

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/378803493>

International student experience of employment integration in Finland

Article in *Research in Comparative and International Education* · March 2024

DOI: 10.1177/17454999241238172

CITATIONS

0

READS

107

2 authors, including:



[Wei Lu](#)

Aalto University

14 PUBLICATIONS 87 CITATIONS

[SEE PROFILE](#)

International student experience of employment integration in Finland

Wei Lu 

Aalto University, Finland

Tayla Everson Härkölä 

Wolt Enterprises Oy, Finland

Research in Comparative &
International Education
2024, Vol. 0(0) 1–20
© The Author(s) 2024

Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/17454999241238172

journals.sagepub.com/home/rci

Abstract

International students have the potential to contribute significantly to host countries through cultural enrichment, economic growth, and human capital development. However, their successful integration into the host society is crucial to realise these benefits. By applying the framework of the two-way integration process from acculturation theory, this study examines the employment integration of international students in Finland, a non-native English-speaking country. Our semi-structured, qualitative in-depth interviews identify several key challenges encountered by international students, including limited information about the labour market, unfamiliarity with recruitment practices, a lack of industry connections, communication gaps from recruiting companies, and host country language barriers. We provide recommendations to organisations and recruiters on how to embrace diversity in their recruitment processes, as well as suggestions to universities on how to better support international students' transition into the workforce of the host country.

Keywords

International students, integration, employment, Finland, non-native English-speaking countries, diversity, immigration, job search, higher education, master's degree students

Introduction

International students bring numerous benefits to host countries, including cultural enrichment, economic prosperity, diversity, national development, and human capital (Dentakos et al., 2017; Hajro et al., 2019; Lashari et al., 2018; Martirosyan et al., 2019; Smith and Khawaja, 2011). Finland, following the global trend, has experienced a significant increase in international students over the past two decades. The number of international students has tripled since 2001, with 31,913 international students enrolled in Finnish higher education institutions in 2019, accounting for 10% of the total student population (Institute of International Education, 2023). For comparison, international students in the United States constituted 5.2% of the student body (Martirosyan et al., 2019).

Corresponding author:

Wei Lu, School of Business, Aalto University, Ekonominaukio 1, 02150 Espoo, P.O. Box 21210, Aalto FI-00076, Finland.

Email: wei.lu@aalto.fi

Finland, like many Western countries, is facing a rapidly ageing population, making it one of Europe's most elderly nations (Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare, 2020). The integration of foreign nationals into the Finnish workforce can help alleviate the lack of available working-age talent. However, if international students fail to integrate successfully into the host country's society, there is a high likelihood of them returning to their country of origin (Dentakos et al., 2017). Additionally, while integration offers several benefits to international students, such as personal growth, academic advancement, cultural immersion, and career development opportunities, it also presents challenges, including cultural identity confusion, feelings of isolation, and low self-esteem (Lashari et al., 2018). Research has indicated specific obstacles to employment integration, such as language and communication barriers, limited professional networks, legal constraints, and discrimination (Arkoudis et al., 2009; Pham et al., 2018; Scott et al., 2015).

Existing studies on this topic have predominantly focused on English-speaking countries that are popular destinations for international students, such as Australia, Canada, the UK, and the USA. However, less attention has been paid to the integration experiences of international students in non-native English-speaking contexts, such as Finland, where the number of international students has been increasing rapidly in recent years (Institute of International Education, 2023). To address this gap, we formulated three research questions:

- *How do international students perceive their employment integration in Finland?*
- *How can employers and recruiters better embrace international students in their recruitment practices?*
- *How can universities provide more support to assist international students in their transition into the workforce?*

We apply the notion of the two-way process of integration, as advocated by Berry and colleagues (Berry, 2005; Sam and Berry, 2006), to investigate our research questions. The two-way integration process refers to the mutual adaptation involving international students on the one hand, and host country employers and universities on the other. This process considers the role of both groups and their reciprocal accommodations, for example, of the international student to learn the host language and of the employer to accept a lower level of language ability. We delve into the experiences of international students during their integration journey towards employment and their perceptions of how companies and recruiters receive them during their job search. It is worth noting that our study considers the experience of highly educated foreign nationals who are seeking employment in their professional fields, that is, to begin their careers in a position that matches their expectations, skills and competence.

Our study contributes to the growing yet small body of literature on employment integration of international students, particularly in non-native English-speaking countries that aim to attract international talent. The results of the study have practical implications for society as it is politically, socially and economically vital that international students integrate into and contribute to the larger society of their host country during their studies, and stay and gain employment after graduation. Furthermore, the current study offers recommendations on how employers and universities can enhance their support and assistance to facilitate a smoother transition of international students into the workforce of their host country.

Literature review

Acculturation and integration

Despite the importance of integration for various political, social, institutional, and economic situations in today's globalising world, the concept is frequently used with varying definitions and interpretations by both academics and practitioners (Ager and Strang, 2008). In our study, we define integration as the process of blending and joining a society, wherein individuals often adapt to the host country's way of life while simultaneously maintaining their home country's culture and identity.

Our definition aligns with the notion of acculturation, which refers to the bidirectional changes occurring at both the individual immigrant level and the host society level, resulting from interactions among individuals and groups from different cultural backgrounds (Sam and Berry, 2006). Berry (1997: 10) identified a model comprising four strategies that cultural groups and individuals can adopt, each involving different degrees of embracing the host culture and retaining their own culture: assimilation (neglecting one's original cultural identity and actively seeking to assimilate into the host culture), separation/segregation (retaining the original culture and actively avoiding interactions with the host culture), marginalisation (minimal cultural maintenance and little engagement with the host culture), and integration (maintaining one's original culture while actively engaging with the host culture). This last strategy is what we employ to define integration in our study.

It is worth noting that acculturation, integration, and even assimilation have been used interchangeably in the literature, despite integration and assimilation representing two distinct strategies in Berry's (1997) acculturation model. However, it can be argued that integration is the preferred form of acculturation outcome, as it involves actively engaging with the host culture while still maintaining one's heritage culture. This two-way process of integration underpins the importance of maintaining multiculturalism within a national context. Multiculturalism refers to co-existence of cultural diversity and equitable participation of cultural minority groups (Berry and Ward, 2016). The presence of culturally diverse groups alone is not sufficient for a society to be multiculturalist. As argued by Berry and Ward (2016: 441), 'diversity without equal participation will lead to separation or segregation' which is an undesired outcome of acculturation, and 'in the absence of diversity and equity, marginalisation and exclusion will likely occur'. Only when both diversity and participation are present can multiculturalism be actualised. This supports the bi-directional integration we advocate for in this study, where international students maintain their cultural heritage whilst simultaneously adapting to mainstream society; specifically, participating in the Finnish employment market. Yet, such integration requires the recognition and appreciation of cultural minority groups by the dominant group, that is, the majority group, so that cultural heterogeneity is valued, celebrated, and viewed as a resource (Ward et al., 2018). Indeed, research has shown that multicultural models are linked with greater inclusivity, less racial discrimination, and more engagement from ethnic groups (Berry and Ward, 2016; Plaut et al., 2011), which in turn brings forth benefits to the entire society. A large-scale study of over 5000 immigrant youth who settled in 13 different countries further showed that immigrants who adopted the integration approach tended to experience less stress and higher adaptation than those who pursued marginalisation, assimilation, and separation (Berry et al., 2006).

A central tenet of acculturation lies in the bidirectional changes that occur in the interactions between two or more cultural groups and their individual members (Berry, 2005: 698). This process encompasses both institutional and structural changes (cultural acculturation) at the societal level and behavioural changes (psychological acculturation) at the individual level. Ward and colleagues (Ward et al., 2001; Ward and Kennedy, 1994) further differentiate between two types of individual-level

adaptation: psychological adaptation, which encompasses affective responses such as self-esteem and well-being, and sociocultural adaptation, which pertains to behavioural responses in effectively managing various aspects of life in a new cultural environment. Research indicates that highly integrated immigrants demonstrate high levels of adaptation in both sociocultural and psychological adjustment (Berry et al., 2006). Ager and Strang (2008) similarly propose a two-way process of integration in the realm of social connections for immigrant integration, which can be argued to apply to all aspects of integration, including employment.

According to Berry (2005), successful acculturation results from mutual accommodation and long-term adaptations between different cultural groups. Acculturation theory has also been applied to explain various aspects of international students' adaptation during their cultural transition, including stressors, coping mechanisms, and social support (see Smith and Khawaja, 2011). We contend that the employment integration of international students involves mutual adaptation between students themselves and the stakeholders of the host country, including universities and employers. Therefore, our study is centred on these two aspects of adaptation through international students' lived experiences of their integration into the host country workforce.

The success of integration largely depends on the domain of working life. Regarding the criteria for determining successful integration, Ager and Strang (2008) propose a framework consisting of 10 primary perceived indicators, often interconnected, categorised into four domains: markers and means (employment, housing, education, and health), social connection (social bridges, social bonds, and social links), facilitators (language and cultural knowledge, safety, and stability), and foundation (rights and citizenship). These indicators can be interdependent and mutually influential. For instance, access to quality education can enhance employment prospects, which, in turn, can improve housing options. Social connections can provide support and resources that contribute to better educational, employment, and health outcomes. Language proficiency and cultural knowledge can facilitate social connections and facilitate integration across various domains.

Employment integration in the host country

According to human capital theory, international students constitute a significant pool of highly skilled workers. Human capital refers to the knowledge, skills, competencies, and attributes possessed by individuals that contribute to personal, social, and economic well-being (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2001: 18). International students are often regarded as well-educated, equipped with cross-cultural understanding, and proficient in multiple languages. They are typically presumed to possess a strong desire for further education, cultural exploration, and international career paths. Moreover, they gradually become acquainted with the cultural values and norms of the host country and obtain higher education qualifications from their host country upon graduation, which can be particularly desirable for successful integration into the host country (Cameron et al., 2019; Hawthorne, 2010; Scott et al., 2015). From the perspective of recruiting companies, international students can bring diversity and a global outlook to the workplace, fostering innovation and enhancing competitiveness, particularly for organisations operating in the global market (Cameron et al., 2019). The language skills, cultural knowledge, and unique competencies of international students from their home countries can be invaluable for companies seeking to internationalise their operations (Hawthorne, 2010). Leading destinations for international higher education, such as Canada and Australia, have implemented two-step migration programmes to facilitate the transition of international students from study to permanent residency in these countries (Hawthorne, 2010; Hou et al., 2020).

Despite international students being viewed as valuable human capital for host countries, they often encounter more challenges finding employment than domestic students (Arkoudis et al., 2009; Fakunle and Pirrie 2020; Pham et al., 2018; Scott et al., 2015). Major challenges reported in the literature included language barriers (particularly in English), a lack of knowledge of the local job market and work culture, and discrimination (Arkoudis et al., 2009; Pham et al., 2018). Scott et al. (2015) show that regardless of a strong desire to transition into the Canadian labour market, international students expressed their poor prospects of finding work in their fields after graduation. Insufficient English language and communication skills were mentioned as being disadvantages for international students to obtain jobs compared with Canadian domestic students. Limited opportunities and a lack of connections to industry professionals were also reported as contributing to international students' poor preparedness for employment in Canada (Scott et al., 2015). Fakunle and Pirrie (2020) found that international students in the UK faced unequal access to job opportunities due to legislative restrictions such as work visas.

Discrimination was another focal issue encountered by international students in their job search. Research conducted in Australia identified discriminatory behaviour in recruitment and unfair hiring practices (Coffey et al., 2021; James and Otsuka, 2009). Booth et al. (2012) explored recruitment bias of Australian companies with an experiment where they assigned names from five different ethnic groups (Anglo-Saxon, Indigenous, Indian, Chinese, and Middle Eastern) to resumes and applicants. Their study revealed that applicants with Chinese and Middle Eastern names had to submit 60% more applications than those with Anglo-Saxon names in order to receive an equal number of call-backs.

Diversity and employment integration

Diversity theory suggests that a diverse workforce can lead to positive outcomes for organisations by fostering creativity, innovation, and adaptability to changing markets and customer needs. In the context of employing international students and immigrants, embracing a range of individuals with diverse cultural backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives can bring unique skills and insights to the workplace, ultimately benefiting the organisations as a whole (Hajro et al., 2019).

The study conducted by Valenzuela et al. (2020) found immigrants are more likely to adopt higher levels of integration in workplace settings when there are more diverse intercultural group climates, where cultural differences are accepted and valued. This, in turn, directly impacts organisational outcomes, as culturally diverse organisations achieve greater engagement from inclusion of minority groups. Hajro et al. (2019) found that societal, individual, and organisational factors influence coping and acculturation models, thereby affecting integration success. Therefore, it is argued that organisations should create inclusive environments, implement diversity practices, and ensure that migration policies facilitate migrants' contributions to the economy (Hajro et al., 2019). Overall, integration can be facilitated through the accumulation of career capital, proficiency in the host country's language, organisational and managerial support, and integration policies that promote diversity.

Despite the growing awareness and discourse of diversity among organisations, international students continue to encounter obstacles in recruitment from companies. Blackmore and Rahimi (2019) examined why international students were not employed in the three occupational areas with recognised skills shortages – accounting, engineering, and nursing – by Australian employers. Based on 34 interviews with multinational companies, medium- and small-sized companies, and large public organisations, they found that senior management generally consented to recruiting diversity; however, in the recruitment process, after evaluating candidates' technical competence, English language proficiency, and 'soft skills', the last criterion of 'best fit' effectively excluded

many international graduates who were not seen to be that of 'agentic Western workers' (Blackmore and Rahimi, 2019: 442). The authors argued that despite stated commitments to innovation and diversity in work practices, Australian employers predominantly sought staff who aligned with their existing staff profiles that represented a homogenous workforce (Blackmore and Rahimi, 2019: 445).

Integration policy and international student experience in Finland

In response to the growing workforce shortage, Finland has undergone significant changes in its integration policies over the past two decades. International students are seen as a key source of skilled labour to keep the Finnish economy competitive in the global market. To facilitate the immigration of international talents, a long-term vision has been developed for Finland to be an attractive, inclusive, and sustainable innovation ecosystem that thrives on diversity (Rilla et al., 2018). In order to counteract Finland's ageing population and shrinking labour force, a number of policies have been enacted to attract and retain international talent (Jokila et al., 2019). For instance, the residence permit duration for job-seeking after graduation with a higher education degree has been extended from the initial 9 months to 12 months, and subsequently expanded to 24 months, with the possibility of further extension up to 48 months (Mathies and Karhunen, 2021). These policy changes aim to support international students in their transition to the Finnish job market and encourage their long-term integration into the Finnish society.

Another notable policy in Finland is the provision of government-funded training. As part of the formal integration programme for immigrants, Finnish or Swedish language training is offered along with social, cultural, and work-related skills, as well as professional development (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment of Finland, 2023). It is worth noting that Finland has two official languages, with Finnish being spoken by 85% of the total population and Swedish by 5% (Statista, 2023). Furthermore, the forthcoming Promotion of Immigrant Integration Act aims to comprehensively reform the support services provided to immigrants, with the goal of enhancing their integration and fostering their inclusion in society. One of the key objectives of this reform is to facilitate immigrant employment by offering early-stage integration services and improving access to services for immigrant women and individuals who are currently not active in the labour force (Finnish Government, 2023).

According to the results of the International Student Barometer (ISB) survey in 2017, 91% of surveyed international students were satisfied or very satisfied with studying and living in Finland (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2018). The highest satisfaction was with safety and security, with 97% of international students expressing satisfaction. Academic study and support services also received high satisfaction ratings, with 91% of international students being satisfied or very satisfied with the expertise of faculty, assessment of coursework, personal support in learning, English skills of academic faculty and service staff in Finnish universities, as well as the quality of the learning environment, including classrooms, lecture halls, learning technology, library, and internet connection (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2018).

However, in contrast to the high satisfaction in safety and security and academic study and support services, only around half of international students expressed satisfaction with employment and career-related aspects, such as advice and guidance on employment and career, as well as opportunities for internships and work alongside studying in Finland (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2018, 2019; Pitkänen et al., 2023). International students' challenges in obtaining employment in Finland were reported by Shumilova et al. (2012) and Li (2019). Possessing the right professional knowledge and competence does not guarantee a job in the Finnish employment

market. The lack of Finnish language skills was perceived as the biggest obstacle, and international students also faced difficulties due to a lack of local networks and limited knowledge of the work culture in Finland, which hindered their access to job information. Other reasons included a small domestic labour market, insufficient career guidance from higher education institutions, and instances of ethical and religious discrimination (Shumilova et al., 2012). Li (2019) specifically observed that insufficient Finnish language skills posed a clear disadvantage for Chinese students, even when their professional competence was equal to that of Finnish domestic students. Finnish companies were more inclined to recruit Finnish applicants who were proficient in both English and Finnish, than Chinese applicants who could only use English at work. The study recommended that Chinese students should seek jobs in highly internationalised sectors where English is used as the working language (Li, 2019).

Methodology

The participants

The participants in this study were international students pursuing a 2-year master's degree at a large university in Southern Finland, highly attractive to international students. The decision was made deliberately to include degree students rather than exchange students, as integration intentions, motivations, and the adaptation process can differ significantly between short-term sojourners and long-term migrants (Dentakos et al., 2017). It was also important that the participants had resided and studied in Finland for a sufficient duration to be able to reflect on their experiences. This is particularly relevant when examining job-seeking experiences, as students with shorter stays in the host country may not have such experiences, and emotions can vary based on the length of stay (Pedersen, 1994). Furthermore, as cultural distance has been linked to the challenges faced during international experiences (Ward et al., 2001), the participants' cultural backgrounds were also considered.

For qualitative semi-structured interviews, between six and twelve interviews are regarded as sufficient to reach saturation for thematic analysis (Guest et al., 2006; Hennink et al., 2017), the method of analysis which we used in the current study. The international student population was reached via the university student unions, and 16 volunteer students reported their willingness to participate in the study. Two participants were excluded from the study as one was an exchange student and the other had not lived in Finland long enough. Eventually 14 participants with a wide variety of cultural backgrounds were interviewed, and their unique interviews were used in this study. These 14 interviews proved to be sufficient in reaching code saturation where the range of thematic issues were identified (Hennink et al., 2017).

In terms of demographics, the age of the participants ranged from 22 to 30 years old. They represented nine countries of origin from Asia, Europe, North America, and South America. The duration of their stay in Finland at the time of the interviews varied from 9 months to 8 years, with the vast majority having resided for 1 to 5 years. Among the participants, two had completed their bachelor's degree in Finland before enrolling in the current master's degree programmes, while the other twelve participants had obtained their bachelor's degree in their respective home countries prior to coming to Finland. All participants were enrolled in English-medium programmes of the university that covered a wide range of disciplines. Regarding international experience, five out of the fourteen participants had previously visited Finland for a holiday, internships, or as exchange students. The remaining participants had prior international experience in countries other than Finland.

Interview data collection

This paper is part of a larger study on international student experiences in various aspects of their lives in Finland. The study was conducted in compliance with the ethical requirements of the university. The participants were informed of the purpose of the study, personal data protection, and their rights to withdraw at any time from the data collection process. Prior to the interviews, consent was obtained from each participant.

The initial part of the interview focused on gathering demographic and background information from the participants. These questions served as an easy start and helped establish rapport with the participants (Patton, 2014). Regarding employment integration, open-ended questions were asked to encourage participants to reflect on their experiences. Examples of these questions included, 'Could you tell us about your work life in Finland?' 'How do you feel about the support provided by the university for international students in finding employment?' and 'Do you believe Finland is prepared to accept foreigners for work?' The final set of questions revolved around participants' future plans and their suggestions for improving the integration of international students into Finland. Additionally, participants were encouraged to share tips for future students considering studying in Finland.

The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner, allowing participants to reflect on their experiences and focus on what they considered important, while still guiding the talk within the scope of the research (Silverman, 2021).

At the time of data collection, due to the high prevalence of COVID-19, all interviews were conducted online using Skype and Zoom video calls to prioritise the health and safety of the participants. With the participants' consent, the interviews were voice recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim. The duration of the interviews ranged from 35 minutes to 120 minutes, with an average length of 69 minutes per interview. All the interviews and transcriptions were carried out by the researchers of this study, with no assistants or translators used in the entire research project.

Data analysis of qualitative interviews

The interview data were analysed with thematic analysis. We applied a systematic coding method following the approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Aligning with the research questions, we categorised the codes into three overarching areas that reflected the experiences of international students: job searching, companies' reactions, and support from the university. The process involved pre-coding, organising the codes into broader categories, identifying themes and concepts, and providing comprehensive descriptions for each (Saldaña, 2021). Descriptive summaries were then generated based on the topics. To ensure the reliability of the analysis, both researchers individually coded the transcriptions. Subsequently, we engaged in discussions to reach a consensus on the final coding.

In coding the interview data, we addressed our three research objectives outlined in the Introduction: international students' perceptions of their employment integration in Finland, their views on employer and recruiter behaviours, and their feelings regarding university support. We found that students' integration perceptions and their views on employers/recruiters' behaviours are intertwined. Due to this close connection, we combined the findings for research objectives 1 and 2. For instance, students talked about employers' requirements for Finnish language together with their inadequate Finnish language skills. Therefore, we described these findings under the theme 'Language requirements and challenges'. Similarly, students said that they lacked knowledge about recruitment practices while employers/recruiters lacked transparency in job adverts, and we reported

these under the theme ‘Lack of recruitment information and industry connections and openness of job market’. The findings for research objective 3 – university support – are presented separately at the end of the Findings chapter.

Moreover, the empirical findings for research objectives 2 and 3 are thoroughly expounded upon in the Recommendations section, offering specific guidance for both employers/recruiters and higher education institutions. These recommendations are grounded in the rich experiences of participants detailed throughout the entire findings.

Findings

The participants cited various reasons and expectations for choosing to study in Finland. These included the high quality of education, availability of suitable academic programmes, and the opportunity to access scholarships. Participants from Russia specifically mentioned cultural and climatic similarities, as well as geographic proximity, as factors that attracted them to Finland. Many participants expressed an interest in experiencing a new culture, particularly those from Asia who found Finland to be exotic. For two participants, family connections played a significant role in their decision to move to Finland. Furthermore, seeking employment in Finland was reported by several participants as an expectation or desire. Many participants often had multiple expectations for choosing to study in Finland.

It is important to highlight that the participants had a highly positive experience with academic studies in Finland. They praised the high quality of teaching, the student-friendly environment, the diverse learning methods, real-life project work used in the courses, modern learning facilities, and the ease of access and communication with professors and staff. Additionally, the participants generally expressed satisfaction with their social and everyday lives. However, they pointed out that work life was the most challenging aspect of integration in Finland, compared to their experiences in academic and social settings.

Lack of recruitment information and industry connections and openness of job market

Almost all participants in our study expressed a strong desire to secure employment in Finland and actively applied for jobs, whether full-time or part-time. Many began to search for a job already after only a few months of living in Finland. However, many of them felt very challenged in their job search. They cited that they lacked information about how the job market operates in Finland and struggled with the transition from studying to working. Additionally, participants perceived that Finnish job opportunities were not readily accessible to foreigners. One participant stated:

I wouldn't say that Finland is open and prepared for foreigners. That's more with respect to the job aspects. I am not sure it's really open to foreigners. In my friend circle we are 10-12 and we all feel the same way, so it's not just my opinion... And we don't even know how to transition into working life - we don't even know what the difference is and how we can adapt or anything like that. We have no clue what to do, and that makes it harder. If there were companies that were saying 'we are open to foreigners for such and such reason', it would have been clearer and easier, so we know what to do and what to change; otherwise, we don't know - it's just a question mark (Participant 8).

Furthermore, an overwhelming majority of job postings were in Finnish. This lack of job advertisements in English further reinforces the limited opportunities for international students. During the COVID-19 pandemic, all job fairs were cancelled, and many companies halted their

entire recruitment process, exacerbating the challenges faced by international students and reducing their job prospects.

Lack of knowledge regarding recruitment practices was identified as another challenge by our participants. They mentioned issues such as what should be included in a job application and what types of job interviews they would undergo. Participants became aware of these matters through their own experiences of applying for jobs, rather than through university education. One participant emphasised the importance of being aware of the specific recruitment processes in their respective fields, which can differ from the standard practices. The participant stated:

At least in the sector of finance, the application process that one has to go through is very tedious and it's not talked about at all in the university... Cover letter and CV are only part of it. There are a lot of different parts. For example, the next phase is perhaps an online test or personality task, motivation task or logical tasks, IQ test, English, math test, etc (Participant 3).

Lack of communication from recruiting companies

Participants in our study highlighted the lack of communication from recruiters/companies as a key issue. They reported that job postings were frequently listed without specified end dates, leaving applicants waiting for extended periods without any response or feedback after submitting their applications. In some cases, participants made it to the interview stage but never received any further communication. Our participants emphasised that clear communication, even if it was to communicate rejections, would greatly help job applicants in their job search. The following quotation illustrates this:

In respect to the transition to industry, I feel getting an interview itself is next to impossible. I have applied to 10–15 companies. One or two have responded, and the rest haven't even responded, so that kind of gives you a question mark, like what's missing and what not? That's really irritating... They could communicate you're not accepted for this and this reason or something, so you kind of know you're in the loop... In my home country, they wouldn't say reasons, but they will always respond and let you know [the result] (Participant 5).

Language requirements and challenges

During our interviews, the topic of Finnish language requirements repeatedly emerged when participants reflected on their experiences in job seeking. One participant noted 90%–95% of the job postings required Finnish language skills. Furthermore, our participants found the language requirements to be unclear and confusing. Some participants mentioned that although job advertisements did not explicitly state the need for Finnish, it was implicitly expected. One participant commented that some companies work in English but post job listings in Finnish, making it difficult for applicants to know whether to apply or not, and that 'There's this awkwardness about the ones that are posted in Finnish that don't say you need Finnish, and you're like "should I apply?"' (Participant 12).

Moreover, participants found inconsistencies in the language requirements. For instance, it was noted that some job postings required Finnish, but when contacted, it became clear that the requirement was not necessary, and the posting was copied from elsewhere. These inconsistencies resulted in miscommunication which added to the challenges of gaining employment and job search experience in Finland.

It is worth noting that six out of fourteen participants had worked or were working as teaching or research assistants. Apparently, it was easier to find such positions within the university than internships or placements in companies. A secure way to gain work experience was to look inwards to the university where English as the working language can be guaranteed and the environment is familiar for international students. One participant commented that some international students want to do their master's theses for companies but fail to get a placement, and then they have to give up and do a research thesis instead.

Participants in our study acknowledged the advantages of learning Finnish for their future careers. Many of the interviewed students had participated in elementary Finnish language courses offered by the university, while two had taken intermediate-level courses. One student even sought out intensive courses from outside due to the unavailability of such courses within the university. However, participants felt they had limited time and energy to learn Finnish, a completely new language, alongside their English-medium degree studies which felt already demanding. Additionally, the participants noted the few opportunities to practice Finnish since all the courses in their degree programmes were conducted in English, which was also the language widely used on campus.

Sector variations affecting employment opportunities

Whilst many participants experienced frustration in gaining employment, four participants successfully obtained a job during their studies in Finland: one participant in the IT sector, two in the digital sector, and one in the service sector. The participant who secured employment in the IT sector stated that it was easy and quick to find a job, with most job openings in the field being offered in English and not requiring Finnish language skills:

I was exploring [job] possibilities intensively, just looking around and sometimes going to interviews. Generally [it was] fast, pretty easy to find something. And most of the job openings in my field [IT] are offered in English, and they [companies] were looking for someone who could speak English. Finnish skills were almost never required, ... In general, in my field like IT, for positions like program developers, programmers, and researchers, Finnish language wasn't required (Participant 1).

One participant who found a job in the digital sector enjoyed the company's international atmosphere and use of English as the working language:

The company I am working for is very international. It is comprised of like 20 nationalities, and the primary language is English, not Finnish. So, it's a good thing for me, because then I don't have to concern about not understanding Finnish (Participant 14).

The participant who obtained a job in the service sector was responsible for international customer service. Finnish was not a criterion in the recruitment. However, the improved Finnish language skills empowered the participant with more tasks and sped up integration into the workplace. The participant stated:

When I applied for the job Finnish language was not required. At beginning I spoke only English and the other two languages I interpret. At some point I felt pressure that I should learn Finnish. I had already basic Finnish skills. I took a three-month intensive course at [name of the training school]. It changed my role of work. I started to speak more with Finnish customers. My Finnish improved quickly by using it... My supervisor noticed this and always said, 'Thank you for learning [Finnish] so quickly to fit in our

culture'. They are very happy that I have tried so hard to be in that setting. It made me also feel good that I improved the whole work atmosphere. There is one common language there (Participant 13).

These experiences reported by our participants indicated that employment opportunities can vary across sectors. For instance, the IT and digital sectors and highly internationalised sectors have more chances for international students to find a job, and employees can manage their work well without Finnish language proficiency.

Diversity and well-being in the workplace promoting employment integration

Those participants who were employed, both full-time and part-time, highly appreciated the employee-oriented approach in Finnish companies resulting in reduced stress levels. They perceived that work–life balance was significantly better than in their home countries. One participant was especially impressed by the minimum overtime work in Finnish companies and stated,

There's much less stress in the working environment. Everyone is much more relaxed. Things can take much longer to be completed. But there's really small amount of overwork. Everyone works their amount of time. No one bullies you into overworking, like the case in U.S. companies or in Russian companies [where] you have to keep up with everyone else (Participant 1).

Finnish companies were seen to prioritise employee well-being. Another participant shared the positive work experiences in well-being and open communication and appreciated the work culture in Finland:

The job was a surprise for me because I applied really last minute... Everyone at my company is really nice. We have a quite diverse group, around half Finnish and half international. Everybody speaks English all the time, which is great. My company always tries to understand or see the situation from the international employees' perspective and tries to not have any kind of misunderstanding. And we always get asked a lot about well-being, like anything goes wrong or we need to discuss anything. The communication is very open. I enjoy and appreciate it very much (Participant 6).

Intention of stay after graduation

A great majority of participants expressed their willingness to remain in Finland after graduation. However, many stated that this depended on their employment prospects and more concretely on whether they could find a job upon graduation. A participant stated,

Being an international student here, in a few months I need to search for an actual job, [securing employment] would matter for me more, because it will determine if I can stay here [after graduation]. Everything will be dependent on the job I get, so if I am not getting responses then it would really affect my situation here. It affects my whole life, not just my working life (Participant 5).

An opportunity to work alongside study was not merely a matter of supporting one's own study but also a sign of prospect for future care and subsequently the possibility of long-term residence in Finland. This indicates that successful employment plays a decisive role in integration of international students in Finland, as the following quotation also showed,

I would really like to enjoy staying in Finland [after study] because I have a home; I have friends; I have a social circle, but I feel it is hard to find a job here for internationals. I think I could offer a lot. If they would not pick me, I will have to go to another country, which is sad. I am in my early twenties and right now it's about establishing a career (Participant 14).

Support from university

While participants acknowledged the university's efforts to facilitate international students' future employment, they highlighted the need for further support in transitioning into the workforce.

Even though the university does try to support you to get an internship or thesis position in the industry, it still doesn't really click. They are for sure trying their best, but I'm not sure how much is coming out of it... There could be more support in transitioning into industry life because currently a lot of international students are lost on how to get work... (Participant 11).

Additionally, participants felt that career support from university was not equally oriented to international students of different disciplines and that some fields of studies such as IT received more support than other fields. A participant commented,

In terms of career search, the university has been increasingly more active in trying to appeal to the international students, ...but it is not enough yet. I think the initiatives are more in the IT space for foreigners, just because it's easier to integrate them [into the IT sector] without the Finnish language skills (Participant 4).

While the Finnish language courses offered by the university were appreciated, it was noted that they did not yet meet the needs of international students who wanted to seek employment in Finland. One participant stated,

I feel Finnish courses taught for foreigners in universities are very slow. You can learn something, but it takes a long time to feel that you are making any progress. This is because they are for exchange students who don't need the language (Participant 13).

Discussion

Our study identified several challenges related to employment integration for international students in Finland, including a lack of information about the labour market, unfamiliarity with recruitment practices, limited professional networks, and language barriers. These findings align with existing literature on the experiences of international students in English-speaking countries such as Australia, Canada, the UK, and the USA (Arkoudis et al., 2009; Pham et al., 2018; Scott et al., 2015). Although overt discrimination was not reported by the students we interviewed, they perceived fewer job opportunities than Finnish domestic students. This finding is consistent with previous research highlighting the unequal access to job opportunities faced by international students in the UK, Canada, and Australia (Coffey et al., 2021; Fakunle and Pirrie, 2020; Scott et al., 2015). Our study demonstrates that international students encounter similar challenges in employment across different country contexts.

However, it is important to note that the language barriers identified in our study differ from those reported in studies conducted in English-speaking countries. None of the students we interviewed

perceived English language skills as a barrier to obtaining employment in Finland, as was the case in Australia, Canada, and the UK (Arkoudis et al., 2009; Scott et al., 2015). A large number of degree programmes are offered in English (in addition to Finnish and Swedish) at Finnish universities, which are typically chosen by international students. However, our interviews revealed that Finnish language proficiency was explicitly or implicitly required by employers in company recruitment processes. As one participant experienced, only a small fraction of job advertisements were in English. This points to the fact that international students need to be proficient in Finnish language in order to gain employment, in addition to the English proficiency they should possess to complete their study in universities. This indicates the importance of host country language ability for the integration process of international students, despite the prevalence of English as a business lingua franca (Kankaanranta and Lu, 2013). Our findings echo the crucial role of language skills posited in immigration literature (Hajro, et al., 2019; Zorlu and Hartog, 2018). For instance, Zorlu and Hartog (2018) demonstrated that Dutch language ability significantly relates to various socioeconomic integration outcomes, having a substantial impact on the economy and the subjective well-being of immigrants.

A further challenge we identified is that many international students found it difficult to dedicate sufficient time and effort to learn the Finnish language alongside their academic studies and job search. Due to the significant linguistic and cultural differences between Finnish and English, attaining a proficient level for work purposes requires a substantial amount of time (U.S. Department of State, 2023). Our findings also indicate that the Finnish language courses offered at universities often fail to meet the language requirements of recruiters. Moreover, the generally high level of English proficiency in Finland (EF, 2022) and the highly internationalised education in Finnish universities offer limited opportunities for international students to practice Finnish. Consequently, the language skills acquired from Finnish courses often remain passive and may even be forgotten over time.

This lack of Finnish proficiency puts international students/graduates at a disadvantage when competing with native Finns for employment opportunities (see Li, 2019). None of the participants we interviewed obtained a job that required Finnish language skills. It highlights the disconnect between immigration policies, higher education, and the business world. These findings have broader implications for other non-native English-speaking countries, emphasising the crucial role of host country language skills in achieving successful integration into the host society. This speaks to the need for accommodation from employers and additional support from universities, which will be further elaborated in the recommendations section.

The findings of our study largely align with previous research on the employment challenges faced by international students in Finland, such as Finnish language barriers, limited access to job information, and lack of awareness regarding Finnish work culture and social networks (Li, 2019; Shumilova et al., 2012). It is worth noting that our findings indicate the persistence of these challenges over time, suggesting that international students continue to encounter these issues. Additionally, our study uncovered the communication gaps from recruiting companies to international students regarding their job applications, which further compounded the difficulties in their job search. Our study also identified important nuances such as company recruitment and job postings, the dilemma between English-medium programmes offered in universities and the need for national language proficiency in workplaces, and the areas of additional support from universities. Furthermore, the variations of career opportunities across sectors and emphasis on well-being in Finnish workplaces are novel findings. Although Finland has implemented a number of national policies to promote integration of immigrants to tackle the problem of labour shortage, the potential of international students as valuable human capital remains underutilised. This again highlights a missing link between national policies, workplace practices, and higher education for the workforce integration of international students (Scott et al., 2015).

Regarding recruitment diversity, our study revealed two contrasting experiences among international students. Of the four participants who secured jobs, three of them were in the IT and digital sectors, and their employers operated with English as the company language. None of the four employers required Finnish language skills in the recruitment process. Furthermore, these companies' diverse work environments and emphasis on employee well-being contributed to the participants' strong sense of integration in the workplace. As suggested by Hajro et al. (2019), societal, individual, and organisational factors play a role in coping and acculturation models, ultimately impacting integration success. However, many of the students we interviewed perceived the Finnish workforce as impenetrable and lacking diversity in recruitment practices. They specifically mentioned companies that claimed to use English as the corporate language but still posted job advertisements in Finnish. We argue that in addition to national immigration policies, organisations need to foster inclusive environments and implement cultural diversity practices, starting from the recruitment stage (Hajro et al., 2019; Valenzuela et al., 2020; see also Blackmore and Rahimi, 2019). The companies where four of our participants experienced successful integration serve as examples of employers who have embraced cultural diversity in their recruitment practices and created inclusive environments in the workplace.

The findings of our study, along with the preceding discussion, underscore the central thesis of the two-way integration process proposed in acculturation theory (Berry, 2005; Sam and Berry, 2006). Integration involves reciprocal changes within various cultural groups in the broader society, necessitating adaptations from both international students and host country stakeholders (including employers, recruiters, and educational institutions). The participants in our interviews expressed their desire and willingness to be part of the workforce, as well as their openness to adapting to Finnish culture and the employment system. Simultaneously, companies and recruiters need to recognise and embrace the diverse potential of the international students/graduates entering the labour market. However, as revealed by our study, the interviewed students experienced the difficulty/unwillingness of employers to recognise and embrace their diverse culture and language backgrounds. They felt themselves excluded from the labour market and as being 'outsiders' of society. This suggests that the reality does not necessarily concur with the desired mutual adaptations as suggested by theory.

We contend that the successful transition of international students into working life has the most significant impact on their integration journey. This aspect of integration is crucial as it positively influences other aspects of their lives and overall adjustment to the host country (Valenzuela et al., 2020). Integrating international students into the workplace provides them with more opportunities to engage with the local language, culture, and social and professional networks. This, in turn, can enhance their integration experience and facilitate the adaptation process. Furthermore, it has positive effects on equality, well-being, and harmonious relations between different cultural groups, thereby strengthening the social fabric of the country.

Recommendations

Recommendations for employers and recruiters

We recommend that companies and recruiters actively embrace diversity in their recruitment practices and maintain open and transparent communication throughout the process. Companies should proactively recruit a diverse talent pool, treating international students with the same consideration as their domestic counterparts. In order to foster a diverse and inclusive environment, companies should recognise and appreciate cultural differences and acknowledge the experiences international students bring from their home countries. Additionally, maintaining communication with international applicants during the recruitment process is essential.

Our findings revealed that several participants did not receive any response from recruiting companies, which can be disheartening and discouraging. Offering constructive feedback on areas for improvement can have a significant positive impact on individuals seeking to enter the host country workforce.

Job advertisements should clearly state the required language(s). When a job posting in Finnish only mentions that English is required, it leaves applicants uncertain whether the use of Finnish in the posting was unintentional or if it implies that Finnish proficiency is also necessary. If Finnish is not required for the position, job advertisements should be in English and explicitly state that Finnish proficiency is not necessary.

Moreover, when Finnish language skills are needed, it is important to provide an explanation of why and at what level they are required. There may be positions where understanding written documents in Finnish would be sufficient, even if the applicant is not fluent in speaking the language. Transparently communicating the reasons behind the language requirements demonstrates a commitment to diversity by not excluding non-Finnish speakers as such. Being mindful of these subtle yet important factors can ensure that companies and recruiters actively recruit diverse candidates by clearly communicating about the language and other requirements.

Recommendations for higher education institutions

We recommend that higher education institutions organise events and career fairs where English is the primary language, specifically targeting non-Finnish-speaking students. These initiatives can create an environment conducive to the needs of international students. Furthermore, universities should offer comprehensive courses on the entire job application process, including CV writing, case studies, commonly used tests, and culturally appropriate interview tips. Additional career support should be allocated to fields with higher entry thresholds where the recruitment process is more competitive, involving various tests, simulated teamwork, and multiple interview rounds with different stakeholders.

Universities can facilitate networking opportunities with companies genuinely interested in recruiting international talent. Engaging alumni and guest lecturers from relevant professional fields can help bridge the gap between international students and industries. Moreover, universities can provide guidance on where to search for job opportunities, especially in a job market characterised by hidden networks.

Language courses should be more robust and tailored towards career goals. The courses should be more oriented to practical use of the language. In addition to regular language courses, universities can organise intensive courses for students aiming to apply for jobs that require proficiency in the host country language. These courses should effectively equip students with the necessary language skills before they enter the job market.

By actively engaging with companies and focusing on the employment experiences of international students, universities can establish themselves as culturally aware institutions that promote diversity. Additionally, universities will expand their professional networks through collaborations with organisations, further enhancing their academic reputation.

Conclusion, limitations, and future research

Our study examined the employment integration of international students in Finland. Through qualitative in-depth interviews, we identified several major challenges faced by international students, including a lack of information about the labour market, unfamiliarity with recruitment practices, limited connections to industries, and language barriers (specifically, the Finnish language). Participants in our study also perceived a lack of openness in the job market and poor communication from recruiting companies. The positive experiences reported regarded the work culture in Finnish companies, which

prioritise employee well-being, maintain a good work–life balance, and promote inclusion in the workplace. Additionally, we found that international students had relatively easier access to employment opportunities in the IT and digital sectors, where English is widely used.

The study contributes to the existing literature on international student integration by highlighting that international students face similar employment challenges across various country contexts, expanding our understanding beyond traditionally dominant English-speaking destinations. Additionally, the current study extends our knowledge of the experiences of international students' integration in non-native English-speaking countries. It highlights a disconnect between immigration policies, international higher education, and the business world, which impedes the career prospects of international students. Subsequently, their potential as valuable human capital cannot be effectively utilised by the host country. Thus, the current research contributes to the increasing need to move beyond the rhetoric and involve all stakeholders of international education in employment integration. Our study has special implications for non-native English-speaking countries where international students pursue higher education in English medium programmes, yet employers often require host country language skills which international students are often lacking, thereby disadvantaging international students seeking employment. We argue for greater diversity in recruitment practices among companies and increased support from universities to facilitate the transition of international students into the workforce.

It is important to acknowledge that our study primarily reflects the perspectives of international students, meaning that our study was limited to interviewing only students, and therefore the views from employers/recruiters and the university were not heard. Future research should consider exploring the viewpoints of companies and universities to gain a holistic understanding of employment integration from multiple stakeholders. Notably, delving into employer perspective is imperative. Examining how companies themselves perceive international students/graduates and their concerns regarding their employment would shed additional light on the integration challenges. Additionally, investigating employers that have successfully recruited international students and graduates could provide valuable insights into best practices for managing cultural diversity and promoting inclusion in the workplace, which in turn enhances the overall integration of international students in the host country society. Engaging employers/recruiters, education institutions, and public organisations in research could further heighten the awareness and appreciation of international students, thereby advancing multiculturalism not only within the employment domain but also in the wider society.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that the uncertainty resulting from COVID-19 was pronounced during the research period. Although the impact of COVID-19 was not originally part of our study design, it proved unavoidable. The impact of this was twofold. Firstly, based on our interviews, COVID-19 exerted an additional negative effect on international student employment opportunities because many companies halted their recruitment processes and job fairs were cancelled. This implies that the external environment, especially the economic situation, can have an additional impact on international student employment integration. This role of external factors should be considered in future research. Secondly, the interviews being conducted online might have impacted the responses. At this time, online meetings were not as prevalent as they are today, making conversation less natural than it might have been in person, possibly limiting the information we obtained. Although online communication is much more common at present days, we believe that in-person meetings are still important for establishing rapport with participants when conducting in-depth interviews to obtain rich data.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iDs

Wei Lu  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0783-5436>

Tayla Everson Harkala  <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-6962-3363>

References

- Ager A and Strang A (2008) Understanding integration: a conceptual framework. *Journal of Refugee Studies* 21(2): 166–191.
- Arkoudis S, Hawthorne L, Baik C, et al. (2009) *The Impact of English Language Proficiency and Workplace Readiness on Employment Outcomes and Performance of Tertiary International Students*. Melbourne: Centre for the Study of Higher Education, University of Melbourne, 45.
- Berry JW (1997) Immigration, acculturation, and adaptation. *Applied Psychology: An International Review* 46(1): 5–68.
- Berry JW (2005) Acculturation: living successfully in two cultures. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 29(6): 697–712.
- Berry JW and Ward C (2016) Multiculturalism. In: Sam DL and Berry JW (eds) *The Cambridge Handbook of Acculturation Psychology*. 2nd edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 441–463.
- Berry JW, Phinney JS, Sam DL, et al. (2006) Immigrant youth: acculturation, identity, and adaptation. *Applied Psychology* 55(3): 303–332.
- Blackmore J and Rahimi M (2019) How ‘best fit’ excludes international graduates from employment in Australia: a Bourdeusian perspective. *Journal of Education and Work* 32(5): 436–448.
- Booth AL, Leigh A and Varganova E (2012) Does ethnic discrimination vary across minority groups? Evidence from a field experiment. *Oxford Bulletin of Economics & Statistics* 74(4): 547–573.
- Braun V and Clarke V (2006) Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3(2): 77–101.
- Cameron R, Farivar F and Coffey J (2019) International graduates host country employment intentions and outcomes: evidence from two Australian universities. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management* 41(5): 550–568.
- Coffey J, Farivar F and Cameron R (2021) The job seeking experiences of international graduates in the host country: Australia’s lost opportunity? *International Journal of Human Resource Management* 32(4): 846–870.
- Dentakos S, Wintre M, Chavoshi S, et al. (2017) Acculturation motivation in international student adjustment and permanent residency intentions: a mixed-methods approach. *Emerging Adulthood* 5(1): 27–41.
- EF (2022) *EF English Proficiency Index*. Lund: EF Education First. Available at: <https://www.ef.com/assetscdn/WIBlwq6RdJvcD9bc8RMd/cefcom-epi-site/reports/2022/ef-epi-2022-english.pdf> (accessed 27 May 2023).
- Fakunle O and Pirrie A (2020) International students’ reflections on employability development opportunities during a one-year masters-level program in the UK. *Journal of International Students* 10(S2): 86–100.
- Finnish Government (2023) *Comprehensive reform of Integration Act will speed up integration and employment of immigrants*. Helsinki: Finnish Government. Available at: <https://valtioneuvosto.fi/en/-/1410877/comprehensive-reform-of-integration-act-will-speed-up-integration-and-employment-of-immigrants> (accessed 25 April 2023).
- Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare (2020) *Ageing policy*. Helsinki: Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare. Available at: <https://thl.fi/en/web/ageing/ageing-policy> (accessed 12 March 2023).
- Finnish National Agency for Education (2018) *Facts Express: What Brought Students to Finland, How Do They Find Studying Here?* Helsinki: Finnish National Agency for Education.

- Finnish National Agency for Education (2019) *Facts Express: Knowledge, Skills and Open-Mindedness*. Helsinki: Report for Finnish National Agency for Education.
- Guest G, Bunce A and Johnson L (2006) How many interviews are enough? An experiment with data saturation and variability. *Field Methods* 18(1): 59–82.
- Hajro A, Stahl GK, Clegg CC, et al. (2019) Acculturation, coping, and integration success of international skilled migrants: an integrative review and multilevel framework. *Human Resource Management Journal* 29(3): 328–352.
- Hawthorne L (2010) How valuable is “two-step migration”? Labor market outcomes for international student migrants to Australia. *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal* 19(1): 5–36.
- Hennink MM, Kaiser BN and Marconi VC (2017) Code saturation versus meaning saturation: how many interviews are enough? *Qualitative Health Research* 27(4): 591–608.
- Hou F, Crossman E and Picot G (2020) *Two-step Immigration Selection: An Analysis of its Expansion in Canada*. Ottawa: Statistics Canada.
- Institute of International Education (2023) *Project Atlas Finland*. New York: Institute of International Education. Available at: <https://www.iie.org/research-initiatives/project-atlas/explore-data/finland-2/> (accessed 12 March 2023).
- James K and Otsuka S (2009) Racial biases in recruitment by accounting firms: the case of international Chinese applicants in Australia. *Critical Perspectives on Accounting* 20(4): 469–491.
- Jokila S, Kallio J and Mikkilä-Erdmann M (2019) From crisis to opportunities: justifying and persuading national policy for international student recruitment. *European Journal of Higher Education* 9(4): 393–411.
- Kankaanranta A and Lu W (2013) The evolution of English as the business lingua franca: signs of convergence in Chinese and Finnish professional communication. *Journal of Business and Technical Communication* 27(3): 288–307.
- Lashari SA, Kaur A and Awang-Hashim R (2018) Home away from home—the role of social support for international students’ adjustment. *Malaysian Journal of Learning and Instruction* 15(2): 33–54.
- Li HW (2019) *The Journey of a Thousand Miles: Chinese Student Migration and Integration in Finland and Germany*. Dissertation, Tampere University, Tampere, Finland.
- Martirosyan NM, Bustamante RM and Saxon DP (2019) Academic and social support services for international students: current practices. *Journal of International Students* 9(1): 172–191.
- Mathies C and Karhunen H (2021) Do they stay or go? Analysis of international students in Finland. *Globalisation, Societies and Education* 19(3): 298–310.
- Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment of Finland (2023) *Integration of immigrants*. Helsinki: Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment of Finland. Available at: <https://tem.fi/en/integration-of-immigrants> (accessed 12 March 2023).
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2001) *The well-being of Nations: the role of human and social capital*. Paris: OECD Publishing.
- Patton MQ (2014) *Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods: Integrating Theory and Practice*. Thousand Oaks: Sage publications.
- Pedersen P (1994) *The Five Stages of Culture shock: Critical Incidents Around the World*. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO.
- Pham T, Bao D, Saito E, et al. (2018) Employability of international students: strategies to enhance their experience on work-integrated learning (WIL) programs. *Journal of Teaching and Learning for Graduate Employability* 9(1): 62–83.
- Pitkänen V, Välimäki M, Niemi KM, et al. (2023) International students in Finland: studies, everyday life, employment and plans for the future. Helsinki: International Talent Finland Research Project.
- Plaut VC, Garnett FG, Buffardi LE, et al. (2011) What about me? Perceptions of exclusion and whites’ reactions to multiculturalism. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 101: 337–353.

- Rilla N, Deschryvere M, Oksanen J et al. (2018) *Immigrants in the innovation economy—lessons from Austria, Canada, Denmark and The Netherlands*. Helsinki: Prime Minister's Office.
- Saldaña J (2021) *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*. Tempe: Arizona State University.
- Sam DL and Berry JW (2006) *The Cambridge Handbook of Acculturation Psychology*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Scott C, Safdar S, Desai Trilokekar R, et al. (2015) International Students as 'Ideal Immigrants' in Canada: a disconnect between policy makers' assumptions and the lived experiences of international students. *Comparative and International Education* 43(3): 5.
- Shumilova Y, Cai Y and Pekkola E (2012) *Employability of International Graduates Educated in Finnish Higher Education Institutions*. Helsinki: University of Helsinki.
- Silverman D (2021) *Doing Qualitative Research*. London: Sage Publications Ltd.
- Smith RA and Khawaja NG (2011) A review of the acculturation experiences of international students. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 35(6): 699–713.
- Statista (2023) *Population of Finland from 2012 to 2022, by language*. Hamburg: Statista. Available at: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/529490/population-of-finland-by-language/> (accessed 12 March 2023).
- U.S. Department of State (2023) *FSI's Experience with Language Learning*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of State. Available at: <https://www.state.gov/foreign-language-training/> (accessed 27 May 2023).
- Valenzuela MA, Flinchbaugh C and Rogers SE (2020) Can organizations help adjust? the effect of perceived organizational climate on immigrants' acculturation and consequent effect on perceived fit. *Journal of International Management* 26(3): 100775.
- Ward C and Kennedy A (1994) Acculturation strategies, psychological adjustment, and sociocultural competence during cross-cultural transitions. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 18(3): 329–343.
- Ward C, Bochner S and Furnham A (2001) *The Psychology of Culture Shock*. Philadelphia: Routledge.
- Ward C, Gale J, Staerklé C, et al. (2018) Immigration and multiculturalism in context: a framework for psychological research. *Journal of Social Issues* 74(4): 833–855.
- Zorlu A and Hartog J (2018) *The Impact of Language on Socioeconomic Integration of Immigrants*. Bonn: IZA Institute of Labor Economics.

Author biographies

Wei Lu, PhD, works as a post-doc researcher at Aalto University School of Business, Finland. Her research interests include several areas such as international student experience (satisfaction, language and communication, cross-cultural adaptation, and integration), international human resource management (transfer and localisation of human resource management practices in multinational corporations), English communication in multinational corporations, and internationalisation strategies of Finnish companies in China.

Tayla Everson Härkälä works as Senior Global Mobility Associate at Wolt Enterprises Oy, Finland. Previously, she has worked as Global Mobility Advisor at EY Finland.