



Developing Intercultural Competence Through Student Organisation Activities: Case Study on ESN Laurea

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**Developing Intercultural Competence Through
Student Organisation Activities:
Case Study on ESN Laurea**

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The goal of the thesis was to analyse the implementation of intercultural competence in the operation and activities of ESN Laurea. ESN Laurea is a student organisation within Laurea University of Applied Sciences and serves as the case company for this thesis. It is a local section of the Erasmus Student Network, and the youngest section of ESN Finland. Having remained in the organisation for the longest amount of time out of its members, the author of this thesis has hands-on experience and knowledge about the organisation's history and operation that proved to be useful for the development of this thesis.

The main research method implemented was the qualitative semi-structured interview with open-ended questions. The interview aimed to survey Laurea and its student bodies' impact on student life, with participants being former international exchange and degree students of Laurea from academic years 2015 to 2018. The focus of this interview was the social aspect of the participants' student career at Laurea.

With the interview outcome analysed, a long-term condensed action plan for ESN Laurea was developed, containing two parts representing two aspects in need of improvement for the organisation. The outcome of this thesis can be used as a reference point for the organisation and its future boards, in the process of further developing ESN Laurea and its operation as part of Laurea University of Applied Sciences and the Erasmus generation.

Keywords: Intercultural competence, student organisation, Erasmus Student Network

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1 Introduction

When it comes to the European Union (EU), mobility has always been one of its strong points. The abolition of border control between member countries allows their citizens to freely travel and choose where they study, work, and even reside. The single market economic engine and equality between member countries' citizens in employment, social security, and tax purposes, further strengthen the freedom of movement, delivering a peaceful, stable, and prosperous united region. (European Union 2021.)

As the world is growing more into multiculturalism through mobility, the ability to communicate and understand people from other cultures appears as an essential skill in the modern age, which is called intercultural competence. The Erasmus Student Network, a Europe-wide student organisation, promotes intercultural competence through its value of "unity in diversity, diversity in unity" (Erasmus Student Network 2021).

ESN Laurea is a student organisation within Laurea University of Applied Sciences and serves as the case company for this thesis. It is a local section of the Erasmus Student Network (abbreviated ESN), and as of May 2021, is the youngest section among the 16 sections of ESN Finland. The organisation promotes mobility, social inclusion, and aims to create a better student life experience by breaking barriers between native and international students. ESN Laurea works closely with the Laurea International Affairs Office and student union Laureamko, its main partners, in the planning of activities and the orientation for international students.

The goal of the thesis was to analyse and look for the implementation of intercultural competence in the operation and activities of ESN Laurea, and its cooperation with other bodies within Laurea University of Applied Sciences. The author of this thesis, as of May 2021, has spent more than three years working in ESN Laurea, taking on multiple key positions of the board, including the position of Local President for more than one year. Having remained in the organisation for the longest amount of time out of its members, the author of this thesis has hands-on experience and knowledge about the organisation's history and operation. As such, a detailed overview was obtained, further helping the development of the thesis.

The main research method implemented in this thesis is the qualitative semi-structured interview with open-ended questions. The interview aimed to survey Laurea and its student bodies' impact on student life, with participants being former exchange and degree students of Laurea from academic years 2015 to 2018. The focus of this interview is the social aspect of the participants' student career in Laurea, with questions related to the three bodies of Laurea, Laureamko, ESN Laurea regarding their own experience during the time they studied

at Laurea. The interview does not concern the ex-students' academic aspect. Using the outcome from the interviews as a reference point, the author of the thesis will attempt to develop a long-term action plan for ESN Laurea, including specific focus points to improve on the current activities and operation of the organisation to enhance the experience of future Laurea international students.

2 Intercultural competence

According to Berardo (2005), intercultural competence is “the capacity to interact efficiently and appropriately in a variety of intercultural situations by successfully utilising one’s intercultural resources (e.g., knowledge, skills, awareness and attitude)”. In other words, it is the ability to communicate with people from other cultures without conflict and to understand them on the basis of their value system. To develop intercultural competence is to acquire knowledge, further developing the ability to empathise, and be able to adapt flexibly to new intercultural situations. Through extensive research on the nature of intercultural competence, it can be broken down into four main components shown in table 1 below (Huber & Reynolds. 2014.)

Component	Traits
Attitudes	Valuing, respecting, being open to learn and empathise with different cultures, backgrounds, viewpoints, practices; questioning the commonly accepted “norms” based on logic, acquired information and personal experience; accepting the uncertainty; taking initiative in interacting and cooperating with people from foreign backgrounds.
Knowledge and understanding	Understanding and being aware of different cultures’ own diversity, as well as perceptions, stereotypes, and deep-rooted discriminations; acknowledging the power of language and its impact on different culture groups, leading to awareness in communication and interaction that different phrases and actions can mean different things for different people; getting familiar with common usages of practices, spoken languages, and behaviours of different cultural groups; understanding that everything is a social construct, from culture, thoughts, to behaviour.

Skills	Multiperspectivity, putting self in a different perspective, stepping back from own point of view to evaluate another; looking for other cultural affiliations and understanding them as well as correlating them to one's own; empathy and compassion, being able to comprehend and respond to foreign ideas, thoughts, and feelings; cognitive flexibility, adapting a separate viewpoint based on the circumstance; critical thinking and evaluating of different cultural ideas and customs in relation with one's own; adapting to a new environment; (multi)linguistic, sociolinguistic and discourse skills; and mediating skills in intercultural exchanges.
Actions	Be exposed to different cultures and perspectives and having appropriate and respectful behaviours towards them; cooperating with people from foreign cultures while challenging verbal and non-verbal actions against human rights regardless of cultural affiliations; exposing, challenging prejudice and discrimination against specific groups; promoting positivism in a society of multiculturalism.

Table 1: The components of intercultural competence (Huber, J., Reynolds, C. 2014)

3 Erasmus Student Network

3.1 About Erasmus Student Network

As stated in the ESN Wiki - ESN Knowledge and Information Platform (2021), "Erasmus Student Network (ESN) is the biggest student association in Europe. It was born on the 16th October 1989 and legally registered in 1990 for supporting and developing student exchange." The history of the organisation starts with the approval for a plan to establish a higher education mobility scheme by the European Community, one of which is the Erasmus programme, enabling students the chance to experience part of their studies outside of their home countries.

16th of October 1989 marked the birth of the first ESN section in Utrecht, The Netherlands. The number of sections within the network continued to increase all over Europe and October 1990 marked the foundation of ESN International in Copenhagen, Denmark, making it a legal association. The first president of the network, Desiree Majoor, was also from Utrecht. (Erasmus Student Network 2021.)

As of 2020, ESN is present in more than 1,000 Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) from 42 countries (figure 1), with Albania and Moldova being the latest members to join the network.

There are six main fields in which ESN focuses on culture, education and youth, environmental sustainability, health and well-being, skills and employability, and social inclusion. With more than 15,000 volunteers in 530 local sections, ESN is the gateway of help for more than 350,000 international students each year. (Erasmus Student Network 2021.)

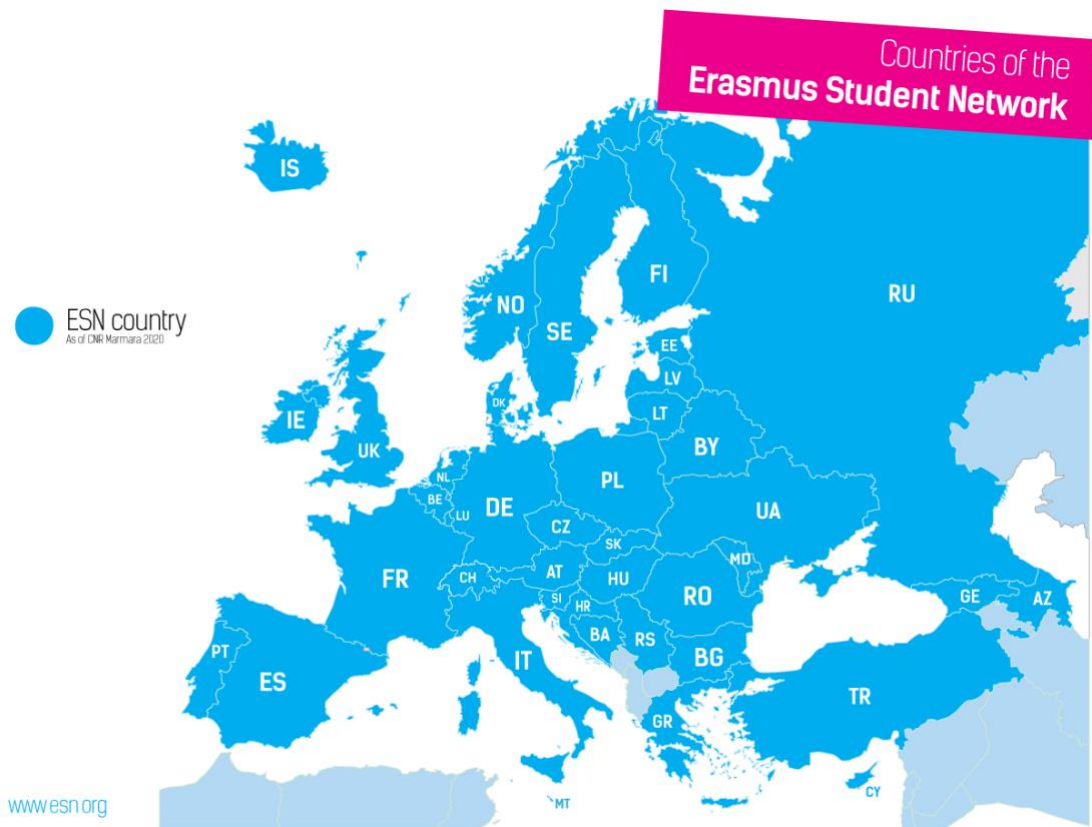


Figure 1: Countries of the Erasmus Student Network (Erasmus Student Network 2021)

The mission of ESN, as described in the ESN Wiki, is “Enrichment of society through international students.” International students are the focus of ESN's efforts. It aims to promote international students' social and practical integration, advocate for their voices from the local to the international level. ESN encourages students to participate in mobility programmes, offers information on how to join them, and assists students in reintegration after their return from overseas. As such, it has a direct impact on the enhancement of the programmes. ESN's vision by 2025 is to become the Erasmus Generation's global network, dedicated to enhancing international education, offering youth opportunities, as well as promoting intercultural competence for a better society. Its strategic priorities include empowering students and volunteers through skills and activities, increase the quantity and quality of exchange programmes, establish strong visibility and outreach with a recognisable brand, making activities and services available for all students to ensure inclusivity, and improving a more interconnected and self-sustainable network. (ESN Wiki 2021.)

When talking about the values of the Erasmus Student Network, “students helping students” has been a significant phrase, dated back to the establishment of the network. Other values include “unity in diversity, diversity in the unity”, “fun in friendship and respect”, “international dimension of the life”, “love for Europe as an area of peace and cultural exchange”, “openness and tolerance”, and “cooperation in the integration”. These are important phrases that all ESN members represent and stand for. (ESN Wiki 2021.)

Structure

To be able to achieve the aims of the organisation, as well as fulfill our mission and vision, and uphold our values, ESN is structured on three levels: local, national and international.

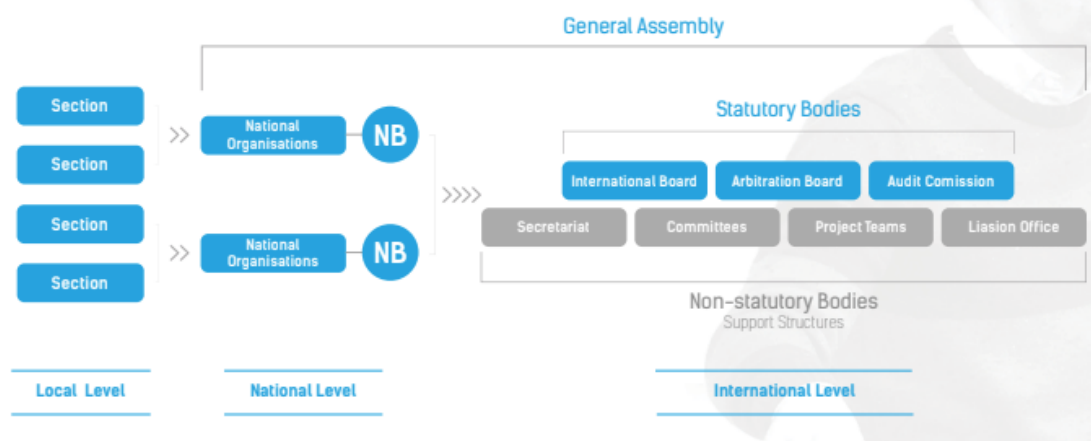


Figure 2: Structure of ESN (Erasmus Student Network Annual Report 2019/2020 2021, 32)

The structure of ESN is complex but can be divided into three main levels: local, national, and international levels (figure 2). The local level is what students are most familiar with. It includes the 534 local ESN sections of the network, who work directly with the students by organising events and support them with the process of participating in mobility programmes. Each local section represents students in one or more HEIs, usually in one city. Depending on the size of the HEIs themselves, local sections can cover from a single university campus to an entire city. Because of the different coverage scope, local sections also do not operate similarly. The difference is also more apparent in Finland, where each HEI is supported by their respective student union, which forms two different student networks: Suomen opiskelijakuntien liitto (SAMOK) or University of Applied Sciences Students in Finland, and Suomen ylioppilaskuntien liitto (SYL) or National Union of University Students in Finland. As the result, local ESN sections in Finland are not the sole student bodies in their respective HEIs. (ESN Finland 2021.)

The national level of ESN consists of ESN National Organisations (NO in short), which are described as “full member organisations of ESN based in EHEA countries in which there is, at least, one official section” (ESN Wiki 2021). Each NO is represented by their respective National Board, which oversees, manages, and supports the local sections. The National Board election, among other national matters, are discussed during the National Assembly (previously National Platform), organised bi-annually in the case of ESN Finland with the presence of all local sections. The national level also includes many support positions who, as the name suggests, support the work of their National Board. In ESN Finland, these positions are National Coordinators, Arbitration Board, Working Groups which will be further explored in the next section. As ESN’s coverage is vast, with 42 countries all around Europe, it is also divided into five different regions, each organises its own Regional Platform every year. The five regions, as shown in figure 3, are:

Regional Platform	Abbreviation	Members	Member countries
Central European Platform	CEP	10	Austria, Belarus, Croatia, Czech Republic, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Ukraine
Northern European Platform	NEP	8	Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Estonia, Latvia, and Russia
South-Eastern European Platform	SEEP	11	Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Romania, Serbia, Turkey, Albania, and Moldova
South-Western European Platform	SWEP	5	France, Italy, Spain, Portugal, and Malta
Western European Platform	WEP	8	United Kingdom, Ireland, Germany, Liechtenstein, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Luxembourg, and Belgium

Table 2: ESN's Regional Platforms (ESN Wiki 2021)



Figure 3: ESN's Regional Platforms (ESN Wiki 2021)

The final and most complex level of ESN is the international level. It is divided into statutory and non-statutory bodies, as shown in figure 2 above. Statutory bodies include the International Board, the representatives of ESN International, which consists of five volunteers holding the positions of President, Vice-President, Treasurer, Communication Manager, and Web Project Administrator. They are supported by the Audit Commission who takes charge of ESN's internal audit, and the Arbitration Board who assists the solving disputes as well as document interpretation. Statutory bodies are elected during the General Assembly (GA), the highest decision-making body of ESN International, which is organised twice per year. On the other hand, non-statutory bodies do not require elections. Their roles vary from supporting the network, International Board, and national organisations to developing and working on internal projects. They include the International Committees (five committees supporting the Network and International Board), International Project Teams (ESN's five main project teams), Network Care Team (supporting the national organisations), Membership Team (supporting the candidate organisations), and Liaison Office (supporting ESN's external representation). (ESN Wiki 2020.)

3.2 Erasmus Student Network Finland

The history of ESN Finland dated back to the 1990s when SYL invited an ESN advocate to one of its seminars. In 1993, ESN HYY, which is known nowadays as ESN Uni Helsinki, officially became the first local ESN section in Finland. One year later in 1994, the first Annual General Meeting (the previous highest decision-making body of ESN, replaced by General Assembly after 2019) in Finland was also held in Helsinki. During the following years, more cities joined the ESN Finland network and in 2009, the first official National Board was elected. ESN Finland's buddy countries are ESN the Netherlands and to an extent, ESN Russia. As of May 2021, ESN Finland consists of sixteen local sections, spread across eight cities within the country (figure 4). Helsinki is the city with the biggest number of sections, being the five: ESN Uni Helsinki, ESN Aalto, ESN Helga, ESN Metropolia, and ESN Laurea. The cities of Tampere and Turku each contain two sections (ESN FINT and ESN INTO Tampere; ESN Uni Turku and ESN Åbo Akademi). The other five sections are each located in Joensuu (ESN Joensuu), Vaasa (ESN Vaasa), Kuopio (ESN KISA), Oulu (ESN Oulu), and Rovaniemi (ESN Lapland). (ESN Wiki 2021.)



Figure 4: The local sections of ESN Finland (ESN Wiki 2021)

ESN Finland has two main partner groups: institutional partners and commercial partners. The institutional partners include the Finnish Ministry of Education, Finnish Youth Cooperation - Alianssi, and SYL and SAMOK which were mentioned above. Commercial partners are companies with which ESN Finland has national cooperation agreements. They are Aikamatkat - Timetravels (travel agency), DNA Oy (mobile operator), GLS Finland Oy (logistics company) and to an extent, Tallink Silja Oy (cruise line). (ESN Finland 2021.)

Like many other NOs, the structure of ESN Finland comprises the National Board, Arbitration Board, support and working groups, and the local sections. The National Assembly is the highest decision-making body. It is organised twice every year in the autumn and spring seasons, in which the National Board is elected during the spring editions. The National Events Committee (NEvCo) organises ESN Finland's national and biggest event, the Pirates of the Baltic Sea (PoBS). PoBS is a biannual student pirate ship cruise, in which over 1,000 international students are on board across the Baltic Sea to visit Stockholm, Sweden. The scale of the event has been growing significantly before the COVID-19 pandemic, with the biggest edition including international students from five countries: Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland. Another big national project of ESN Finland is the Flnsight, a series of training events created to "bridging the gap between the section representatives and the National Board" (ESN Finland 2016). As of May 2021, the series has spanned eight different events, covering different topics from "interpersonal skills and well-being", "personal development and human resources" to "leadership of others and oneself". (ESN Finland 2021.)

3.3 ESN Laurea

The author of this thesis, as of May 2021, has spent exactly three years and five months in the organisation, taking multiple board positions including Event Manager, Vice President, Local President, Treasurer and Local Representative. As such, the information written in this chapter reflects the thesis author's experience and observations during their volunteering period. Further information regarding ESN Laurea's foundation was referenced from Sevalneva (2020)'s thesis, one of the co-founders and ex-board members of the organisation.

ESN Laurea ry is one of the sixteen local sections of ESN Finland. ESN Laurea represents Laurea University of Applied Sciences, initially only active in Leppävaara campus in Espoo upon its foundation. Following the recruitment of a board member in the Tikkurila campus (who would later become the current Local President) in Vantaa, ESN Laurea expanded its operation to the campus, officially covering two cities.



Figure 5: ESN Laurea's first logo

ESN Laurea was founded in May 2017 by three Laurea international students, with the aim to bring internationality to Laurea and provide more activities for non-Finnish students. The National Board of ESN Finland 2017-2018 was contacted by the founders about the idea, and subsequently, on the 13th to 15th of October 2017, they participated in ESN Finland's National Platform (abbreviated NB, later renamed National Assembly) Herwanta 2017 in the city of Tampere, where they gave a presentation in front of the local sections and the National Board about the idea of bringing ESN to Laurea. By a unanimous vote from the sixteen sections, ESN Laurea was approved as a Candidate Section. As the ESN sections had the tradition to represent themselves with animal mascots, Cornelius the Unicorn was chosen as ESN Laurea's mascot and made its appearance in the first logo of the section (figure 5).

Around this time, the author of the thesis, being a classmate of two co-founders at the time, expressed interest in becoming part of the organisation after getting to know about ESN Laurea's causes. After the winter break, in January 2018, the author joined ESN Laurea as an active member, marking the start of their ESN career which would last till this very day, without any signs of stopping. ESN Laurea made an appearance at The Shadow Freshman Party Spring 2018 (Varjofuksiaiset in Finnish), part of the Freshmen Party organised every semester by the student union Laureamko, in Leppävaara campus as a task point holder. This marked the thesis author's first ESN event as an organiser.



Figure 6: ESN Laurea's first official board at NP lappeen Ranta (ESN Finland 2018)

During the following months, ESN Laurea organised three more events independently, including the Estonia Trip, Nuuksio Hike & Grill, and Unicorns on Ice, all of which became regular events of the organisation, before attending the following NP of ESN Finland held in Lappeenranta (stylised NP lappeen Ranta). The author of the thesis, along with two co-founders and another new member made up the delegate team for the section (figure 6). NP lappeen Ranta was held from the 9th to 11th of March 2018, during which the ESN Laurea team presented their work for the past months as a Candidate Section to the network. It was here that ESN Laurea received 15 out of 16 approval votes, officially becoming the seventeenth and latest section of ESN Finland. Following NP lappeen Ranta, the organisation contacted the Finnish Patent and Registration Office (Patentti- ja rekisterihallitus in Finnish, abbreviated PRH) to become a Registered association (gaining the suffix ry), with the delegate team named the first official Local Board.

3.3.1 Official status period

As an official member of the Erasmus Student Network, ESN Laurea changed its visual identity with a new logo design, incorporating the ESN star, as well as ESN's five signature colours: pink, cyan, green, orange, and dark blue (figure 7). ESN Laurea gained a number of rights, including the freedom to use the ESN brand, tools, services, and resources; having representatives to attend and/or join ESN Finland and International's events and teams, and receive a vote during the National Assemblies. These rights allow ESN Laurea to establish itself as part of the Erasmus Generation, become a recognised student body within Laurea, and create a direct impact on the experience of the students of Laurea.



Figure 7: ESN Laurea's logo after becoming an official Local Section

During the next academic year, ESN Laurea's activities grew significantly, continuing to improve their presence and impact by being visible at Laurea's orientation days, directly welcoming the freshmen and promoting the organisation and its activities for them. Another perk of being part of ESN Finland is the potential collaboration between existing local sections. The Helsinki Metropolitan region (including the cities of Helsinki, Vantaa, and Espoo), is the most ESN-dense area with five local sections: ESN Uni Helsinki, ESN Aalto, ESN Metropolia, ESN Helga, and now ESN Laurea joining the network. This created a great opportunity for cooperation and mutual support. Together, the five sections organised joint activities as ESN Helsinki, uniting students from five different HEIs. The big network coverage made it easier for ESN Laurea to receive assistance and learning from neighbouring sections during its first official academic year.

The author of the thesis acted as the Vice-President of the section from the beginning of its official status, up until January 2019, when the then-President and co-founder of ESN Laurea resigned. Afterwards, the author of the thesis was elected as the interim President for the remaining of the mandate. Following the ex-President's departure, ESN Laurea continued its operation, organising activities for students while recruiting new members at the same time. Many international students showed interest, and the organisation received a number of active members who would participate in organising the events alongside the board members. In May 2019, ESN Laurea elected a new Local Board with five Board Members. The author of the thesis continued as the Local President, along with the remaining co-founder, now the Treasurer, and three new Board Members taking the roles of Vice President, Communication

Manager and Event Manager. During this mandate, ESN Laurea established an official contract with the student union Laureamko, allowing both parties to promote, co-organise and support each other's events for a more unified Laurea.

One year later, for the mandate 2020-2021, ESN Laurea's board reduced to only three, seeing the departure of two previous Board Members in the Treasurer/remaining co-founder and the Event Manager. The previous Vice President was appointed the new President, with the author of the thesis stepped down to take the roles of the Treasurer and Local Representative, while the Communication Manager continued with their role. As the COVID-19 pandemic hit worldwide, ESN Laurea went on a hiatus, as was the case of many other student organisations. May 2021 marked the departure of the thesis author and final original Board Member, as they moved on to the national level with the newly elected position of Vice President of ESN Finland.

4 Research methods and implementation

The main research method implemented in this thesis is the qualitative semi-structured interview. An interview, as defined by Gillham (2000), is "a conversation, usually between two people. But it is a conversation where one person - the interviewer - is seeking responses for a particular purpose from the other person: the interviewee." The relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee is described as a "controlling one". For interviewing, control is an important factor in the structure management of the process. The structure of the interview, while may vary in flexibility, is always present among seasoned interviewers. An important skill to have is the ability to listen and shift the focus from self to the interviewee. Research interviews are also not bound to a specific style. A good interviewer knows how to combine both interview theories and personal flairs into their work. (Gillham 2000, 4.)

A semi-structured interview, as implemented in the research process of this thesis, consists of open-ended questions. Though an outline and prepared questions are present for the interview, hence it is structured, the interviewer is not necessarily required to strictly follow the said outline. With this method, the interview flow turns into a discussion, which allows a natural conversation to occur between the interviewer and the interviewee. This encourages two-way communication for a comprehensive discussion. As the tone of this interview style is light and casual, the participants' discomfort level can be minimised for an overall better experience. (Doyle 2020.)

Qualitative research, as opposed to quantitative research that focuses on quantities and numbers, are more descriptive and cannot be quantified. When conducting a qualitative research interview, the obtained data is more personal and open. While it is more time-consuming and takes more effort in comparison with quantitative research, with this method, the interviewer gets an insight into the behaviour, opinions, and experiences of the participants. (Taylor 2019.)

4.1 Interview implementation process

As the interview aimed to survey Laurea and its student bodies' impact on student life from 2017 to 2019, during the beginning age of ESN Laurea, participation invitations were sent to two primary groups: former exchange students of Laurea in 2018-2019 academic year, and degree students who started their studies earliest in 2016. The interview invitation message being:

“Hey, how are you doing? It's been a while (smiley emoji). I'm conducting an interview for my thesis about intercultural competence and student organization work, with ESN Laurea as the case study. The interview is meant to target former Laurea students. You can think of this interview as a reflection of your student experience during your exchange at Laurea. It will not only help me graduate but also the future exchange students as we look for ways to improve their experience. Want to be a part of it?”

The author of the thesis was able to recruit ten participants for this interview. The interviews were conducted during a period of seven days within the first two weeks of May 2021. The final interview layout was adjusted and finalised to include a clear structure with five sections (figure 8). The full interview, including eighteen questions in total, can be found in appendix 1.

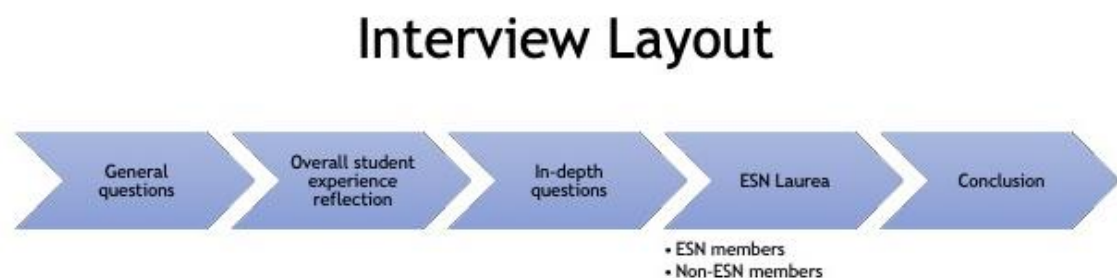


Figure 8: Interview layout

Prior to each interview, the participants were provided with the full interview layout with all questions, the title of the thesis for context, and given a disclaimer about the scope of the interview. The disclaimer wrote: “The focus of this interview is the **social aspect** of the

participant's student career in Laurea, with questions related to Laurea, Laureamko, ESN Laurea and their own experience during their time studying at Laurea. **The interview does not concern the academic aspect.**" The reason for this, as learned during the mock interview, was to guide the participants to the right track and give answers strictly related to the social aspect, which this thesis focuses on. The interviews were carried out in Zoom, with the participants' permission to record.

4.2 Results

The following part showcases the results of the interviews. It is divided into five subparts, equivalent to the five sections within the interview layout.

4.2.1 General questions

The first section gave statistics about the participants' ages, sexes, nationalities, and their student careers at Laurea. It provided an overview of the participant pool, as well as represented a part of Laurea's student demographics.

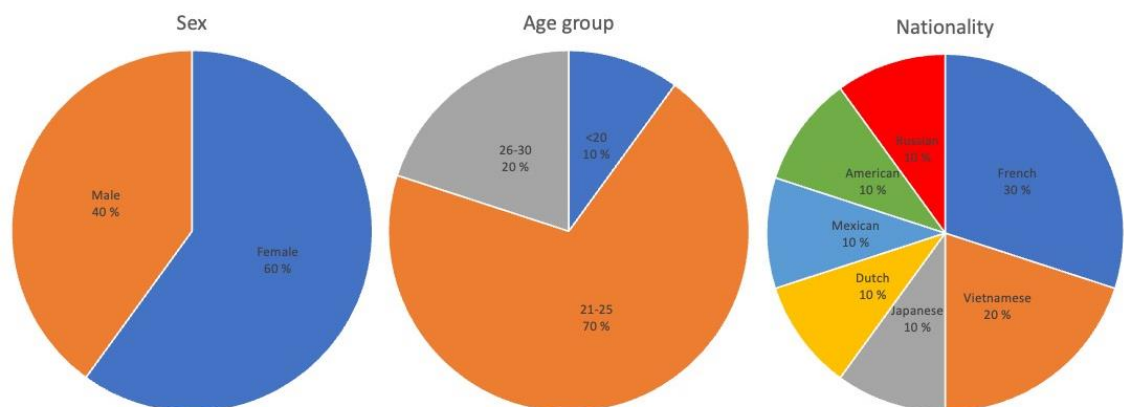


Figure 9: General questions

A total of ten participants were included in the interview process, of which six were female (60%) and four were male (40%). Most of the participants were aged 21-25, taking 70% of the pool, while only 20% were aged 26-30. One sole participant was under 20, making up the rest 10%. When taking nationalities into account, seven different countries were represented in the interview process. 50% of the participants made up of only two nationalities: French with 30%, and Vietnamese with 20%. The rest composed of five other nationalities including Japanese, Dutch, Mexican, American, and Russian, each taking up 10% respectively (figure 9).

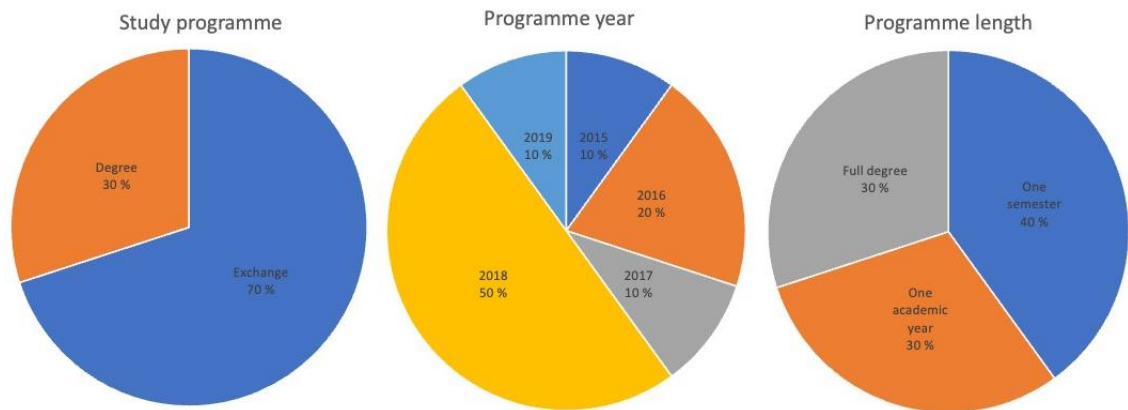


Figure 10: General questions (continued)

All participants included in the interview process attended Laurea studying in English programmes. Exchange students were the majority with 70%, while full-time degree students took up the rest 30%. For the programme length, all degree students stayed for their full degree, which ranged from three and a half years to up to four and a half years. Within the 70% of exchange students, 40% stayed for only one semester, while 30% picked a one-year exchange programme.

A bigger division was shown in the years in which the students started their career in Laurea. The furthest starting year dated back to 2015 with one sole participant (10%), while the majority came to Laurea during 2018, making up half the pool with 50%. 2016 was the second biggest group with 20%, and the rest 20% were equally shared by the 2017 and 2019 groups (figure 10).

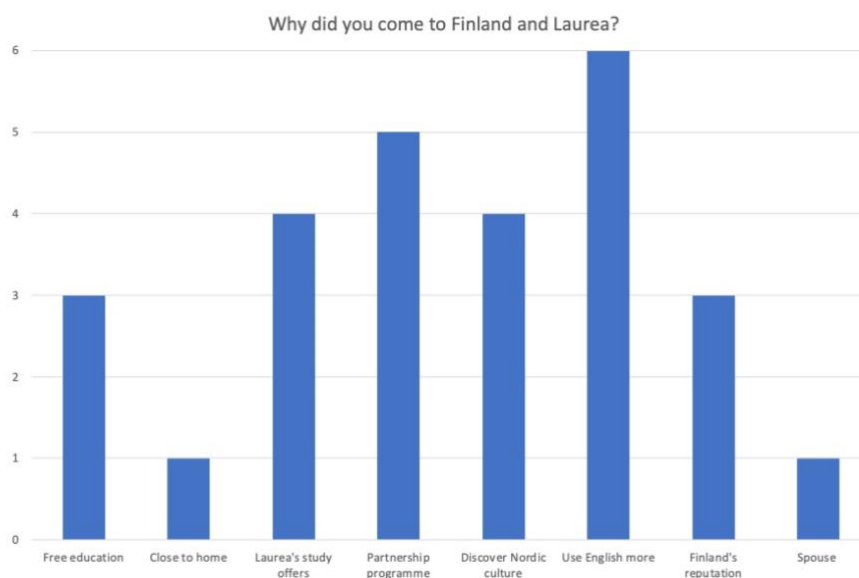


Figure 11: Participants' reasons for coming to Finland and Laurea

The participants were also asked for their reasons for coming to Finland, and more specifically Laurea. Figure 11 shows all the reasons recorded during the interviews and the number of times each of them was mentioned by the participants. Note that all participants listed at least two reasons, resulting in a total count of more than ten in the chart. The answer of “use English more” was the most common, as well as an important answer relative to the topic of this thesis. Other answers also had the tendency to link to one another, with “discover Nordic culture”, “partnership programme” and “Laurea’s study offers” being the main answers among the exchange students. An example of this is from an exchange student, who stated that of all HEIs that had a partnership programme with their home university, they were interested in Laurea because of the available courses, as well as the appeal of the Nordic culture and lifestyle. Most of the exchange students who participated in this interview come from Southern European countries, they wanted to explore Northern Europe. For the degree students, who were primarily non-Europeans, a different set of reasons were recorded including “free education” (only until 2016 for non-Europeans), “close to home”, “Finland’s reputation” and “spouse”.

Apart from these general questions, participants were asked to describe in their own words, the definition of intercultural competence. As it one of the topics of the thesis, this question was an essential opener for the rest of the interview. Participants used different keywords to describe intercultural competence, such as “awareness”, “communication”, “preparedness”, and “understanding” towards different cultures. These terms are in line with the definition of intercultural competence as described in the first part of the thesis, showing that the participants had sufficient knowledge and awareness of the topic. This was further broken down in the following sections of the interview.

4.2.2 Overall student experience reflection

As the title suggested, this section explored the participants’ experiences in Laurea and their reflections on them. The opening question, question number one, was important for the direction of the interview. It helped establish how much each participant knew about Laureamko and ESN Laurea, what their initial impressions were, and whether they could point out the different roles the two organisations played within Laurea. All participants were familiar with Laureamko and ESN Laurea, able to express their thoughts and impressions, at least at the basic level, about the different responsibilities of the two organisations. However, there was also confusion among them, as, during the following questions, some participants got mixed up with the two bodies’ roles and needed the interviewer’s assistance to differentiate between them. The general impressions from the participants showed that Laureamko focused on student union responsibilities and tutoring, while ESN Laurea provided activities and interaction between students with the focus on the international aspect.

Questions two and three gave the interviewer a complete picture of each participant's student career in Laurea, whilst helping them refresh their memories about the experience for the upcoming questions. When asked about the orientation process, the interviewer received mixed answers. Some students were happy with the orientation, stating they received sufficient support from Laurea and the student organisations. The get-to-know activities and city tour made them feel welcome to the city. Other participants felt the whole process was long and packed, with too much going on. One participant described it as "messy" while another skipped the orientation altogether as they felt it was unnecessary. Participants from 2018 and later programmes were also asked to pinpoint the roles of Laurea, Laureamko and ESN Laurea during the start of their Laurea experiences. Again, there were confusions among some of them, but most were able to list the activities corresponding to each body presented. In question three and its sub-questions, the interviewer aimed to discover if students still received enough social support throughout the remaining of their experiences. All participants agreed that they did not receive the same amount of support as their freshman period, with most expressed their understanding that they did not need it as much and help was always available had they needed them. Another point raised by a participant was about the Finnish education system, which was built in a way that forced students to be on their own, both academically and psychologically. Because of this, they had to rely on themselves to find social activities, which was not available all the time nor always suitable for everyone. However, participants did mention ESN Laurea' activities and parties as social support that improved their social life during this time.

Moving on to question four, participants were asked to summarise their student experience in Laurea. Again, there was a big difference between the exchange versus the degree students. All exchange students reported positive experiences, with answers like "fresh air", "best of all my studies", "great experience". Laurea and its organisations were praised for how they made students comfortable, and the big number of activities and events, which were not available in the participants' home universities. The degree students, on the other hand, were not all positive. "It was like a rollercoaster, and I know it was like this for many students, especially international students", one participant claimed. The themes of depression, homesickness, culture shock, and financial stress were common for the degree students. When followed up about the aspects that helped improve their student experience in question five, it was clear that student organisation activities played an essential part. Participants enjoyed the opportunities to socialise and connect with fellow students through recreational and cultural events such as cruise trips, short visits, and parties.

4.2.3 In-depth questions

In this section of the interview, more deep-dive and critical questions were given to the participants. During the process of making these questions, the author wanted to highlight

the expectations of the participants versus the experiences they got from Laurea. Starting with question six, participants were asked about their expectation for the university when it comes to improving their experience as international students. All participants answered yes, with various degrees of elaboration. A common theme in their reasoning was that for international students who just came to Finland, they are more vulnerable and need a lot of help to integrate and expand their social circles. When asked whether Laurea did enough in this regard, most responded yes and said they were happy with the number of activities provided. However, “could be better” was also mentioned by a few participants. One stated that the university relied solely on the student organisations for the social aspect of the students, while itself stopped providing assistance after the orientation. The accommodation was the biggest problem for the exchange students, and the same participant expressed that the university could have been more involved in the process. All participants agreed that more improvement would be welcome.

Question seven was about the student union Laureamko and its representation of the students. Again, there was a big difference between the answers of the exchange group versus the degree group. The exchange participants paid little attention to representation, with one answering “I don’t care, I’m only here for four months.” Others said it was “hard to answer”, “didn’t pay much attention” and “didn’t need representation”. The degree participants, on the other hand, had strong opinions about this subject. One participant had a strong disagreement with the statement, claiming that most Laureamko activities were in Finnish, thus hard for international students to engage in. Another degree participant pointed out that the current president of Laureamko “barely speaks English” and “it’s impossible that he actually understands what international students go through because he can’t communicate with them”. The same participant, who was part of Laureamko, also expressed the difficulty of getting involved in Laureamko as an international student. “Laureamko is specifically for Finns, because everything if you’re a tutor if you’re a campus representative, everything on the meetings will be in Finnish. As somebody who was an active part of the student environment, it was really a struggle to actually fight for real representation.”, they stated.

From these answers, question eight served as a follow-up, asking participants whether they felt that they belonged in the Laurea student community as a whole. With this question, it is worth noticing that none of the participants fully agreed with the statement. “More or less” was a common answer, with the participants elaborating that they felt only fit in with their own degree/exchange group. Furthermore, 100% of the participants agreed that there were no interactions nor connections with the Finnish students outside of classes. “We always feel a kind of separation”, one exchange participant said. In the sub-question, when participants were asked if they felt the student community was united, another degree participant expressed strong opposition, mentioning that “it’s never a unity, and I don’t feel like it’s ever

even been an aim of Laurea to unite us.” They followed up by quoting a Finnish degree student saying, “It’s really a shame that we don’t hang out more, as in degree students and Finnish students.” Another degree participant, who started their degree in 2015, criticised Laureamko and compared Laurea’s student community with that of Haaga-Helia, another university of applied sciences in Helsinki. They said: “At the time, ESN did not exist and Laureamko organised events and activities mostly for Finnish students. It was really hard for me to participate in any kind of events, and I think I missed out on a lot of social activities. The union is not great in Laurea. It is not strong enough to represent all students, including Finnish and international, and the university doesn’t concentrate on it too much. International students from other universities like Haaga-Helia have very strong communities with lots of activities to help them engage easier to live in Finland, and social activities like finding jobs and other matters.”

Question nine was the last of the section, regarding the implementation of intercultural competence within Laurea, Laureamko and ESN Laurea from the points of view of the participants. In this regard, participants recognised the efforts from the three bodies, in which they praised ESN Laurea for trying to bring the Finnish and international cultures together, Laurea for the partnership and courses, and Laureamko for the trips they organised.

4.2.4 ESN Laurea and Conclusion

This section focused solely on ESN Laurea and its relationship with the participants. As the thesis author was a board member since 2017 and took part in the organisation’s activities and events, this section was also considered to direct feedback for the author’s work in ESN Laurea. The section is divided into two parts: D1 for ESN members who purchased the ESNcard (ESN’s membership card) and participated in at least one event organised by ESN Laurea; and D2 for non-ESN members who did not participate in anything.

90% of the interview participants were ESN members, having joined at least one ESN Laurea activity during their studies at Laurea. In question ten, they were asked about the appeal of ESN Laurea, and what motivated them to keep joining ESN Laurea’ activities. Most participants agreed that ESN Laurea’s focused on internationality, culture exchange, integration and socialisation were appealing. One participant said: “There were more cultural and social events to get students to get to know more about Finland”, taking the Fazer Visitor Experience Visit and Nuuksio Hike and Grill as examples. Another participant expressed that ESN Laurea “represented us well, especially for me, an Erasmus student, and they gave us a huge opportunity to be integrated into the school.” When asked for the number of events participated in, four participants (44%) said three to five, while four others claimed they joined more than five different activities. One participant was confident in their answer, stating they attended “every single one” (figure 12).

The final sub-question discussed the motivation for participants to continue attending ESN Laurea's activities. "I think since there were a lot of different activities, when you went to one thing and you thought it's great and you had a great time, the next time there would be something somewhere else, you also wanted to go with them, because you had a great time. You want to continue having a great time with the same people, while also meeting different people at different events", one participant said.

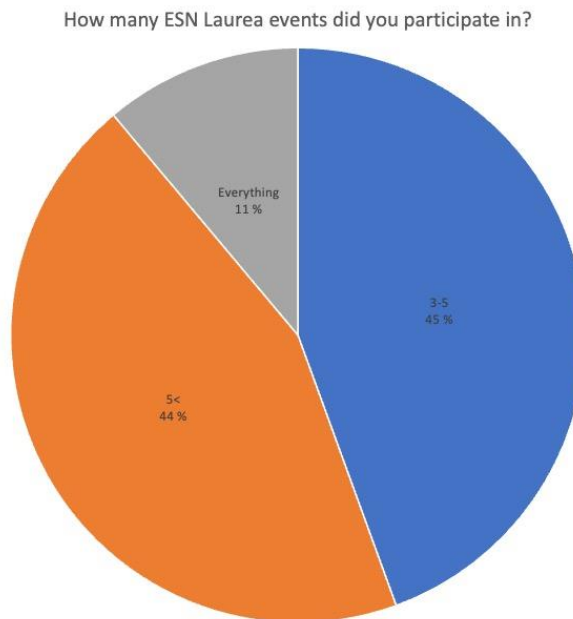


Figure 12: How many ESN Laurea events did you participate in?

Question eleven asked the participants about the existence of ESN in their home country and university. While ESN was not present in all countries of origin of the participants, and a few did not know or care about the existence of ESN in their country, one participant expressed the impact ESN Laurea had on them when they got back to their home university. They expressed "The welcome I received in Finland motivated me to give the same for this year and the last year in my school. We get like 150 newcomers from foreign countries, and I try to be like how you were to me in Finland. You give me motivation, for real." This tied in to question twelve, where the author asked if ESN Laurea had a positive impact on the participants' student life. All participants answered yes, with one elaborated that "Without ESN, maybe I wouldn't have had the chance to join interesting events, and I would have just been a lonely student staying at home all day." Participants also rated ESN Laurea generously, with an average score of 8.3, receiving none lower than 8. 50% of the participants rated ESN Laurea with 8, 37% with 8.5 and 13% with 9, the highest score received (figure 13). To wrap up this section, participants were asked to suggest what would have improved the overall experience even more. A lot of interesting ideas were mentioned, which will be broken down during the next part.

On the scale of 1 to 10, how much would you give ESN Laurea?

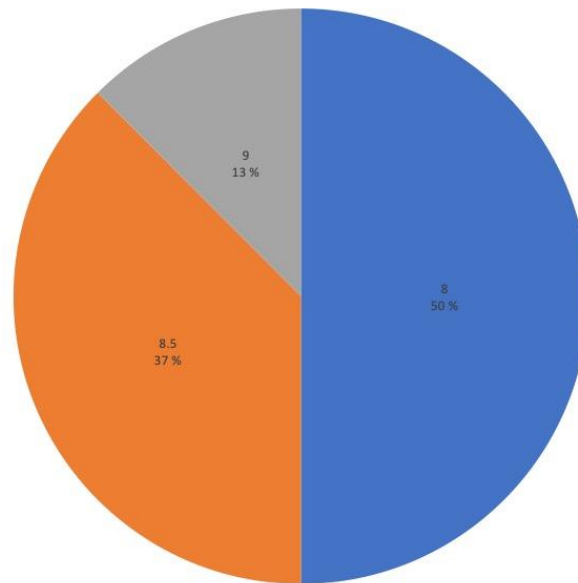


Figure 13: On a scale of 1 to 10, how much would you rate ESN Laurea?

Of the ten interview participants, only one person was a non-ESN member, being the degree student that started at Laurea in 2015. For this participant, a different set of three questions were asked. The first question aimed to explore what ESN Laurea as a student organisation could do to improve the student experience. They highlighted the importance of support in other aspects of life, not only the social activities. “As a freshman and exchange student or international students coming to the new country, it is really important to get to get a lot of support, not just to engage to the life by participating in social activities, but like for example, what I have experienced is that I got problems with my housing.” They then compared the experience with their exchange period in the Netherlands: “When I arrived in Holland, ESN students also helped me to arrange a better apartment. So, it's not just about fun and party, it's also about other things in life, and especially when you come to the new place, there are so many things to buy.” They also expressed the hardship of adapting to a new life in a different country.

For the second question, the participant was asked what their fellow students thought and said about student organisations in general. With this, they explained that it depended on the people, and some people from their home countries were not social, only preferred to be around the same community. However, they themselves thought that being part of an organisation was important since international students come to Finland alone and abroad and need emotional support, among other problems.

The last question aimed to address why the participant did not join any ESN Laurea activity, and whether they would have wanted to had they known more about the organisation. Work

was the reason given by the participant. Furthermore, they expressed regret as they missed out on a lot of activities.

To conclude the interview, the participants were asked to summarise their time in Finland in three words. The opposite trend between the exchange versus the degree students continued, with the exchange participants using “exciting”, “fresh”, “best year” among others to describe their time. On the other hand, the degree participants replied with “not great”, “depression”, and “challenges”. However, they did find positive aspects of the experience through friendship. “Somehow the love grows”, one concluded.

5 Developing ESN Laurea’s action plan

From the interview results, it is safe to assume that ESN Laurea has been playing an important role in the improvement of international students’ experience at Laurea. However, the results also highlight potential improvements, as well as aspects untouched by the organisation that can greatly affect the international degree students specifically. The following chapter will attempt to develop an action plan for the upcoming academic years as a long-term project for the organisation.

5.1 More focus on the international degree students

As shown in the interview results, along with the author’s own experience, the international degree students are a vulnerable group, in need of more long-term support throughout their student career at Laurea. For different reasons, the operation and activities of ESN Laurea have not attracted as many students within this group compared to the exchange students. One improvement in this regard better representation of the organisation during the degree orientations. However, as each degree group has their own orientation day and do not share the same period as the exchange students, it has been impossible for ESN Laurea to be present at all orientation days due to the lack of human resource. Furthermore, from the author’s experience, communications with the teachers in charge of degree orientations proved to be difficult, as the organisation did not receive replies from most of them when the idea of being present during the orientation session was presented.

The current event line-up of ESN Laurea could also be improved to appeal more attractive to the international degree students. Apart from recreational and cultural events, the organisation could introduce educational events related to studies at Laurea, the working life, and mental well-being, which are among the degree students’ interests. Internal discussions during the board meetings of ESN Laurea suggested that events such as seminars and workshops will attract a lot more degree students. However, for such events to be organised, well-trained hosts are essential to ensure the quality of the seminars and workshops. As part

of ESN Finland, ESN Laurea has access to a big network of ESN members, some of whom are certified trainers and educators. The organisation could make contact with them to potentially plan for a training session with Laurea students, though this requires more funding for the hiring of the trainers, which leads to the second part of the chapter.

5.2 Bigger push for cooperation within Laurea

Laurea's International Affairs Office (abbreviated IAO) and the student union Laureamko remain ESN Laurea's most important partners outside of the ESN network. While the COVID-19 pandemic did cause a tremendous impact on the operation of the university and its student organisations, it also showed that cooperation is extremely essential during this period of time. With the drop in the number of incoming exchange students, along with Finland's restrictions regarding public events during the academic year 2019-2020, ESN Laurea and Laureamko were made to temporarily shut down physical activities and explore options for virtual events. Fortunately, as the situation getting better, recent meetings of ESN Laurea with Laureamko and the IAO explored the possibility to return to operation, along with a more detailed cooperation plan. The author of the thesis has been pushing for more involvements from the partners to help ESN Laurea and its operation, from human resource to funding for larger-scale activities and covering travel costs for the volunteers. Additional long-term work is required, but the author is hopeful for the future of ESN Laurea.

6 Conclusion

With the world turning more and more into multiculturalism, intercultural competence proved to be an essential skill, as it is the ability to communicate with people from other cultures without conflict and to understand them based on their values. The four core components of intercultural competence: attitudes, knowledge and understanding, skills, and actions aid one in their path to becoming a global citizen.

Erasmus Student Network, with its mission to enrich society through international students, has students as the focus of its efforts. It aims to promote international students' social and practical integration, advocate for their voices from the local to the international level. The phrase "students helping students" remains one of ESN's important values. Among others including "unity in diversity, diversity in the unity", these are what all ESN members represent and stand for. ESN Laurea, the case company of the thesis where the author spent more than three years working in, was founded as an effort to bring more implementation of intercultural competence to Laurea's environment, and the purpose of the thesis was to analyse its operation and activities for the potential impacts it has on the experience of local international students, highlighting the importance of student organisation work.

Through a qualitative semi-structured interview with open-ended questions as the main research method for the thesis, the author was able to obtain data from a pool of former Laurea international degree and exchange students. The interview layout, including five parts of general questions, overall student experience reflection, in-depth questions, ESN Laurea, and conclusion and feedback, was structured to lead the participants to revisit their complete experiences as Laurea students, while at the same time touching the main topic of intercultural competence implementation.

With the data obtained and analysed from the interviews, a two-part long term action plan was created. During part one, the author highlighted how important the inclusion of international degree students was, with plans to make it more attractive for them to get to know and join ESN Laurea' operation and activities. In part two, the subject of cooperation between Laurea and its student bodies was focused on. The author of the thesis believed that this was an essential factor for the enhancement of future generations of Laurea students, especially in the post-COVID period of time.

The work of the student organisations in universities is to provide the best support and experience to their students, and it can be done in many ways. Knowing the existing problems and working to find solutions are the key operations for any organisation, and this is what ESN Laurea will continue to work on for the future of Laurea and the Erasmus generation.

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Appendix 1: Interview questionnaire

The focus of this interview is the **social aspect** of the participant's student career in Laurea, with questions related to Laurea, Laureamko, ESN Laurea and their own experience during their time studying at Laurea. **The interview does not concern the academic aspect.**

A. General questions

- a. Name, age, nationality
- b. What, when and how long did you study in Laurea?
- c. Were you a degree or exchange student?
- d. Why did you choose to come to Finland and Laurea?
- e. What is intercultural competence to you?

B. Overall student experience reflection

1. What are Laureamko and ESN Laurea to you?
 - a. How were your impressions of them?
2. How well were you supported at the start of your studies in Laurea?
 - a. What was the orientation experience like?
 - b. What did Laurea, Laureamko and ESN Laurea do?
3. How well were you supported for the rest of your studies?
 - a. Was there further (or lack of) support to enhance your student life?
 - b. Do you feel you're still cared about as much as the freshmen?
 - c. Did you receive support at the end of your exchange/degree?
4. Summarise your student experience at Laurea.
5. What aspects enhanced your student experience at Laurea?

C. In-depth questions

6. Do you think the university should have the responsibility to improve your experience as an international student, or is it up to you?
 - a. Yes: Did they do enough?
 - b. No: Why shouldn't they?
7. As the student union, Laureamko is supposedly the voice of the students. Did it hold true to you?
 - a. Do you think you were well represented and heard?
8. Did you feel like you belong in the Laurea student community as a whole?
 - a. Have you encountered fellow students who feel the same way that you do?
 - b. Is the student community united?
9. When it comes to intercultural competence, was it implemented/present well at Laurea, Laureamko, and ESN Laurea?

D. ESN Laurea

i. ESN members

10. Why was ESN Laurea appealing to you?
 - a. How many ESN Laurea's events did you participate in?
 - b. What motivated you to continue participating in ESN Laurea's events?
11. Is ESN active in your home country/city/university?
 - a. Yes: Compare them with ESN Laurea
 - b. No: Do you wish it was? Anything similar?
12. Would you say that ESN Laurea had a positive impact on your student experience in Finland? Rate from 1 to 10.
13. What can ESN Laurea work on to further enhance the student experience for upcoming students?

ii. Non-ESN members

14. In what ways can a student organisation like ESN Laurea improve your student experience?
15. What have your fellow students said about student organisations in relations to student life?
16. Why didn't you participate in our activities? If you had known more about ESN Laurea, would you have considered participating in its activities?

E. Conclusion

17. How was your time in Finland? Describe it in 3 words.
18. Feedback for the interview.
 - a. Structure
 - b. Questions, including follow-ups
 - c. Objective