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Internationalisation from within - International students strengthen the intercultural competence in local businesses

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Introduction

Tourism companies in Lapland are in many ways trailblazers for internationalisation, when it comes to marketing, serving customers and managing human resources internationally. However, even the tourism companies could still develop their internationalisation, which could grow from within the company. There could still be more possibilities to better utilize the potential of the international staff for the cultural knowledge and cross-cultural awareness inside the company. In this article, we demonstrate how international students can concretely enrich the intercultural competence in local businesses.

This article is co-written with students Maxi Rödel and Nathalie Prévost, who will soon graduate with Bachelor of Hospitality Management from the Finnish tourism degree programme of Lapland UAS. Unlike Maxi and Nathalie, international students usually choose the Degree Programme in Tourism (DPT) taught in English, which enables them studying in a multicultural group. Nevertheless, every year a couple of students with non-Finnish backgrounds choose the Finnish degree programme in Hospitality Management. Many of them face language challenges, especially with academic writing in Finnish. Studying in Finnish has also challenged Maxi and Nathalie, but according to them, strong

motivation, clear goals, advanced Finnish skills and hard-working attitude have brought them this close to the Finnish “restonomi” degree.

Finnish authorities and universities are asking, how to attract international talents to Finnish working life and make them stay here. Maxi Rödel from Germany and Nathalie Prévost from France have both personal and professional experience in integrating into Finnish society; Maxi has lived in Finland for 18 years, Nathalie for 26 years. Hence, it is interesting to find out some more about them.

Maxi came to Finland after graduating from carpenter school in Germany. In Finland she learned how to build log houses and then gained construction work experience also in Germany and Norway. When becoming a mother, she changed the hard, physical construction work to tourism jobs in different positions. Currently, she lives in Ivalo. She is a full-time student, but also supports her family part-time with her own company offering tourism services, such as holiday house rentals and translations for German speaking people, who need help doing business or buying properties in Finland.

Nathalie has lived in Finland more than half of her life. She already has a Master of Arts degree from the University of Turku (2004) and is a certified French and English teacher. She has worked for ten years as a language teacher, mostly in primary and secondary Finnish schools. During this winter season she will work as a hotel receptionist in Ylläs, the work that she has been doing since 2017.

Both Maxi and Nathalie have long experience in working with customers and co-workers from different cultures. In addition to that, they are at home in the Finnish society but can still see the Finnish peculiarities also through the lenses of a newly arrived international co-worker. Due to their intercultural competence gained through integration, work experience and studies, their kind of international students can help the companies to become more competent interculturally. Furthermore, both Maxi and Nathalie concentrate on improving cultural knowledge and cross-cultural awareness in their bachelor's theses.

Cross-cultural experiences from the tourism field

According to Maxi and Nathalie, working with international tourists is inspiring and rewarding, but cultural differences can cause misunderstandings, dissatisfaction and even

conflicts, which can harm the reputation of the company. The same can also happen between the employer and the employee coming from two different cultures.

Many tourism workers in Lapland, but also the local inhabitants, have heard of, or experienced “critical incidents” with international tourists. Some incidents are only awkward and amusing, but some of them can actually threaten the safety, privacy or the environment. Here are some examples observed by Maxi and Nathalie:

- *Once a French couple refused to speak English with the receptionist. It was not clear if it was because their level of English was too low or that they just demanded to be served in their native language. I wasn't working at this particular hotel but was called by my colleague to help them in this tricky situation. This is of course quite rare, but it is to be considered. If there is an important message to be relayed to the client and there is no common language, the impact can be quite serious. (Nathalie)*
- *In the hotel where I worked as a receptionist for the first time, I was asked to stop moving my hands when I speak as it was annoying to my superior. I was quite surprised at the request, especially since the company had been working with French clients for a long time. My superior was new at the company and since we spoke Finnish together, I probably had been “quantified” as a Finn in her mind. My “odd” behaviour was then unappropriated. Nevertheless, I am French, and asking a French to speak without using her hands is like asking a Finn to speak with hands; quite impossible. I chose to never work for this company again. (Nathalie)*
- *I was once asked to translate instructions in French about the use of the hotel pool and sauna. I was supposed to write that between the use of the pool and the sauna, the clients had to take a shower without their swimming suits on, to not transfer the pool's chlorine to the sauna, also used without clothes. I answered that I could do the translation but explained that it would be useless as French will never take a shower in public naked. I was told that the translation will be enough. I felt useless as the heart of the intercultural problem was not addressed, and therefore not resolved. (Nathalie)*
- *When I was working some years ago for a car rental company in Northern Lapland, we often had foreign customers, who were renting very small cars to drive long*

distances on the Lappish roads in the dark of winter. They often had no prior driving experience in winter conditions and sometimes unfortunate car accidents happened, when the small car crashed into a reindeer or got off road. Sometimes they also got stuck in deep snow while trying to drive on snowmobile routes or skiing tracks, not knowing that these were no official roads for cars. Winter conditions can be totally unknown for people from warmer countries. This applies also to clothing. Pre-informing the customers and instructing them on site should be designed as seeing the world through their eyes. (Maxi)

- *In one hotel some Asian travellers cooked instant noodles in the electric kettle. The result was that the kettle was out of use for the next customers. It took a long time to clean it and get the strong taste out of it. Also, some other hotel guests complained about the smell of the noodles. (Maxi)*
- *At a safari company we were picking up Indian customers from the accommodation by two 8-seat busses. The customers were a group of Indian people from different families. We let the people sit in the busses. At the end there were two men and two seats next to each other left. But there was no way, that the two men could sit next to each other, so we had to organize the whole group of people in a new way. Greater power distance and hierarchy between people of different social status can cause this kind of incidents, especially in Finland, where we are not used to it. (Maxi)*
- *In Lapland it happens every now and then that international tourists have been coming to private yards and even peeking through windows. This can feel quite invasive for Finnish people who are used to distances and privacy. In Finland private property is respected even without a fence around it. However, this concept might be strange for people from different cultures. (Maxi)*

The above-described situations could be at least lessened, if there were people working for the companies and travel agencies who have cultural knowledge of both the tourist and the host culture. Intercultural competence is needed to be able to operate even in unfamiliar situations in a way, that the customers but also the tourism companies feel valued and comfortable.

Need to improve intercultural competence

Culture is more than a certain lifestyle and language. In tourism, it is important to remember that culture also affects f.ex. the communication style, the way of showing feelings and physical distancing. In addition to verbal and non-verbal communication, also other culture-related factors such as values, norms and attitudes require attention. (Häikiö & Kangasniemi 2016, 30–31; 2019.) The more different the culture of the guest is from the host one, the more attention needs to be directed to the cultural questions. However, assuming similarities with f.ex. European cultures can also be interpreted as low service quality, if the guest feels uncomfortable and mistreated in a customer service situation.

International tourists from almost all over the world visit Lapland. The number of different cultures is remarkable and growing. According to Business Finland (2021), new growing markets in tourism are India and United Arab Emirates, which are culturally far from Finnish culture. If a company wants to offer authentic tourism products and services to international guests, intercultural competence is crucial. Hence, it can become an important competitive edge for the companies.

Intercultural competence can be defined as “the appropriate and effective management of interaction between people who, to some degree or another, represent different or divergent affective, cognitive, and behavioural orientations to the world” (Spitzberg & Chagnon 2009, 7). In other words, the competence to act effectively in an intercultural situation, is called intercultural competence (Schmid & Wilk 2017).

According to Schmid and Wilk (2017) the competence to act effectively is actually made up of several part competencies, and these part aspects can be seen on three levels of effective action: knowledge, attitude and behaviour. Knowledge is important, but one has to have the motivation (attitude) to apply it and also act in an appropriate manner (behaviour). The part competences are specialist knowledge, methodological, social and self-competence. (Bolten 2007, 112.)

An intercultural situation may feel insecure and difficult because the way of interaction is unfamiliar, not natural. One’s usual ability to act effectively is not enough, but it must be transferred into an unknown situation. The familiar competencies need to be transferred to unfamiliar contexts so that an individual can communicate and interact even in the most diverse situations. This requires knowledge about the cultural context of the other, but also

the right attitude and behaviour to reflect one's own culture and that of the other, and willingness to learn. All the competencies can be trained and learned. However, intercultural competence can never be complete or finished, instead, it is an ongoing process and in a constant state of flux. (Bolten 2007, 108–115; Schmid & Wilk 2017.)

An interculturally competent person is, according to Arasaratnam (2016, 6), “mindful, empathetic, motivated to interact with people of other cultures, open to new schemata, adaptable, flexible, able to cope with complexity and ambiguity. [...] Further, she or he is neither ethnocentric nor defined by cultural prejudices.” An interculturally competent tourism worker would hence be able to operate and communicate effectively and culturally aware with customers with different backgrounds, but also understand and explain the cultural features of both sides deeper.

According to these definitions, intercultural competence is something that an individual can have and gain. However, we think that also a company can have intercultural competence through its individuals and their work community, and will benefit from it in multiple ways. Better intercultural competence helps the company to meet culturally diverse customer expectations and to design and deliver more memorable experiences. This leads to higher satisfaction with service quality, which can result in better reviews and word of mouth marketing in social media. Better intercultural communication is also crucial for the safety of the programme services (Häikiö & Kangasniemi 2016; 2019).

Intercultural competence is a competitive edge also for international human resource management. Many tourism companies in Lapland have a multicultural staff, especially during the high season. The need for professional and language-skilled employees is high in programme services and restaurants, and the companies have to compete about the best workers. The employer that best understands and values the cultural background of an international employee and is able to instruct, motivate and commit him or her to the job, is more attractive.

Theses to improve the intercultural competence

Coming from another culture, does not automatically make anyone interculturally competent. One still has to gain cultural knowledge and have the right attitude to behave appropriately in an intercultural situation. This is what Maxi and Nathalie are aiming at with their interculturally themed bachelor's theses that concretely benefit the intercultural competence

of their commissioners, tourism businesses in Lapland. Maxi's commissioner, co-owner Anni Pöyry from Ollero Eco Lodge praises the value of her thesis as follows:

- *Through Maxi's thesis we got valuable information about Arabic culture and practises and how to take those into account in our services. We see intercultural competence as very important. It is an essential asset in the travel industry where we are daily interacting with people from different cultures and countries who have been shaped by different values, beliefs and experiences.*

In September Maxi presented her bachelor's thesis *Lappish luxury for Arabic customers. Developing a product idea for Ollero Eco Lodge*, in fluent Finnish language. In her thesis Maxi looked into the Arabic culture and suggested tourism products at Ollero Eco Lodge in Rovaniemi especially for this customer group. She took the already existing products of the company and modified them, so that they meet the needs and expectations of Arabic customers and also minimize the possibility of misunderstandings and awkward situations. She created a manual about what to consider while serving Arabic customers and also on how to deliver these services, so that the customer contact happens smoothly and the customers leave with an unforgettable beautiful memory of the Lapland holiday. In Arabic culture certain roles for women and men are much more defined as in Finnish culture, which shows e.g. in behaviour and dressing. Also the religion of Islam plays a big role, which results in certain needs of the customer during their vacation in Lapland. (Rödel 2021.)

Ollero Eco Lodge is an environmentally friendly combination of comfort and rustic Lapland style and offers a unique and private location by the Ounasjoki river only 10 minutes' drive from Rovaniemi City Center (Ollero Eco Lodge 2021). Ollero was recently featured on Netflix in "The World's Most Amazing Vacation Rentals".

Nathalie has begun with her thesis process this autumn. She also focuses on intercultural communication and cross-cultural skills in tourism in her thesis looking for answers on how to better serve French clients in Ylläs. Nathalie explains the motivation for her thesis as follows:

- *Cross-cultural communication is my passion, and part of my daily life. As I speak fluent Finnish, my Finnish colleagues expect me to interact in a Finnish way. But no matter how well you are adapted to the culture, there is still a part of you that is true*

to your original culture. It is important that everybody is aware and understanding of these cultural differences in a multicultural environment, when dealing with diverse clients or co-workers.

Some travel companies use native representatives to smoothen the communication between the foreign clients and the local businesses. But what about the rest of the businesses? How can they offer a more customized service to clients they do not share a culture with? In her thesis, Nathalie is planning on proposing a cross-cultural training designed to smoothen the Finnish - French cross-cultural communication in the hotel reception service department. By making the receptionists aware of the cultural differences in communication, she hopes to help the staff to offer a better service to French clients, improving their satisfaction and desire to renew their visit to the business.

A part of the thesis will also explain the Finnish culture from a foreigner's point of view in order to help receptionists see the world through the clients' eyes, but also help the company's foreign workers better understand their colleagues. Abroad where cross-cultural trainings are already used, companies send their staff to different trainings, depending on their clientele. In Lapland, this is not widely used. Therefore, finding the right medium sensitive to both companies and their staff will be a learning curve. Nathalie comments on her learning process as follows:

- *By reading about cross-cultural communication, I got a deeper understanding of the problem and the comfort that it has been thoroughly researched. All there is to do now is apply it to Lappish tourism. It is a huge task, but we'll do it one step at the time, one thesis at the time.*

Conclusion

Lapland UAS has an important role in internationalising local businesses from within. One concrete way of doing this is through thesis and other commissioned development work by our students. But what else could we do? Here are some suggestions. In our communication and management courses, we could address more cultural topics to strengthen the intercultural competence of our students. We could praise the multicultural working environment ourselves. We could support the companies in recruiting international workers

by culturally training both sides. We could help our international students to better integrate into the community of Lapland UAS and to Finnish society and encourage them to stay.

One internationalisation idea could be a new form of intercultural internship in local tourism companies, in which an international student would work as a cultural assistant for the customer service manager. This kind of internship could be beneficiary to both parties, also introducing or reinforcing the concept of intercultural competence in the company's strategy. As an expert of one or more customer cultures the student could help to improve the service quality and simultaneously get a glimpse of management duties. This would provide the student with more advanced work experience, more self-confidence and hopefully more optimistic and many-sided view on career possibilities in Lapland.

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