



Karelia University of Applied Sciences
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The Way to Successful Integration into the Finnish Labor Market as an International Student of Karelia University of Applied Sciences

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Title
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Commissioned by Talent Hub Eastern-Finland Project

Abstract

In this interconnected global economy, the immigration and integration are very big challenges. This thesis focuses on the investigation of the integration process of international students into the Finnish labor market. It does so by targeting only the international students of Karelia University of Applied Sciences within the context of the Talent Hub Eastern-Finland Project. Like other parts of Finland, North-Karelia also suffers from a lack of skilled labor and at the same time sees an increasing number of international students. It is very important to use the available workforce to solve the problem. So, the topic of this research is timely and relevant.

The research starts with analyzing and investigating the current integration process of the international students at Karelia University of Applied Sciences through the available historical background data. At the same time the research looks at Karelia University of Applied Sciences and Talent Hub Eastern-Finland Project's current services for international students. In the next steps, a student's discussion session and online interview with the project employees have been conducted to understand the challenges and find solutions.

In conclusion, to improve the integration of international students into the Finnish labor market, recommendations were given to the international students. Recommendations were also proposed to Talent Hub Eastern-Finland Project to better support the international students.

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Immigration, Integration, International students, cultural integration, Karelia University of Applied Sciences, Talent Hub Eastern-Finland project, Labor market, Finland

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1 Introduction

Finland is known as the happiest country in the world. Over time, Finland has gained popularity among international students for higher education studies. Compared to the pre-COVID years, the number of international students in Finland has increased significantly. By the end of October 2022, the first-time residence permit of higher education had been granted to 7060 applicants, representing an increase of about 54% compared to the previous year (Finnish Immigration Service 2022). Understanding the factors and processes that contribute to the successful integration of international students into the Finnish labor market is crucial for policymakers, educators, as well as for the students themselves.

1.1 Background

The author of this thesis is herself an international student at Karelia University of Applied Sciences; therefore, she understands the importance of properly integrating international students into the Finnish Labor market. The author has experienced significant challenges in entering the labor market. This personal experience motivated her to research the topic of integrating international students into the Finnish labor market, aiming to assist other students at Karelia University of Applied Sciences who are in similar circumstances.

This author proposed this thesis research to the Talent Hub Eastern-Finland Project. The project, scheduled to be carried out from 2023–2027, is based on the cooperation of six educational institutions across different levels of education in the North Karelia and North Savo regions. The project's partner institutions are the University of Eastern Finland, Karelia University of Applied Sciences, Savonia University of Applied Sciences, North Karelia Municipal Education and Training Consortium Riveria, Savo Vocational College and Ylä-Savo Vocational College (Structuralfunds.fi 2023).

According to the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment in Finland, almost all regions of Finland have suffered from a lack of skilled labor force. As a region, North Karelia is no exception to the need for skilled labor forces. Therefore, after much research and numerous projects, it has been confirmed that the international students who have successfully completed their degrees in Eastern-Finland region have significant employment potential. The focus of this thesis and the Talent Hub Eastern Finland Project is to encourage international students to seek employment in Eastern Finland after their graduation. This bachelor's degree thesis is focused on the international students of Karelia University of Applied Sciences in coordination with the Talent Hub Eastern Finland Project.

1.2 Research Objective

The aim of this thesis is to identify effective integration methods for international students at Karelia University of Applied Sciences into Finnish labor market. The final outcome of this thesis will serve as a guidebook for future international students and the university during the integration process. The research in this thesis will focus on key areas:

- Investigating the current services provided by Karelia University of Applied Sciences for the social and cultural integration of international students.
- Examining Karelia University of Applied Sciences approaches to integrating international students into the local companies and services offered by the Talent Hub Eastern-Finland Project.
- Identifying the integration barriers encountered by international students and proposing solutions to improve the integration process to the Talent Hub Eastern Finland.

The main research question addressed in this thesis is: *What are the appropriate ways for international students at Karelia University of Applied Sciences to integrate into the Finnish labor market?*

To support the main research question, there are three sub-questions:

1. *What challenges do international students encounter in integrating into Finnish society, and how do they overcome them?*
2. *What support and services does Karelia University of Applied Sciences provide for the integration of international students into the labor market?*
3. *What best practices could be incorporated into the current process to enhance the integration of international students into the labor market?*

To cover the theoretical framework of the thesis, the author will conduct research on the existing social and cultural aspects of the integration process and the adaptation of international students. This research will specifically focus on international students at Karelia University of Applied Sciences. The outcome of the thesis will aid in identifying the challenges encountered by international students during integration and proposing suggestions to overcome these challenges.

At the beginning of the research, the author of this thesis used a qualitative research approach to comprehensively understand and visualize the current integration process at Karelia University of Applied Sciences. Subsequently, direct interviews and online interviews are used for further research.

1.3 Research techniques

To conduct the research for this thesis, the author utilizes a qualitative research method. Qualitative data will be collected through direct and online interviews. Additionally, a benchmarking method will be used to formulate the final recommendations. This thesis will also use the available material to investigate the integration process of international students. Below are the practical approaches used to support the research process:

- To collect primary data for the research, direct interviews and an online survey via Google forms.

- Secondary data was sourced from online open-source data (e.g., Finnish Immigration Service) and previous project data related to the same topic.

At the outset of the research, the author used a qualitative research approach to understand and visualize the current integration process at Karelia University of Applied Sciences. Afterwards, direct interviews and online surveys were used for further discussion.

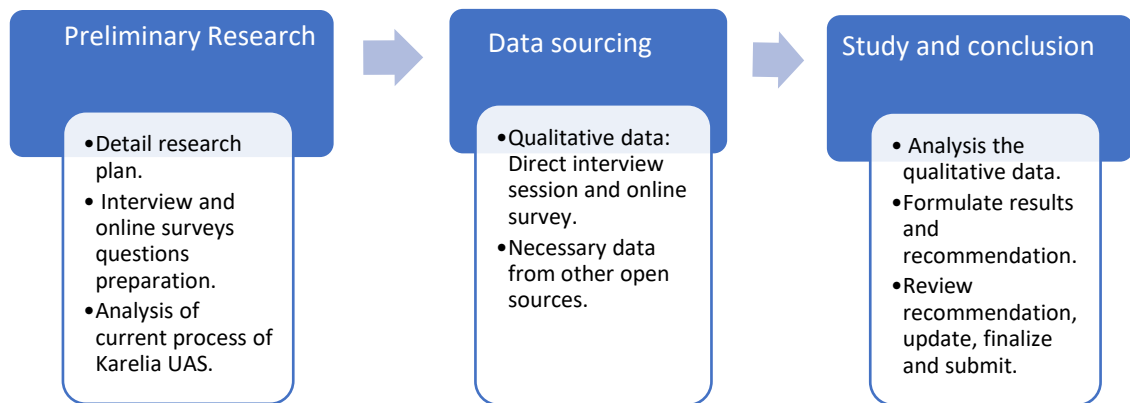


Figure 1. Three stages of the thesis project.

This thesis project follows the three stages shown in Figure 1. It begins with the first stage, a background study, then progresses to data collection, and concludes with the analysis and recommendation stage.

During the background stage, the author conducted research on the planning of this thesis process, visualized the current integration process at Karelia University of Applied Sciences, and prepared questionnaires while organizing interview sessions.

In the data collection stage, all necessary data was collected through interviews, online surveys, and by utilizing the open-source databases.

Finally, in the analysis and results stage, all data collected from the data collection stage is analyzed and used to formulate recommendations to improve the current

integration system of international students at Karelia University of Applied Sciences.

2 Literature Review

2.1 The history of immigration to Finland

The history of immigration in Finland spans several centuries and has seen significant changes over time. Finland was known as an emigration country from the 17th century onwards. Between 1860 and 1920, around 300,000 Finns emigrated to the USA and Canada (Pennix 2008).

After the second world war, many Finns left the country, especially for Sweden, in search of better living and economic conditions. This significant emigration movement caused a notable population reduction at that time, which had a long-lasting effect on Finland's demographics. However, in the second part of the 20th century, migratory patterns in Finland underwent a paradigm shift. In the mid-1980s, only 1% of the population consisted of immigrants. Since then, there has been a significant increase in resident immigrants. New opportunities and challenges emerged when the nation joined the European Union in 1995. Finland's population was 5,568,637 at the end of March 2023. The population expanded by 4,667 people between January and March, primarily due to a rise in net immigration from other nations, with 9,126 more immigrants arriving than leaving. (Statistics Finland 2023.)

Statistics Finland provides key data about immigration in Finland found in Figure 2.

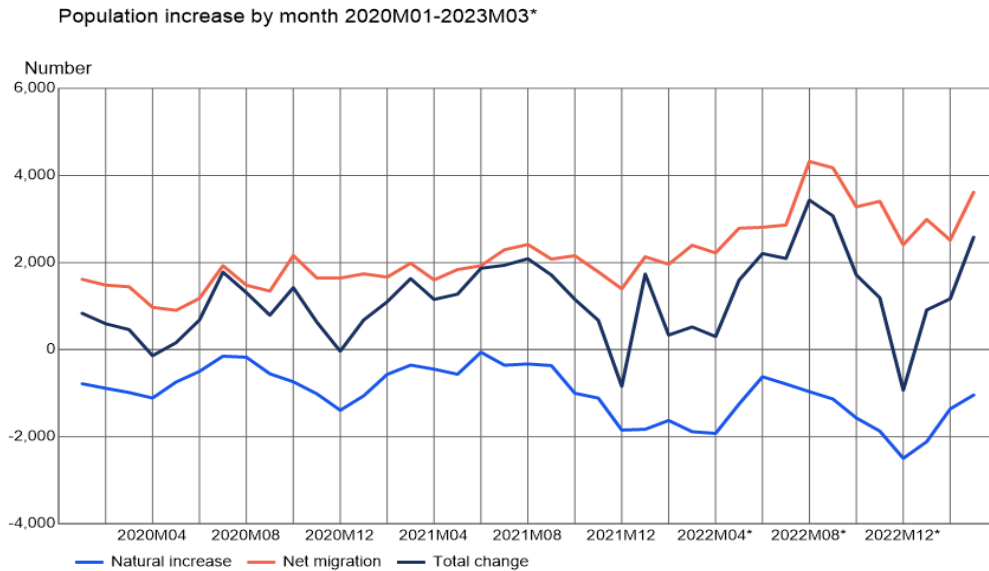


Figure 2. Population Statistics.

The past development of Finland's current cultural, religious, and language diversity can be found in Finnish history. Due to its long historical relationship with Sweden, Finland still maintains a significant Swedish-speaking minority and has two official national languages: Finnish and Swedish.

Small Jewish, Catholic, and Tatar Muslim communities were established after 1809 during the Russian period (the Grand Duchy of Finland was a part of the Russian empire until 1917). Jews were primarily retired soldiers, while Tatar Muslims were tradesmen, and Catholics had various origins (Martikainen 2004,117). The Russian Orthodox Church was also introduced to Finland, which was a Lutheran country, by the Russian Empire's rulers and warriors.

A large number of immigrants in Finland was 'Ingrians', the original inhabitants of 'Ingermanland', people from the southern shore of the Gulf of Finland, near St. Petersburg. Although the majority of the population spoke Finnish, they had to go through strong Russification later in the 1920 to 1930s and were deported to Siberia. (Pennix 2008.)

The return migrants from the former Soviet Union constitute a significant portion of the recent immigration movement, characterized as 'supply driven' immigration. Another significant part of such immigration are refugees and

asylum seekers. Since 1990, thousands of Middle Eastern Kurds, Somalians, and refugees from the Balkan Wars have arrived in Finland. Admission to Finland can be obtained through one of two methods. Firstly, there is the allocation of the annual refugee quota, which ranges from 500 to 750. Typically, the government selects vulnerable migrants from refugee camps in the regions to fulfill the quota. The second method is through an asylum application. Additionally, immigration for family reasons (such as family reunion and new marriages) has gained popularity over time and is likely the primary entry method nowadays.

In the past few years, Finland's world-leading higher education system has become a popular choice among international students. There are more than 500 English-taught bachelor's and master's degree programs offered in 13 universities and 22 university of applied sciences in Finland. There are more than 20,000 international students studying in several locations across Finland (Study in Finland 2023).

2.2 Integration Policy of Finland

Finland's integration policy prioritizes facilitating immigrant employment, social inclusion, and active participation in Finnish society, viewing integration as a two-way process. The policy aims to ensure the successful integration of international immigrants in all areas of Finnish society, focusing on several key areas. These include assisting immigrant families, promoting employment opportunities for adult immigrants, helping immigrants becoming municipal residents, and ensuring a smooth and well-managed entry into municipalities for beneficiaries of international protection (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment of Finland 2023).

Additionally, the policy supports the active participation of civil society in the integration process and emphasizes the significance of seamless coordination between central and local government entities. All administrative branches must collaborate and adhere to the values of equality, non-discrimination, and the prevention of racism while promoting acceptance of immigrants for successful

integration. In Finland, the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment is responsible for planning and directing matters related to integration, with the Minister of Employment serving as the focal point.

2.3 Profile of Joensuu City

The City of Joensuu was founded in 1848 by Czar Nicholas I of Russia as the regional capital of North Karelia. Throughout the 19th century, the city thrived as a hub of manufacturing and commerce. The expansion of local sawmills from 1860 onwards, coupled with the lifting of industrial restrictions, fueled prosperity. Notably, Joensuu became an important center for the glass industry in Utra, attracting a significant foreign population. Water traffic saw improvements with the construction of the Saimaa Canal in 1856, facilitating vibrant trade between North Karelia, St. Petersburg, and Central Europe. By the early 20th century, Joensuu had become one of Finland's largest port cities. The River Pielisjoki has long been the heart of Joensuu, with Karelian traders using the river and canals for centuries (Joensuu 2023).

The establishment of the University of Joensuu (now University of Eastern Finland) in 1969 and Karelia University of Applied Sciences in 1992 played a pivotal role in the city's development, attracting a diverse student population. Additionally, Joensuu's proximity to the eastern border has facilitated cross-border cooperation with the Republic of Karelia in Russia. The border station at Värtsilä - Niirala, opened in 1991, further enhances connections between the regions. Today, Joensuu stands as a vibrant urban center, benefiting from economic growth and cultural diversity from the international collaborations fostered by the university and the border's influence on trade and cultural life.

3 Integration and Educational Migration

3.1 What Is Integration

We are now living in the century when the world witnessed the greatest wave of migration. This is especially true during the second half of the 20th century. The current global estimation is that there were around 281 million international migrants in the world in 2020 (UN Migration 2022). This includes the migration of international students. As educational opportunities cross national boundaries, more students are seeking higher education experiences abroad, including in Finland. Understanding the factors and processes that contribute to the successful integration of international students into Finnish society is crucial for policymakers, educators as well as for the students themselves.

When we are talking about the integration of immigrants or international students, it is always a two-way process of understanding between the immigrants and the local people of the host countries. The success rate of the integration depends on how well the immigrants are integrating economically and socially into the host countries.

Non-discrimination and cooperation are vital prerequisites for immigrants to achieve successful integration. As the population of the society is changing and becoming more diverse, immigrants need to adapt to their surrounding society through active participation in everyday tasks and gain new skills and knowledge. However, the encompassing cultural and economic integration of international students can be considered as the main parts of the overall integration.

This thesis is primarily focused on the integration of international students of Karelia University of Applied Sciences into the labor market. It will also include the elements of personal and professional growth during studies. In essence, integration can be described as a continuous process where international

students are expected to interact with the local people, learn the Finnish language and adapt to the Finnish working culture after studies.

3.2 Cultural Integration

There are many variables and ways to describe culture. Many common traits and elements are incorporated in different definitions of culture. Different disciplines in the social science offer different aspects and definitions of culture. Peterson defines culture as “the relatively stable set of inner values and beliefs generally held by groups of peoples in countries or regions and the noticeable impact those values and beliefs have on the people’s outward behavior and environment.” (Peterson 2004,17).

Culture has been defined in various ways. Hofstede makes an analogical comparison between culture and computer programming, stating "Culture is the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others". (Hofstede 2011, 3).

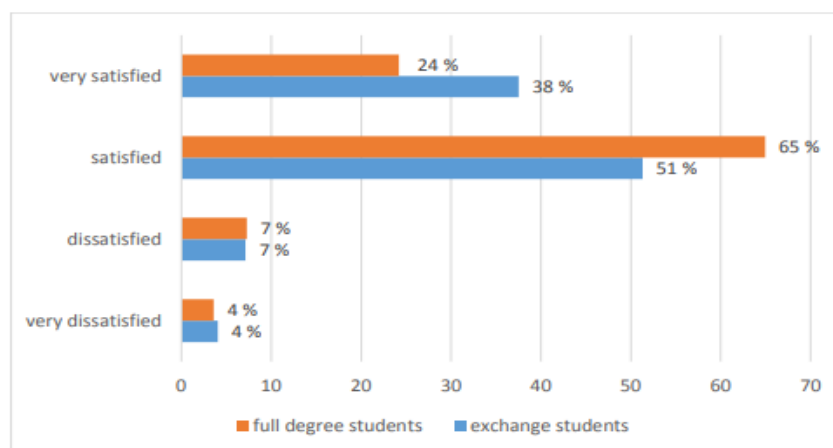
There are undoubtedly some common factors in both definitions. However, culture is always a collective phenomenon; it can refer to tribes or ethnic groups, nations, or organizations. Typically, whatever a human being learns from their surroundings in different stages of life represents their culture.

The cultural integration of international students in the Finnish society is a mixture of opportunities and challenges. As a nation renowned as the happiest country in the world for the seventh time in a row, Finland also boasts educational excellence and cultural uniqueness. Finnish culture can be characterized by values such as equality, individualism and deep connection with nature. All these cultural traits have great influence on the integration process of international students in the society. The cultural integration also depends on level of behavioral similarities and differences between the Finnish culture and the international student’s own culture (Landis, Bennett & Bennett 2004, 166).

The initial barrier that impacts the integration of international students into the society is the Finnish language, which is known as one of the most challenging languages in the world (Latomaa 1998). In Finnish universities of applied sciences, 10% of students are foreign language speakers and 7% of the students are with international backgrounds (Statistics Finland 2021). However, the high proficiency in English speaking and the welcoming nature of the Finnish society help to overcome these challenges. Approximately 32% of international students living in North Karelia have beginning knowledge of Finnish language (Integration.fi 2024). The language courses provided by the universities helping the students to overcome the language difficulties.

Many international students often experience 'cultural shock' upon their arrival in Finland (University of Oulu 2024). Adjusting to Finnish customs, the harsh weather conditions, and the social norms can be very daunting. However, the peacefulness, safety, and the high quality of life in Finland give a very positive experience to many international students. According to the Finnish National Agency of Education's barometer survey, the satisfaction of international students upon arrival in Finland is very high.

6 Arrival



How satisfied were you with the overall arrival experience? (First year full degree and exchange students, N=1810) %

Figure 3. Satisfaction Chart of International and Exchange students.

Finnish universities, along with the city councils, provide many services to facilitate the cultural integration of international students. Orientation programmes, tutoring, integration and language programmes for foreigners are organized every year to welcome the new students. The mentoring programme, which pairs an international student with a local Finnish student is proven to be very effective not only for the international student but also for the Finnish students as a way to enrich knowledge of cultural diversity.

Despite of all these efforts and services, international students still encounter many challenges during their integration processes. The introvert nature of Finnish people poses a barrier to deeper social connection. Additionally, stereotypes about people from various societal levels can affect how international students feel they fit in.

4 North Karelia Analysis

4.1 North Karelia and international population

North-Karelia (*Pohjois-Karjala*) is the easternmost region of the European Continent. The region consisting of nine municipalities with a total population of 162,500. Among these, only five of them are towns. Joensuu, recognized as a university city, serves as the largest and central municipality in the region. The North Karelia Regional Council is responsible for the regional development and oversees the interest of the people, municipalities, and organizations. They supervise and coordinate regional development programs related to national and EU structural funds. The region is divided into three sub regions: Joensuu, Central Karelia and Pielinen Karelia (see Table 1).

Key figures on population by Information, Area and Year

	2020	2021	2022
Population 31 Dec			
Heinävesi	3,196	3,136	3,061
Ilomantsi	4,749	4,643	4,492
Joensuu	76,935	77,261	77,513
Juuka	4,527	4,444	4,352
Kitee	9,933	9,877	9,727
Kontiolahti	14,857	15,035	15,157
Lieksa	10,719	10,543	10,372
Liperi	11,994	11,979	11,962
Nurmes	9,501	9,423	9,243
Outokumpu	6,552	6,506	6,457
Polvijärvi	4,201	4,161	4,084
Rääkkylä	2,066	2,032	1,960
Tohmajärvi	4,307	4,241	4,160

Table1. North Karelia and sub-region population(OSF 2024).

According to the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment of Finland, approximately 6,000 jobs have remained unfilled due to talent shortage. This shortage affects the entire country, including North Karelia. However, finding employment for international students is particularly challenging. There is a significant mismatch between the labor market and the employment of the international students.

Figure 4 shows the increase in the number of foreign citizens residing in North Karelia from 2010 to 2022. North Karelia, situated near the Russian border, is located near the Russian boarder, is home to educational institutions such as the University of Eastern Finland and Karelia University of Applied Sciences, attracting many international students each year.

Population 31.12. by Year. MK12 North Karelia, FOREIGN COUNTRIES, TOTAL, Population 31 Dec.

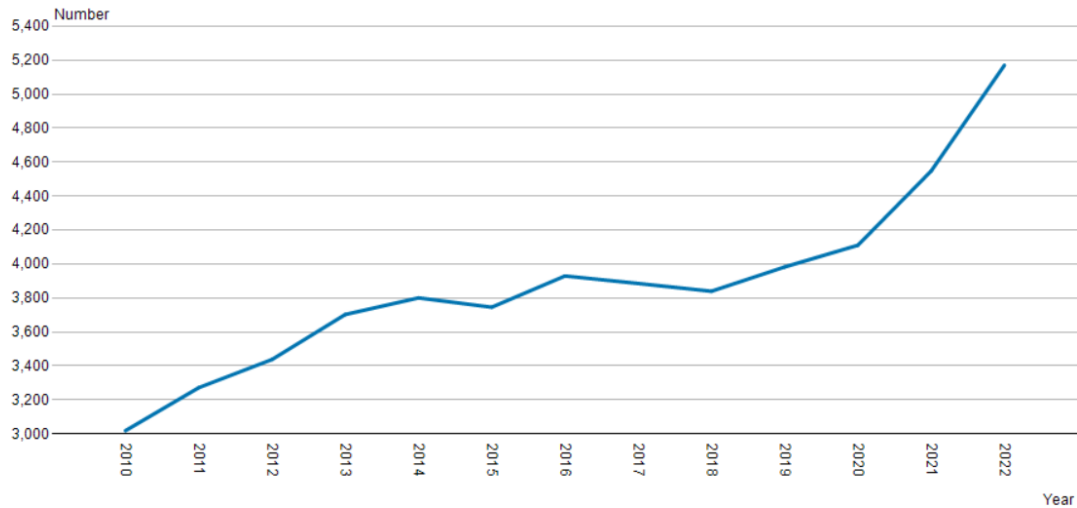


Figure 4. North Karelia foreign population (OSF 2024).

Many foreign citizens relocate to North Karelia for educational reasons. However, research indicates that international companies in the region are hiring international talents for work purposes. It is essential for medium and small companies to be aware of the increasing number of international students arriving in the region each year. Encouraging the employment of foreign language speaker can help mitigate labor shortages.

4.2 Karelia University of Applied Sciences international students

Karelia University of Applied Sciences, named North Karelia University of Applied Sciences until 2013, was founded at 1992 as an institution of higher education and applied research. Karelia University of Applied Sciences is a multidisciplinary, internationally connected, and innovative organization.

Karelia University of Applied Sciences offers both bachelor's and master's level education. It has 7 study fields with 21 programmes, including 5 master-level programmes. Among these, there are 4 English language programmes:

1. Information and Communication Technology- *Bachelor of Engineering*
2. Industrial Management- *Bachelor of Engineering*
3. International Business- *Bachelor of Business Administration*
4. Sustainability Management- *Master of Engineering*.

Based on the information from Karelia University of Applied Sciences Student Service Office, Karelia University of Applied Sciences has a significant number of international students. The school has a total of 4189 students, out of which 350 are of foreign backgrounds or international students. This represents 8.3% of the total students. The university has international students from 43 countries around the world. The international study programmes of Karelia University of Applied Sciences are very well known among Russian and Southeast Asian students.

Karelia UAS international students	
<u>Nationality</u>	<u>Number</u>
Russia	80
Bangladesh	65
Nigeria	29
Pakistan	27
Nepal	23
India	22
Srilanka	21
Vietnam	18

Table 2. Karelia UAS international student number according nationality, year 2023.

5 Support for International Students at North Karelia

5.1 Karelia University of Applied Sciences services for international students

The foundation of the integration process for international students begins at the university, as it is their first point of contact. The integration process during the first year plays a vital role in the long-term integration of international students into society. For successful integration, the university must provide all the necessary information and training from the outset. If the university can create a positive integration experience for international students, these students will be motivated to stay in the region and contribute positively to its development. Karelia University of Applied Sciences follows a specific process to welcome new international students and ensures they become familiar with university services and the region throughout their time at the university. Table 2 below outlines university's current approaches to international student integration.

Karelia UAS process flow for international student integration process			
<u>Before-arrival</u>	<u>Arrival</u>	<u>Adaption and integration</u>	<u>Graduation</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Admission office ○ Social media account for newcomers ○ Student ambassador service ○ Information portal on the Karelia UAS website 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Orientation week ○ Student tutor service ○ Welcome team 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Karelia Starter kit ○ Tutoring service ○ Study counseling ○ Introductory courses ○ Teacher tutor ○ Finnish course 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Teacher tutor ○ Graduation ceremony for degree student

Table 3. Karelia UAS process flow for international student integration.

The process of integrating international students is divided into four stages. The initial communication begins with the student during the university selection process. Once the student is selected, they receive an admission confirmation email from the admission office, which includes detailed instructions how to proceed further. Below is a description of all the four stages of the integration process:

1. **Before-arrival:** After the student is selected for the degree programme, all the international students are provided with necessary information before their arrival. On the university website, international students can find all the information they need upon their arrival, including details about arriving in Finland and information about the City of Joensuu. Everything can be found in the university website, along with a welcome note from the university president. Additionally, students receive prompt replies from the admission office for any inquiries.
2. **Arrival:** Upon arrival in Joensuu, international students receive support from a tutor along with a welcome package. The tutor's role is to assist students in familiarizing themselves with the university's overall services, providing survival tips for the initial period, and acting as a supporting figure for early stage of settling down in the new city. During the orientation week, the teacher tutor provides all the necessary information about the study. Additionally, the student union, *Poka*, organizes various events and activities as a part of welcoming new students.
3. **Adaption and integration:** After the arrival and initial settling into the new environment, aside from regular studies, students are also introduced to career services, the student union, work life courses, and Finnish language courses. During these stages, all the international students become acquainted with the services that the university provides for them. The university is actively involved in numerous projects aimed at improving and facilitating the integration process for international students. Karelia University of Applied Sciences is well aware of the challenges international students encounter in finding part-time jobs or internships during their

studies. Therefore, the university offers special career coaching services and partnership programmes with companies to assist international students in this regard.

4. **Graduation:** Upon completion of 80% of the total degree programme credits, students can start the graduation process. The teacher tutor will guide individual students with their graduation process. At the end of every semester, the university organizes a graduation programme for the graduating students.

5.2 Talent Hub Eastern Finland project

As previously mentioned, like other parts of Finland, North Karelia is experiencing a population crisis. The population in this area has been declining since the 1990s due to the low birth rates and an aging population. It is projected that the working-age population in Eastern Finland will decrease by around 25% by 2030 (UEF//CONNECT 2024). However, the annual influx of non-Finnish immigrants coming to the region is helping to balance the population loss. The proportion of the non-Finnish population in the region is increasing every year. In 2022, approximately 4.9% of the total population in Eastern Finland had immigrant background (European Commission 2024).

Joensuu is the largest city in the region. It is home to approximately 77,500 North Karelians. The city is renowned as a hub for students, as it hosts the University of Eastern Finland with around 9500 students, Karelia University of Applied Sciences with nearly 4000 students, and Riveria and other vocational institutes with around 10,000 students. All these institutions have a significant number of international students.

The North Karelia region is well-known for its strength in natural resources, its diversified educational system, and its competence in key industries such as forestry, technology and plastics. The region's expertise in forest bioeconomy and photonics is recognized as one of the best national wide.

There are about 65,000 jobs in the region. Seventy-two percent of them are in services, just under 23% in processing, and 5% in primary production. The region has about 11,000 workplaces, employing approximately 31,000 workers (European Commission 2024). The largest workplaces are industrial enterprises, such as Abloy Oy, the world's leading key manufacturer, John Deere Forestry Ltd. which produces forestry machines, Medisize Corporation which produces medical devices, Thermo Fisher Scientific Oy that produces laboratory instruments, and Binderholz Nordic Oy which produces wood. After the pandemic, the employment situation of this region improved by around 4% compared to the previous year.

However, some companies are experiencing challenges in hiring workers for high-skilled jobs. Although the overall employment situation is improving in the region, international students in educational institutions in Eastern Finland region are facing significant difficulties in finding part-time jobs, internships or employment after their studies. While the majority of the international students are willing to stay in the region, they often have to move to other cities after completing their studies to find better employment opportunities.

To enhance the employment prospects of international students and assist companies in accessing a more diverse skilled workforce, the six educational institutions in this region have initiated the EU funded project 'Talent Hub Eastern-Finland (2023-2027) project.

The primary objective of the project is to facilitate the integration of international students into Eastern Finland's society. The project's motto focuses on ensuring that international students feel welcomed and encouraged to stay in the region, becoming valuable contributors to its development. Moreover, the project is not solely focused on international students; it also aims to develop services for employers to identify the potential of international talents and provide them with the concrete tools for recruiting, onboarding, and adapting to Finnish working culture, as well as language proficiency enhancement.

The project's goal is to involve international talents in shaping a prosperous future for the region. The Talent Hub Eastern Finland Project aims to foster a sense of belonging among international residents, encouraging them to identify as North Karelians.

Below are the services that the project is designing for international students:

1. *MOOC for Working Life in Eastern Finland:*

This bilingual online course is designed to help international students assess their skill competences and strengthen their professional skills from the perspective of working in Eastern Finland. The University of Eastern Finland team is responsible for developing the MOOC courses.

2. *Finnish Language Learning:*

Language is the significant barrier for international individuals during their integration process. While there are many language courses and services available for non-Finnish speakers to learn the language, international students require additional support to improve their language proficiency for better employment opportunities.

Under the project, a *Kielikamu* model is being developed to facilitate language learning during studies. In this model, Finnish-speaking students assist international students in learning the language and using it more frequently in their studies and everyday conversation. Once again, the University of Eastern Finland team is working on developing this language learning model.

3. *Mentoring Programme:*

The Talent Hub Eastern Finland Project, in collaboration with Savonia University of Applied Sciences and the University of Eastern Finland, is working on developing a mentoring programme. This annual programme is designed to help international students familiarize themselves with Finnish working life and build their professional network. The mentoring

group primarily consist of small groups of international students. Mentor recruitment began in November 2023.

4. *Company Outreach Team:*

The company outreach team is developing a system to assist companies in recruiting more international students. The team's main responsibility is to actively reach out to companies to find jobs, thesis topics, internships, and training opportunities for international students. The company team consists of both Karelia University of Applied Sciences and Savonia University of Applied Sciences members.

5. *Entrepreneurial Path Development for International Experts:*

This service aims to enhance students' entrepreneurial skills through personal guidance and courses. The Karelia University of Applied Sciences team is working on this project, organizing various events, and workshops for aspiring entrepreneurs.

6. *Alumni Activities:*

Under the alumni activity initiative, the project is developing various services and events for graduate students, tailored to specific sectors. The Karelia University of Applied Sciences team is responsible for developing alumni activities.

7. *Solution Oriented Study Counselling:*

Solution-oriented study counselling is the most efficient way for students from diverse backgrounds to find employment. The study and career counsellors of the project's partner institutions will develop study paths for international students that lead to employment.

8. *Recognition of Professional Competence:*

These services, in collaboration with solution-oriented study counselling, will help the international students to recognize their skill competencies. Recognizing professional competence is crucial, as articulating one's skills can be challenging due to language barriers. These services indicate the

tasks and work environments the applicant can handle independently and where assistance may be needed. The Savo Vocational collage team is working on this service.

The THEF Project also offers services for employers:

1. *Workplace Instruction Training:*

The project aims to enhance employers' capabilities in onboarding and hiring international talent. Concrete services are being developed to increase language and cultural awareness, as well as foster an environment that embraces diversity in the workplace.

2. *Service Model for Employers:*

The project is designing a service model tailored to the recruitment needs of employees, assisting them in finding skilled international students.

6 Research context and method

While the primary focus of the research involved current international students at Karelia University of Applied Sciences, it is also crucial to involve stakeholders to gain a deeper understanding of the challenges and potential solutions. This ensures a more comprehensive approach to addressing the issues faced by international students.

6.1 Research method

This thesis has utilized the qualitative method to collect data and convert it into results. To visualize the situation of international students at Karelia University of Applied Sciences, the author of this thesis used the quantitative data collection

method, which was employed as secondary data. For the secondary data collection, open-source statistical data from Official Statistics Finland and internal data from Karelia University of Applied Sciences were used. The official statistics of Finland and the university's internal data were utilized to understand the overall picture of the international students in Finland and their different cultural backgrounds. The quantitative research results helped the author understand the problem in detail and the reasoning behind the research topic of the thesis.

The primary research method of this thesis is a qualitative approach aimed at understanding the most significant barriers and expectations of international students at Karelia University of Applied Sciences for successful integration into the Finnish labor market. The research focused on answering relevant questions, primarily targeting international students currently enrolled in a degree programme at the university.

These students also have the intention or plan to stay in Eastern Finland. The author's goal was to gain deeper insights from these international students through face-to-face discussions, identifying the challenges they face and soliciting their opinions on how to improve their situation or what kind of services they expect from the university to enhance their chances of smooth integration into the Finnish working life after graduation or during their studies. The author herself is also an international student at Karelia University of Applied Sciences.

During the research process, several individuals were interviewed, with ten primary international students, including the author herself, participating in the interviews. They were all asked the same questions to identify common issues. However, the author aimed to gather diverse perspectives from international students with different backgrounds and also conducted interviews with various stakeholders from the university to explore potential solutions by the end of the research.

6.2 Sampling

The purposive sampling method was utilized to select the interviewees for this research. Also known as judgmental or selective sampling, is a non-probability technique involves the researcher selecting participants based on specific criteria relevant to the research questions (ChatGpt 2024).

Participants had to meet the specific criterion to take part in the research, namely being an international student of the university. Interviews were conducted with all ten participants in the research, comprising four females and six males. The interviewees varied in age from 20 to 35 years old and came from different ethnic, linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

<u>Participants</u>	<u>Degree Programme</u>	<u>Year of study</u>	<u>Country of origin</u>	<u>Gender</u>
1.	International Business	2	Bangladesh	Male
2.	Information and communication technology	1	Srilanka	Male
3.	Industrial management	3	Bangladesh	Female
4.	Industrial management	2	Morocco	Female
5.	Information and communication technology	1	India	Male
6.	International Business	3,5	Philipini	Female
7.	Information and communication technology	1	Nepal	Female
8.	International Business	3,5	Bangladesh	Female
9.	Industrial Management	1	Srilanka	Male
10.	Industrial management	1	Nigeria	Male

Table 4. Student discussion participants' information.

The university employees interviewed also had specific criteria. They had to be involved in some ongoing project or communication of the university related to international student integration tasks.

Participants No.	Area of working	Work Place
1.	Project coordinator (THEF Project)	Karelia UAS
2.	Project coordinator (THEF Project)	UEF
3.	Communication	Karelia UAS
4.	Project coordinator (THEF Project)	Karelia UAS
5.	Project coordinator (THEF Project)	Savonia UAS

Table 5. Staff interview participants' information.

6.3 Data collection and analysis

As this thesis relies on qualitative research, the semi-structured interview emerges as a pivotal tool for exploring complex social phenomenon such as the integration process. It combines predetermined questions with a flexibility to explore emerging topics. In the context of this thesis, focusing on international students' integration, this approach enables both consistency across interviews and the adaptability to dive deeply into the participants' experiences through open-ended inquiry.

The primary objective of the author was to delve deeply into the diverse attitudes and perspectives related to the integration experience of international students at Karelia University of Applied Sciences into the labor market. The main focus of the discussion session was to capture the personal experiences of individual participants to enhance future integration processes. As mentioned earlier, the author herself is an international student at the university, highlighting the authors' personal commitment to exploring the individual experiences of fellow international students to develop a more thorough understanding of the social, cultural, and psychological factors that impact the integration process. The casual

nature of the off-the-record interviews significantly contributed to this study, fostering more open and honest comments from the participants and providing a relaxed environment for conducting the interviews. Overall, the author's choice of using a semi-structured interview method allowed for the collection of rich and comprehensive data that could be analyzed to provide recommendations for improving the integration process of international students of Karelia University of Applied Sciences.

The questions asked to the participants (*Students*) during the discussion session were as follows:

1. *Why did you choose Karelia University of Applied Sciences? Do you want to continue living in North Karelia after graduation?*
2. *Have you received sufficient support from Karelia University of Applied Sciences for integrating into Finnish society? Have you participated in the integration services organized by Karelia?*
3. *Do you find recruitment events beneficial? Do you participate in those events?*
4. *Are you aware of any partnership companies associated with your degree programme?*
5. *What are your expectations from Karelia University of Applied Sciences in terms of supporting your employment opportunities?*

The questions asked to the participants (*Employers*) during the discussion session were as follows:

1. *What is the main goal of the project (Talent Hub Eastern-Finland Project)?*
2. *How do you suggest improving the integration process of international students?*
3. *What challenges do you face regarding the integration process of international students?*

The author aims to decode several primary focus areas from the responses of both the students and staff members of the university. These areas include cultural understanding, the impact of language barriers, feedback on Karelia University of Applied Sciences current services, and the participants' expectations from the university.

7 Findings of the research

Throughout the interview and discussion session, one of the major findings was the positive feedback from students about the university's services in the integration process for international students. However, the main focal point was on increasing support for the integration process into the Finnish labor market for international students. For instance, P1, a second-year international business student living in Finland for two years, stated that at the beginning of his study, he received proper support and integration information from the school and friends.

He had already managed to secure part-time jobs and also completed a professional internship with one of the renowned companies in the region. His future plan is to stay in North Karelia.

On the other hand, P9, a first-year student, mentioned that although he received basic integration information from the university, he has not had enough opportunities to integrate with local people due to the limited number of Finnish students in his study programme.

Another finding that the author realized throughout the interviews with both the project staff and the international students was that they both have mentioned the lack of communication and the scope of international students' integration with local students. In the author's opinion, this depends on the attitude and mindset of the international students, which can help them to fit in successfully in the new environment.

8 Conclusion and Recommendations

In this chapter, the author attempts to draw conclusions based on the findings of the research. The main aim of this study was to identify ways to improve the integration process of international students at Karelia University of Applied Sciences into the Finnish labor market.

The findings of the thesis were able to observe that nearly all the interviewees (including student and staff members), mentioned the same challenges for the integration of international students into the labor market: the language barrier, the lack of social networking, as well as understanding of working life, and the communication gap between students and the university activities. Finally, some recommendations are provided for both international students and the Talent Hub Eastern Finland Project to adapt and improve the work-life integration process of international students.

8.1 Recommendations for international students:

From the findings of the research, the author identified the major challenges that international students encounter during the integration process. The challenges were consistent with those found in previous research. While discrimination towards immigrants has been mentioned in many previous studies, the author did not find any evidence of racism towards the international students of Karelia University of Applied Sciences. None of the interviewees mentioned experiencing racism during the sessions. However, other challenges were clearly mentioned, along with the ways in which they are being overcome.

According to the author of the thesis, one of the major problems for the integration process of international students is xenophobia. Xenophobia and negative cultural stereotypes can reinforce each other, leading to a vicious cycle.

Xenophobia fosters negative stereotypical beliefs, which, in turn, perpetuate and intensify unfavorable attitudes towards the cultural groups being stereotyped (Lehtonen 2005).

When international students arrive, their first impression from other international students may include negative comments about Finnish society and working conditions. The research provides clear evidence that students who were able to overlook these negative comments and instead focus on finding the solutions for the integration process were ultimately successful.

The following are the key recommendations for international students:

1. *Social Networking:*

Networking skills are recognized not only within Finnish working culture but also globally. They are a significant requirement for integration into the labor market. The best way for the international students who are new to the Finnish society and working culture is to integrate more with their local classmates. It will, of course, take time to understand the culture, but getting to know local people is the best way. The university organizes many events and job fairs. These events are the best place to expand one's professional network. The author of the thesis believes that it is not only the responsibility of the host country but also of international students to take steps to get to know the people and culture.

2. *Internship Through Thesis or Course Work:*

While prioritizing their studies is essential, many international students need part-time employment to support tuition and living expenses, which diverts their focus from academic pursuits. Fortunately, the university provides numerous opportunities to work closely with local companies and network simultaneously. Writing a thesis is a mandatory part of the degree programmes. If a student can propose a solution-based thesis topic to a company, this can lead to a potential internship. For instance, this thesis was commissioned by Talent Hub Eastern Finland Project, which also provided the author with the opportunity to do an internship for the project.

3. Language skill:

Finnish, renowned as one of the most challenging languages in the world, presents a linguistic challenge for the international students. During the research, the language challenge was mentioned by all participants. However, Karelia University of Applied Sciences offers a range of language courses tailored to students' proficiency levels. Numerous success stories from Karelia University of Applied Sciences international students who have mastered the language and integrated into the labor market exist.

Only enrollment in language courses is insufficient; students must be motivated to learn actively. Engaging in day-to-day conversations in Finnish is the most effective method. For instance, the success story of Yosra, an international student, detailing her journey in mastering the Finnish language, was featured in the Karelia University of Applied Sciences *Pulssi* portal.

8.2 Recommendations for Talent Hub Eastern-Finland project:

The Talent Hub Eastern Finland Project presents an amazing opportunity for international students to integrate into the Finnish working life. The prospect's services are designed to focus on international students and support local companies in hiring more international talent. However, the target audience of the project should be made more aware of the benefits and actions of the project.

It is recommended that the project employ a digital marketing plan to engage more participants (international students and local companies) using the available marketing tools at Karelia University of Applied Sciences. One of the objectives of this thesis is to recommend a digital marketing plan for the project to support the integration process of the international students into the labor market.

Below are some recommendations for the project that could be incorporated into digital marketing methods to enhance services and increase the engagement of international students:

1. Social Media Marketing:

Social media networks have become the most easily accessible source of information for students. For the project to be successful, it is important to provide all service information to its target customers so that they can make use of them. Students are not the only focus customer group for an educational organization like Karelia University of Applied Sciences. An organization connects with different businesses and organizations to build a common environment. Therefore, the project should have a social media marketing plan in place, keeping in mind both focus customer group - the international students and local companies in Eastern Finland.

During the interview session, the author raised the topic of the proper channels to contact students, and most participants agreed that they are most active in the social media channels and the WhatsApp groups of their respective degree programmes. Additionally, during the interview session with the staff members, it became apparent that convincing local companies to hire international individuals is challenging due to the lack of experience in this area.

Therefore, the social media marketing content for the project should focus on the region's opportunities and talents to attract both target audiences, including international students and local businesses. Based on the campaign goals, it is recommended to use the 'Attention-Interest-Desire-Action' framework for crafting the social media schedule.

This framework is effective for capturing the attention of the project's target customer groups (current and future international students and the local companies of Eastern Finland). It should begin with a bold statement to catch attention, followed by information to create interest, a description of

the benefits of the event or services to create desire, and finally, a call to action prompting customers to take action, such as attending a workshop or event.

The project can enlist the help of Karelia University of Applied Sciences student ambassador programme and share the project schedule content with them to post on social media channels. A weekly social media post schedule for the project has been proposed in **Appendix 1**.

To further attract attention, more success stories of international students should be published on the social media channels. To support this effort, the author has been working on developing a process whereby the project can automatically gather all information about international student internships in the system. This information can then be used for social media posts. The entire process has been described in **Appendix 2**.

2. *Own Website and Using Search Engine Optimization (SEO):*

Establishing its own multilingual website with regular updates about the project is essential for customer acquisition. This platform would serve as a valuable resource for both students and local companies seeking for information about the project. Additionally, implementing search engine optimization (SEO) strategies can enhance the project's online visibility.

By optimizing key terms related to the project, such as 'International students working in Eastern Finland,' 'Networking,' and 'Entrepreneurship in Joensuu,' the project can increase its website traffic and reach a wider audience.

9 Discussion

The primary limitation of the thesis, from the author's perspective, was the limited number of participants in the research. This constraint restricted the exploration of a diverse range of perspectives among international students regarding the integration process at Karelia University of Applied Sciences.

However, the international students at Karelia University of Applied Sciences can still benefit from the research findings. They can utilize the insights to understand why some students are more successful in integrating into Finnish working culture compared to others and identify key factors to consider for successful integration. Nevertheless, due to structural constraints in the thesis writing, not all challenges and recommendations could be fully addressed.

This study not only proves beneficial for the international students: different ongoing projects of Karelia University of Applied Sciences can also utilize the recommendations regarding communication channels to enhance the success of their projects. All the projects are designed for the betterment of the students, so it is crucial to ensure that the target audience receives all the information about the service's systematic manner to make effective use of them.

It is important to note that the author herself is also an international student of Karelia University of Applied Sciences who is highly satisfied with the integration services provided by the university. She also attempted to consider the perspective of unsatisfied students. It was challenging for her to set aside personal opinions and focus solely on the participants' perspectives. Ultimately, the research was able to provide recommendations for both satisfied and unsatisfied students. The author suggests that future research should focus on how international students can utilize the available services more efficiently rather than proposing new services.

The author took into consideration the findings of previous studies, most of which focused solely on the language barrier. While the language barrier is a significant

challenge for international students' integration into the labor market, the author believes that the lack of cultural understanding is the main barrier.

Therefore, more services should be arranged for the international students to facilitate better cultural integrations. However, integration is a two-way process: it is not solely the responsibility of the university or the authority to provide services. International students should also take steps to embrace Finnish culture and make use of the available services.

Throughout the entire research process, the author ensured that the data privacy of the participants was protected. Before conducting interviews, all participants were informed about the use of their information, and each participant was assigned an anonymous identity to maintain their anonymity.

In conclusion, the researcher considered ethical concerns and employed techniques that could be relied upon to obtain data. By using a predetermined set of questions, taking careful notes, and applying a rigorous analysis procedure, the dependability of the obtained data was ensured.

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Appendix 1

Recommended social media post schedule for the project:

A weekly social media schedule has been proposed to the project keeping AIDA frame work in mind to grab the attending of the targeted audience group.

Day	Type of Content	Content Details	Platforms	Engagement Tactics
Monday	Success Stories	Share the success stories of international talents incorporating with the local companies through the project, focusing on impacts. It includes present and alumni students	Instagram Facebook LinkedIn	Encourage the follower to comment on how they are be inspired by the story or how that can be helpful for them.
Wednesday	Educational Content	Post information about the educational services of the project like MOOC courses, language courses.	LinkedIn Instagram Facebook	Utilize polls or questions to in stories/post to engage the audience and gathering feedback for the future improvement.
Friday	Events	Promote upcoming events, workshop or networking opportunities with the speakers' introductions, after event feedback post.	LinkedIn Instagram Facebook WhatsApp Groups	Create event countdowns and reminders. Streaming live to extend reach.

Appendix 2

Recommended process for international student's internship databank:

To support the project communication process, the author of the thesis has developed a process. In this process, dedicated study counsellors for the international degree programmes (International business, Industrial management, Information and communication technology) will update their own information in an Excel sheet. This information will then be automatically uploaded to the project's dedicated Excel sheet for international student internship information. This data can be used as needed for the project.

