



Why to stay, where to work?

Report on the motivational factors of coming to Finland, staying in Lapland and thoughts of employment among international students at the University of Lapland.

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Background

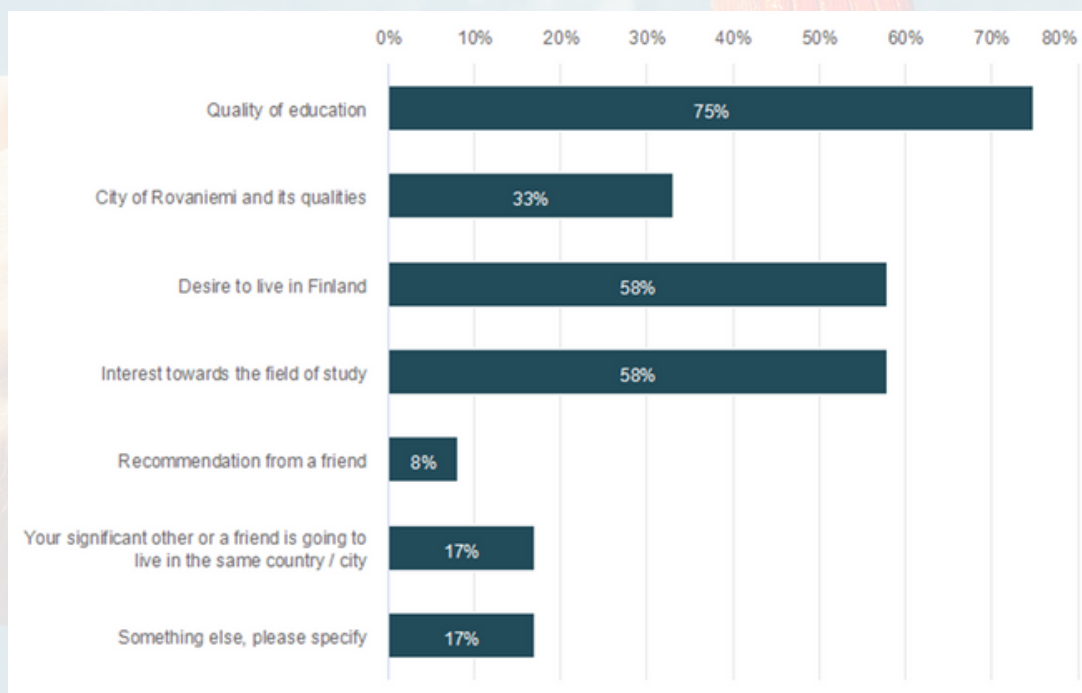
BRIDGE – making career paths smoother for immigrants -project (ESF) conducted a survey during autumn 2022 among international students at the University of Lapland to identify motivational factors related to employment and staying in Lapland. In total, 12 responses were received.

The students who responded to the survey were both Master's degree students and doctoral students. The questionnaire was not addressed to exchange students, as the questionnaire was specifically designed to find out what kind of motivational factors graduate students have for staying in Finland/Lapland. The students also represented all faculties and different nationalities. For this reason, the survey is comprehensive and does not represent the opinions of only one faculty or nationality.



Motivational factors for coming to Finland and choosing a place to study

In the survey, the students were asked to evaluate what was most important to them when choosing where to study. The respondents were given several options to choose from. Respondents were also given the opportunity to elaborate on their answers in an open question.



Picture 1. Question: Please evaluate, what was important for you when deciding where to study?

The table shows that 75% chose the quality of teaching and education as the most important factor. In the open answers, one respondent said that he was motivated by getting to know the Finnish education system, which is well-known worldwide. 58% of respondents said that the desire to live in Finland and interest in the discipline were important factors. Respondents also mentioned that the mentors of doctoral students, interesting fields of research and the possibility to specialise, for example, in the Arctic (also at Master's level) were also motivating factors. In addition, students also mentioned their interest in living in the North and the possibility of linking the North/Arctic to their studies and research interests.

Respondents were most motivated by their love of Finland and Lapland. These respondents stated that they had been in Finland/Rovaniemi for studying reasons before, for example in an exchange program, and wanted to return to the region afterward to study for a degree. Surprisingly, only a few cite the surrounding nature, climate, or safety as the main motivating factors for coming to Finland.

From these responses, it can be concluded that the reputation and quality of the Finnish education system are very important factors for coming to Finland and Lapland. This is certainly also important for those who have returned to the country after their exchange studies.

"The main reason to come here was to experience the 'widely known' Finnish education system."

Things that surprised in Lapland

When asked what surprised the respondents most about Lapland and what they would have liked to know before coming here, respondents mentioned the following:

- administrative issues and bureaucracy take time
- poor and expensive health services
- poor job opportunities, including at the university
- having to open a bank account and its importance (including online banking)
- environmental issues were not as expected
- nature and weather, cold weather
- difficult to start a doctoral thesis
- information about the city and budget-friendly options for student leisure activities



As some of the respondents had already been to Finland, they felt they were already aware of factors such as culture and weather. However, they were surprised by how different it is to study in a foreign country as a degree student than as an exchange student. One respondent also reports feeling lonely. They also feel that loneliness is influenced by the quietness of the city and the poor public transport, which makes it difficult to move easily from one place to another, especially in cold weather. More attention should therefore be paid to preventing loneliness among international students.

"...I think it gives you a different feeling, when you live in a foreign country for longer time of period in a different circumstances, such as as a degree student (more responsibility for your life than being just an exchange student which is more close to "longer period of sightseeing" than actually "living" there)."

These results suggest that one should be more realistic about the study practices and communicate them to students diligently, even before they start their studies. As a preliminary action to this very aspect, the BRIDGE project has created the website Orientation for LUC studies, which provides realistic information about Lapland, living in Lapland, and culture.

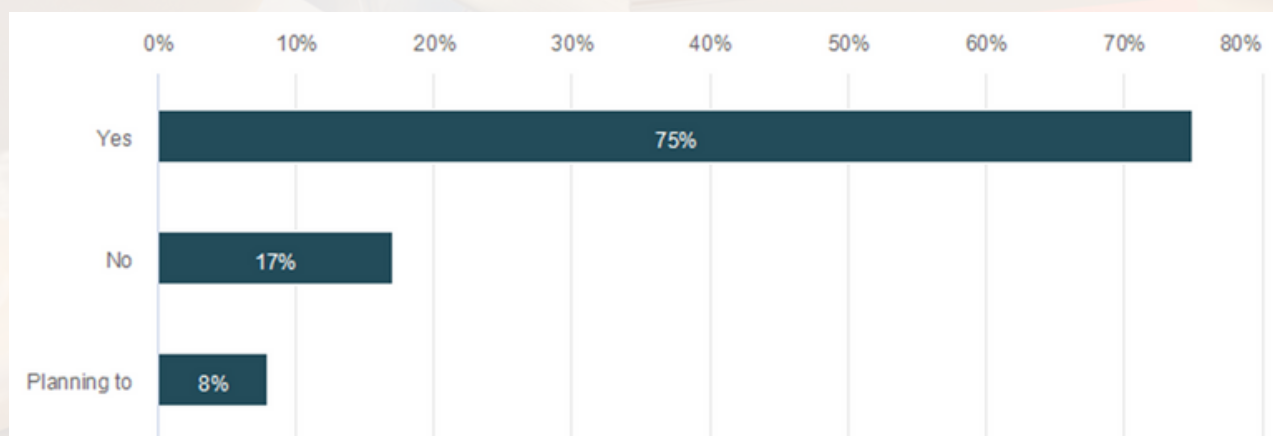
One preventive measure for culture shock and cultural understanding would be student student-led events for international students. Student-led activities are particularly important for identification and peer support. In addition, stronger tutoring activities would be important to better integrate students into the student community and provide them with peer support, for example, to overcome loneliness.

Finnish language

75% of the respondents said they had studied Finnish during their studies.

About half of the respondents said their Finnish language level was at a beginner level (Survival Finnish / Beginner), the rest at the A2-B1 level. However, respondents say that their language skills could do with more practice and that they do not necessarily use the language in everyday situations.

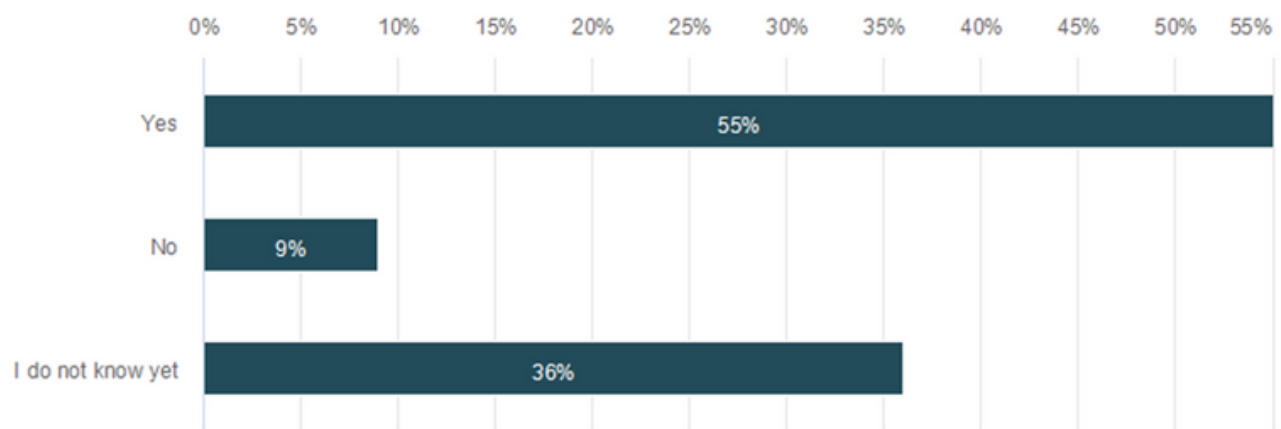
It can therefore be concluded that students take Finnish language courses as part of their studies, even if they are not compulsory. However, the importance of language skills for employment should be more strongly emphasized to students.



Picture 2. Question: Have you studied Finnish language during your studies?

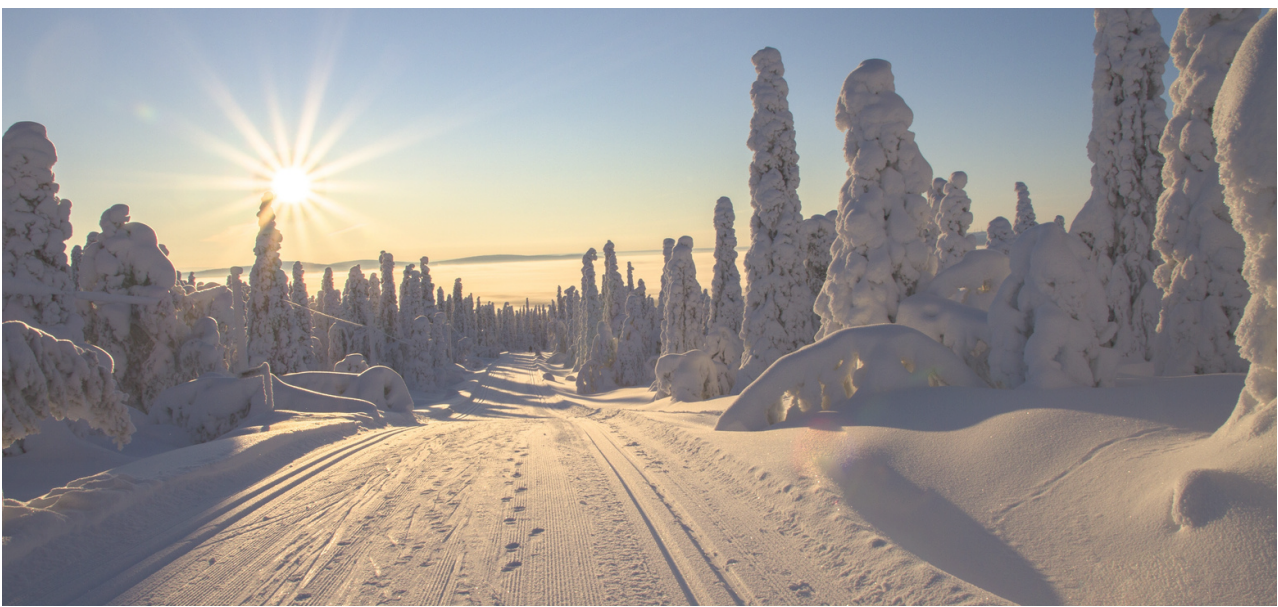
Staying in Lapland

55% of respondents would be willing to stay in Lapland after graduation and 36% had not yet made a decision.

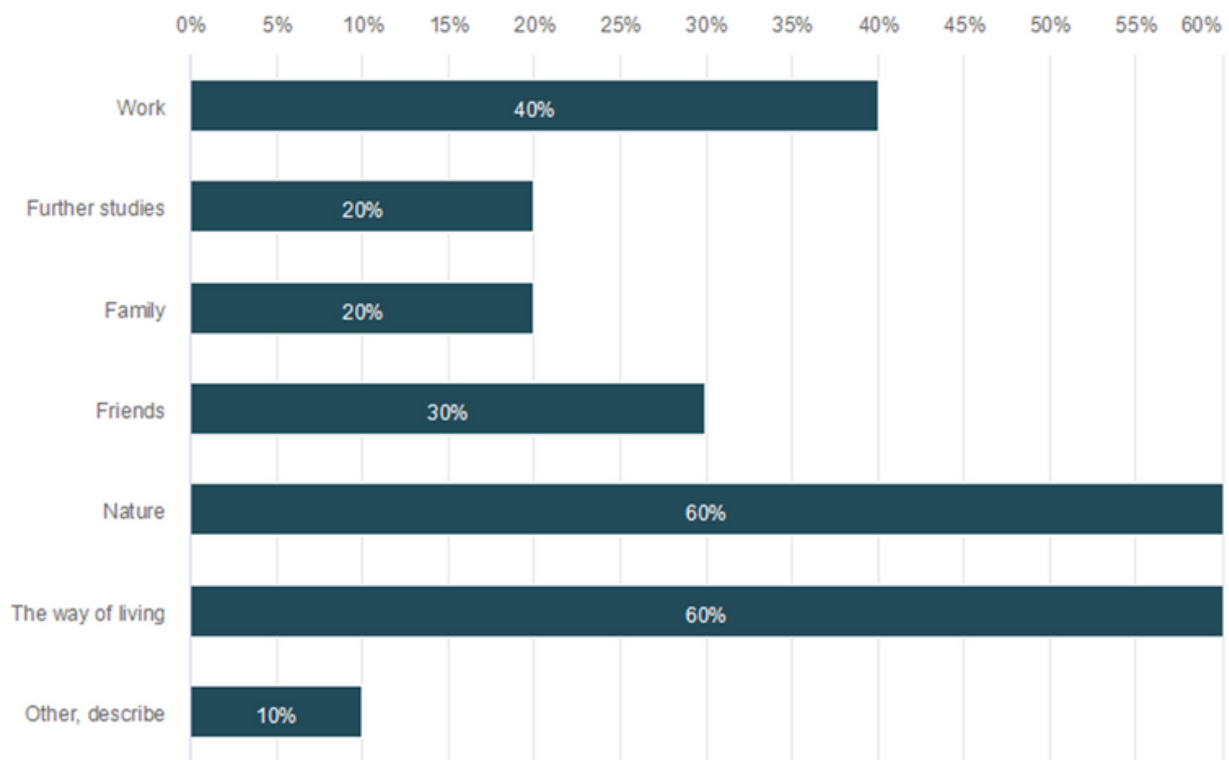


Picture 3. Question: After graduation, would you like to stay in Lapland?

Some respondents had already considered staying in Lapland when they moved. One big factor was their (Finnish) spouse. Some respondents also mentioned safety, quality of life, nature, and quietness as factors influencing their decision to stay in Lapland. Respondents also state that they had thought that the Arctic region was an attractive place to live in general, but after a few years in Rovaniemi/Lapland, they already felt rooted in the region.



When asked about motivations for staying in Lapland, the majority of respondents mentioned nature, lifestyle, and work as the most important factors for staying in Lapland. Other factors mentioned were safety, appreciation, and people's values.



Picture 4. Question: What will motivate you to stay in Lapland?

The responses are interesting in that nature and lifestyle were not the most important reasons for moving to Lapland, but after living in the area they have become important factors for international students.

However, respondents mention that they would prefer to stay in Rovaniemi / Lapland, but that there are only a few jobs in the region, or in the whole country, for international students that match their education. The desire to stay in the region is strong for many, but the availability of jobs is a concern unless they want to do something else than what they have been trained for. One respondent says:

“Now I’m considering moving to another country like Canada or Australia which has more immigrants from different cultures there. So there are more chances to fit in the society.”

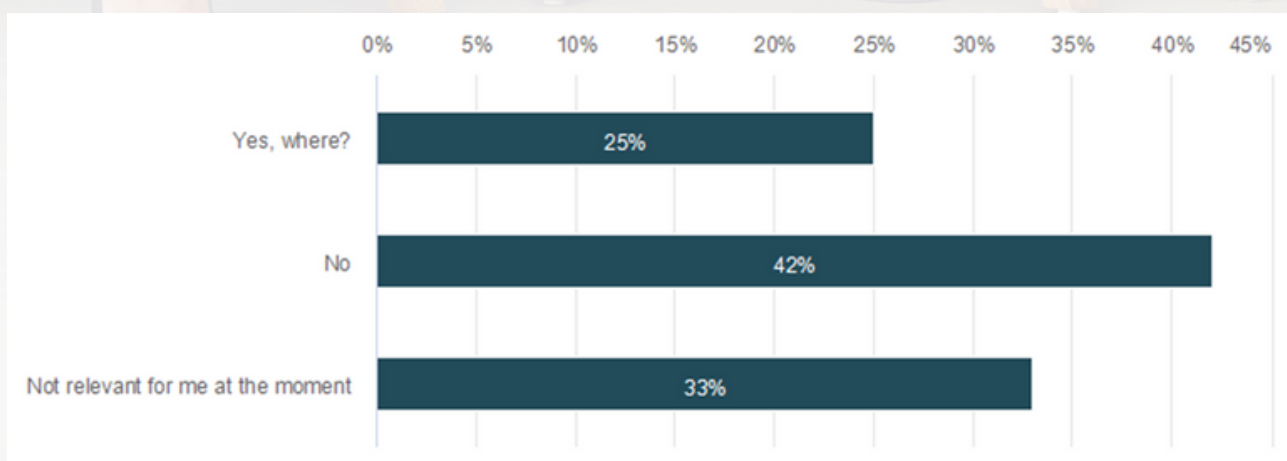
This is perhaps a somewhat worrying phenomenon, which should be given more attention in the Lapland region. We have several international master's programs at the University of Lapland and a large number of international doctoral students, but how can we better employ these students and integrate them into everyday life and Finnish culture?

In the survey, it was also asked what services and opportunities would motivate students to stay in Lapland. Students say that they need more knowledge about job search, such as work permits and jobs that match the education of international students. However, one respondent says that Lapland has more English-language employment opportunities in his field than in southern Finland, and that housing costs are cheaper than in many other regions, so these factors motivated one to stay in the region. In addition to the challenges of finding employment, respondents stress the importance of social integration. Lack of family and friends is a major barrier to staying in the region and without them, people may not want to stay after their studies.

Finding employment in the region

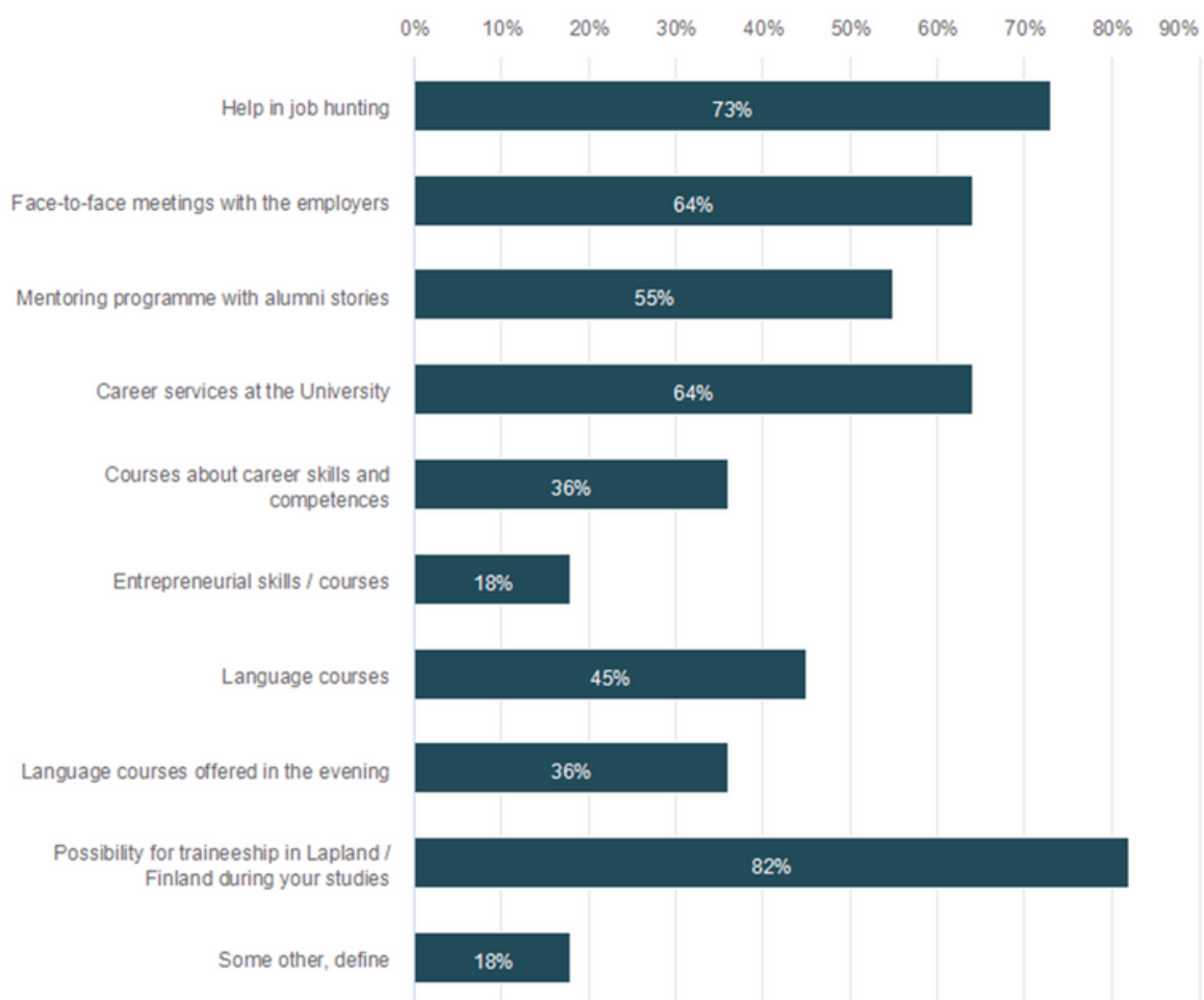
58% of the respondents said they had worked during their studies and 17% intended to apply for a job. However, only 36% said they were currently working.

Only 25% had received support to look for a job. Respondents reported having received help from a recruitment agency, EURES services, and the University of Lapland's SILTA mentoring program. However, it should be noted that 33% said that they had not yet started looking for a job.



Picture 5 Question: Have you received any support for finding a job?

In the survey, it was also asked what kind of services and courses the University of Lapland or the City of Rovaniemi could offer to support employment. In their answers, the students mentioned internships during their studies, either in Lapland or Finland. The second most desired services/courses were those to support job search, but more opportunities were also desired for career services and face-to-face meetings with employers, for example during mentoring programs. Language courses specifically online in the evenings and intensive Finnish language courses were also mentioned in the open responses. Perhaps somewhat surprisingly, courses and services related to entrepreneurship were perceived as sufficient.



Picture 6 Question: What kind of courses and services at University of Lapland and in Rovaniemi city would help you with finding a job?

Respondents perceived the fact that it is very difficult to find a job as a foreigner in Finland as a particular challenge to finding a job. Several respondents mentioned that jobs related to tourism are available, but even these tend to be seasonal, lower-paid jobs, where working conditions may also be problematic. If studying something other than tourism, students have difficulty finding jobs in their field in Lapland. Previous work experience is also a factor, i.e. if a student has no previous work experience, it is particularly difficult for them to find employment in jobs that match his/her education.

Language skills were also perceived as a challenge; jobs are not necessarily found without good Finnish language skills. University language courses were generally considered to be good, but intensive courses concentrating especially on speaking skills were needed. Students also perceive the small size of the region as a challenge, i.e. they compete for the same few jobs as Finnish students, and most often employers prefer to hire a Finnish person rather than an immigrant precisely because of language skills.

For students, Finnish job search practices are also not necessarily very clear, and more support is needed. Such services should be provided in English in particular. In addition, respondents felt that the university does not provide any support in the job search. A solution to this could be mentoring programs in English, with a special focus on job search practices, cultural factors, and so on.

The lack of support for doctoral researchers to carry out research and/or apply for grants was perceived as a challenge to employment. In addition, more assistance was requested, for example in the form of travel allowances. More employment-related events for doctoral researchers were also requested.

"I'm not sure where to look for job vacancies or how it works if you're a foreigner applying for a job. A clear understanding of work practices and job hunting would be great if it is hosted in English."

Students' tips for boosting employment

A more active role for the university in communicating students' skills to employers

Better support in applying for grants

More paid doctoral researcher positions and jobs in other positions at the university

Making use of doctoral researchers in project applications and in approved projects

A mentoring programme focused on employment

A job-search practice meeting in English

University recruitment events to bring employers and students + their spouses closer together.

Intensive language courses lasting a week on a variety of topics.

Possibilities for traineeships

Cooperation with local companies during the studies

Perhaps somewhat worryingly, students reported that they had done very little cooperation with local companies during their studies. Some respondents report doing non-academic work alongside their studies, but only one identified collaborative work done on courses. However, students have identified for example traveling as a great place for networking and finding employment opportunities, for example on a part-time basis (such as project work).



Picture 7 Question: How much have you done collaboration with local companies during your studies (1 - not at all, 5 - very much)

During the project and various meetings with different actors, it has been discussed the importance of cooperation with local companies and how students may not even understand that coursework for businesses is part of cooperation. The visibility of companies may remain superficial for students and contacts may only be made through the teacher. Perhaps the implementation of cooperation with local companies needs to be looked at more closely at the university level across all programs.

Summary

The answers to the survey give a clear picture of the situation of international students in Finnish society. Students are highly motivated to come to Finland to study, but cultural differences, employment challenges, and language skills act as barriers to staying in the country. In order to support employment, it would be worth developing a range of services, meetings with potential employers, and language courses at different levels throughout their studies to strengthen their language skills. This would be a very good integration factor and would strengthen the region's retention capacity.

