket stärker karriärberedskapen och öppnar karriärmöjligheter

Min egen erfarenhet av vägledning visar att språkinlärning och karriärvägledning inte är två skilda stödfunktioner utan delar i en sammanvävd utvecklingsprocess. Karriärmålet ger språket riktning: när studenten vet vilken bransch, arbetsuppgift eller praktikplats hen siktar på blir det tydligare vilket språk, vilken nivå och vilket yrkesordförråd som behövs. Språkinlärning stärker karriärberedskapen genom att studenten lär sig läsa jobbannonser, beskriva sin kompetens, skriva ansökningar, delta i intervjuer, nätverka och förstå praktik- eller arbetsplatsens kommunikationskultur.

Språkanvändning i verkliga situationer som praktik, företagsbesök, mentorskap och alumnkontakter utvecklar samtidigt språk och nätverk. En högre språkkunskapsnivå kan på sikt påverka anställningens stabilitet, karriärutvecklingen och lönen.

Karriärvägledning hjälper studenten att tolka arbetsmarknadens språkkrav som varierar mellan branscher, regioner och arbetsplatser. Studenten kan lära sig att skilja mellan formella krav, arbetsplatsens faktiska behov och ibland överdimensionerade språkkrav samt att välja finska, svenska eller en kombination utifrån karriärmålet.

Eftersom högskolorna finansieringsmodell i hög grad baserar sig på antalet avlagda examina, driver det högskolorna till att effektivisera handledning och skapa tydligare studiebanor för att garantera en snabb genomströmning, det vill säga att studenter avlägger sina examina inom angiven tid (Kovalainen, 2022). Studenterna ställs i allt högre grad inför stränga och ofta motstridiga förväntningar på att de ska ta examen snabbt och samtidigt förvärva en bred uppsättning kompetenser för att klara sig på arbetsmarknaden (Nielsen & Sarauw, 2017).

Nedan görs ett försök att illustrera den kontext inom vilken studentens språkinlärning i svenska och finska sker på en finländsk högskola. Den centrala variabeln som lyfts fram är tidsperspektivet.

	Bachelorstudent	**Masterstudent**	**Gemensamt / olika**
Utgångsläge och tidshorisont	Ofta yngre, utan tidigare arbetserfarenhet. Eventuellt den första långa utlandsvistelsen. Progression över tid. Långsiktig integration.	Äldre med tidigare examina och arbetserfarenhet. Eventuellt branschbyte, familj och barn. Kan ha vistats längre tid i landet. Begränsad tid att avlägga studier.	Båda navigerar ett nytt system med utbildning, arbete, språk, vardag, inklusive byråkrati, klimat, mat. Slutmålet är ofta sysselsättning i Finland.
Motivation och mål	Avlägga sina examina och utforska karriärmöjligheter. Göra sina föräldrar stolta.	Skapa en bättre framtid för sina barn. Söker snabb etablering, personlig- och karriärutveckling	Båda strävar efter sysselsättning och fortsatt uppehållstillstånd.
Språkinlärning (finska/svenska)	Börjar från nybörjarnivå (redan i hemlandet ifall path-way-student). Progression över tid.	Föredrar intensivkurs. Förväntas snabbt nå en nivå där hen kan använda språket i praktiken.	Arbetsgivarna förväntar sig goda språkkunskaper.
Kontext för språkanvändning	Klassrumsbaserad undervisning. På sikt användning under praktik och projekt i samarbete med arbetslivet.	Kombinerar studier, arbete och nätverkande. Behov av att snabbt lära sig språket.	Avsaknad av kontakter till lokalbefolkningen och informella miljöer för att förkovra språket.
Karriärkompetenser	Bygger upp aktörskap, självförtroende och resiliens över tid.	Självstyrning. Behov av att snabbt bygga upp yrkesnätverk.	Avsaknad av nätverk och arbetslivets spelregler.
Praktik/Arbete	Praktik ingår i utbildningen och behovet av språkkunskaper under sin praktikperiod.	Praktik är svårt att få in i utbildningen. Bedriver ofta studierna vid sidan av arbete.	Båda behöver arbetserfarenhet i Finland, helst relevant branscherfarenhet.

Tabell 1. Språkinlärning i kontext. (Copilot i Word har använts för att bolla idéer för tabellen).

En viktig faktor som inte får förbises är den tid det tar att lära sig ett språk. Börjar man med finska eller svenska från nybörjarnivå under studierna når man vid utexaminering oftast inte upp till de språknivåer som krävs i arbetslivet. Mathies & Karhunen (2021) konstaterar att det är svårt för högskolor att integrera studier i finska eller svenska i utbildningsprogrammen på grund av begränsat utrymme i läroplanen. Många studenter efterlyser också mer flexibilitet när det gäller språkutbildningen och mer undervisning på avancerad nivå. Särskilt studenter på masternivå har ofta en stram studieplan och press över ekonomin. Mot den bakgrunden är det förståeligt att de prioriterar professionsstudierna framför språkstudierna.

Karriärberedskap är att kunna använda språken i praktik- eller arbetssituationer. Det tar tid att lära sig ett andra språk och flera faktorer påverkar inlärningen. Därför kan man inte förutsäga hur processen kommer att se ut på basis av omfattningen av språkinlärningen eller vistelsetiden i landet. Suni och Honko (2024) menar att även om en längre vistelse i Finland och deltagande i språkutbildning vanligtvis ökar sannolikheten för att uppnå en hög språkkunskapsnivå, är sambandet varken statistiskt signifikant eller alltid ens linjärt.

Sammanfattning

Beslutsfattandet kring karriärval sker alltid inom en viss handlingshorisont, som består av individens preferenser och arbetsmarknadens möjligheter, och kan både vidga och begränsa synen på valmöjligheterna (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997). Språket fungerar inte bara som ett verktyg för kommunikation utan också som en viktig resurs för arbetsmarknadsdeltagandet, vilket innebär att insatser som stöttar språkinlärning och tillhandahåller språkspecifika arbetsmöjligheter främjar en meningsfull och hållbar integration (Kosová & Sundbäck, 2021).

Språkinlärning stärker studentens möjligheter att delta i arbetslivet, medan karriärvägledning gör språkinlärningen målmedveten, yrkesrelevant och förankrad i autentiska sammanhang. När områdena integreras under studietiden utvecklar studenten samtidigt språk, karriärkompetens, nätverk, aktörskap och tillhörighet – förmågor som tillsammans påverkar möjligheten att etablera sig på den finländska arbetsmarknaden.

Min erfarenhet visar att internationella studenters motivation att lära sig finska eller svenska ökar i det skede de bestämmer sig för att stanna i Finland eller när de börjar söka efter arbete som motsvarar deras utbildning. Lauronen (2026) påpekar att säkerheten och det finska välfungerande samhället framstår som viktiga attraktionsfaktorer, men att sysselsättningen kan avgöra om man stannar kvar i Finland efter studierna eller om man söker sig någon annanstans.

Således ska karriärvägledning och språkinlärning ses i ett helhetsperspektiv, eftersom de tillsammans stärker internationella studenters möjligheter att fullfölja sina studier, etablera sig på arbetsmarknaden och bli delaktiga i samhället. Det behövs ytterligare forskning för att öka förståelsen för hur internationella studenters behov, utöver de som rör sysselsättning, hänger samman med deras möjligheter att lära sig svenska eller finska under och efter sina högskolestudier. Det behövs också fler arbetsgivare som inser att språkkunskaper som är under utveckling är till nytta och som är beredda att anställa arbetstagare som ännu inte uppfyller språkkraven.



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