



Exploring the experiences and challenges of International Nursing students adjusting to Life in Finland: A Qualitative study of Laurea UAS students

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Laurea University of Applied Sciences

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Nursing Students Adjusting to Life in Finland: A Qualitative
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This study explores the challenges and experiences of international nursing students in Finland, particularly those nearing the completion of their studies. The objective was to identify limitations in their integration process and highlight gaps in nursing education that impact their adjustment to a new environment. By examining their personal experiences, the research aimed to provide insights into the unique needs of this student group.

A qualitative research design was employed, using semi-structured interviews with five international nursing students from Laurea University of Applied Sciences. Thematic analysis with an inductive approach was used to analyze the collected data. Despite the sample size, data saturation was achieved due to the depth of the interviews, which provided rich insights into students' experiences.

The findings revealed several key challenges. Academic difficulties were evident, particularly in securing preferred placements and managing coursework, with the additional burden of learning the Finnish language. The language barrier persisted as a significant obstacle in work-life situations. Beyond academics, students struggled with social integration, forming friendships, and accessing support networks, especially during the winter months when the absence of family support became more pronounced. Seeking information and navigating Finnish society were perceived as difficult. However, students also acknowledged the benefits of studying in Finland's self-directed learning environment. Participants shared their perspectives on what could be improved to better support their educational journey.

Participants reported experiences of discrimination and judgment based on their foreign backgrounds during practice placements, leading to diminished self-assurance and concerns about future employment in the Finnish healthcare system. The research highlights how these experiences affect students' sense of belonging and their perceptions of long-term professional growth opportunities. While some students maintain motivation to pursue careers in Finland, others express doubts about overcoming perceived barriers to advancement.

The study recommends strengthening educational institution support systems, particularly in increasing practical placement opportunities, as these are essential to nursing education. Enhanced collaboration between schools and placement providers is suggested to ensure placements align with students' learning needs and timelines. Future research could further explore the long-term motivations of students who choose to remain in Finland despite these challenges.

Keywords: international nursing students, academic challenges, supportive educational system, integration, lived experience in Finland

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1 Introduction

In this report, Perplexity AI has been used to edit the language of the text and make the text smoother.

Globalization has brought about many changes in the world, including an increase in people migrating to other countries in search of better economic opportunities (WHO 2020; Dorri, Abedi & Mohammadi 2020). This trend has led to a shift in economic situations around the world, creating employment needs and policy readjustments (WHO 2020). While globalization has had a significant impact on various sectors, it has also influenced the migration of nurses (Dorri, Abedi & Mohammadi 2020). Globalization has led to an increase in the migration of nurses across countries (Dorri, Abedi & Mohammadi 2020), as healthcare systems worldwide seek to provide accessible care to population that is ageing and increasing in chronic health conditions (Stokes & Iskander 2021). This migration can be seen as both a positive and negative consequence of globalization, as it allows nurses to access new opportunities and improve their skills, but also disrupts the stability of healthcare systems (Dorri, Abedi & Mohammadi 2020).

In today's global setting, the healthcare sector around the world is facing a crisis due to the shortage of healthcare workers, especially nurses (Poon et al. 2022). The reported shortage of 5.9 million nurses globally (The World Health Organization; WHO 2020), is expected to increase to 9 million by 2030. This crisis has led to a significant demand for healthcare professionals in many countries (Marć, Bartosiewicz, Burzyńska, Chmiel & Januszewicz 2019), including Finland (Ropponen et al. 2023).

A key role of education is to connect countries globally, in which the internationalization of higher education has become an important topic of interest. The significant growth in the number of students pursuing education abroad has sparked inquiries about the extent to which international students decide to remain in their host countries, and the influence of the challenges they encounter during their studies on their decision-making process (Mathies & Karhunen 2021a & 2021b; Wu 2020).

In Finland, nursing degree programs are provided by universities of applied sciences. The study program is designed to last for 3.5 years of full-time studies, totalling 210 European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) credits. The education provides the students with a bachelor's degree and a professional qualification to practice as a registered nurse (Ministry of Education and Culture 2017). The joint national application system (Study info n.d) also provides international students English-language taught degree programs in Nursing.

The Identified shortage of 16,000 registered nurses and 9,000 practical nurses in Finland (Punkari 2023), is a significant indicator for Finnish universities in attracting international students in healthcare. Consequently, the Rectors' Conference of Finnish Universities of Applied Sciences has underlined the crucial need to augment the presence of international students in Finland and facilitate their integration into the local workforce (Ylönen 2023).

Amidst the increasing influx of international nursing students (INS) to Finland (Ministry of education 2009), a noticeable gap exists in comprehensive research dedicated to exploring the specific challenges and experiences encountered by INS, particularly in the aftermath of the recent global Covid-19 pandemic. This research aims to address this gap and enhance the comprehension of the unique experiences and challenges faced by INS in Finland.

This thesis focuses on international nursing students studying in Finland to acquire a bachelor's degree in nursing. The study seeks to comprehensively understand the potential aptitudes and limitations these students face during their prolonged academic stay in a foreign nation. By examining their experiences, this research aims to provide insights into the broader context of international student adaptation and integration.

2 Background

The UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2023) defines international students as those who travel across national borders to pursue educational opportunities in a country other than their own.

Most scholarly research in the field of international students has primarily focused on native English-speaking countries. As highlighted by studies in the field (Verbik & Lasanowski 2007, 3; Ortiz, Chang & Fang 2015; Choudaha & Chang 2012, 7). Countries like the USA, the UK, and Australia have historically been leaders in attracting international students.

In recent times, the Nordic region has become an increasingly appealing destination for international students, due to their high level of welfare, quality education, and a wide range of programs offered in English (Airey, Lauridsen, Räsänen, Salö & Schwach 2017; Lundahl 2016; Nordic Council of Ministers 2013; Saarinen & Taalas 2017). In Finland, internationalizing higher education has become a key national policy objective. The "Strategy for the Internationalization of Higher Education Institutions in Finland 2009-2015," issued by the Ministry of Education and Culture, outlines the goal of establishing Finland as a globally robust and appealing hub for higher education and research (Ministry of Education 2009). This initiative highlights efforts to enhance societal adaptability in an international context, demonstrating how Finnish higher education has bolstered its efforts to welcome more international students.

To explore this topic, a literature review was conducted using various credible databases such as CINAHL, ScienceDirect, and Elsevier. Peer-reviewed articles relevant to the key concepts of this research were selected to form the theoretical foundation. The focus was on obtaining the most recent studies where possible, with particular attention given to research conducted in Finland to ensure contextual relevance.

Finland has become a popular destination for international students, including those in the nursing field, who come to study and explore the opportunities it offers. From 2017 onwards, Finland alongside other Nordic nations, shifted towards a more market-driven strategy by introducing tuition fees for international students from outside the EU, (MENA Report 2016; Nordic Council of Ministers 2013). This policy shift represents a notable change in the landscape of higher education accessibility for international students in the region.

International students who may lack prior experience living in Finland pose an intriguing subject for analysis, particularly concerning their potential unfamiliarity with the Finnish climate and cultural norms. Additionally, their limited familiarity with the distinctive Finnish educational framework adds another layer of complexity to their adaptation process (Mathies & Karhunen 2021b, 876). Consequently, the challenges and experiences these international students encounter often differ significantly from those of their locally residing counterparts pursuing the same course.

This thesis explores the experiences of international nursing students in Finland, focusing on their education, integration, and challenges in clinical placements. It examines how language competency, academic environments, and broader immigration policies shape their adaptation. The background information was gathered from peer-reviewed articles and government reports, accessed through academic databases and *Google Scholar*. The focus was on recent studies, particularly those conducted in Finland, to ensure relevance to the research topic

2.1 Nursing education in Finland (Laurea University of Applied sciences)

In Finland, nursing education is provided through degree programs at universities of applied sciences. Among these institutions, Laurea University of Applied Sciences (Laurea UAS) stands out as one of Finland's largest educators of nurses (Alastalo, Korhonen & Partamies 2020).

Laurea UAS has placed a strong emphasis on internationalization, offering six-degree programs taught in English, including a Bachelor of Nursing program. This program comprises 210 ECTS credits, aligning with the EU Directive 2013/55/EU, which outlines minimum requirements for nursing education. Students complete their studies in 3.5 years, with 90 ECTS credits dedicated to clinical practice, ensuring a blend of theoretical knowledge and hands-on experience (Education Statistics Finland n.d.; Mattila, Pitkäljärvi & Eriksson 2010).

The significance of Laurea's nursing program is evident in its high enrolment of international students. In 2022, 321 international students were admitted to Laurea's polytechnic bachelor's degree programs, with 159 enrolling in nursing. This marks a substantial increase from 2017, when only 72 international students were admitted to the program. This trend reflects both the global demand for highly skilled nurses and Laurea's commitment to fostering a multicultural learning environment (Education Statistics Finland n.d.).

The EU directives on Nursing are closely aligned with evolving healthcare needs, emphasizing professional competence, evidence-based decision-making, and interprofessional collaboration (Silen & Korhonen 2020). Finnish nurses are globally recognized for their high standards, thanks to curricula developed in collaboration with the industry and governed by strict EU directives (Silen & Korhonen 2020). In partnership with the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture, Laurea has contributed to projects like Skills for Social and Health Care, which aim to address changing job profiles and enhance competencies in healthcare.

Graduates of Finnish nursing programs, including Laurea, are required to obtain a nursing license from the Social Welfare and Health Care Department (Valvira). This ensures adherence to national regulations and standards of care, further solidifying the reputation of Finnish nurses (Valvira n.d.).

Through its Bachelor of Nursing program, Laurea exemplifies Finland's approach to combining rigorous academic training with practical application, preparing students for the dynamic demands of modern healthcare. Its role in educating international nursing students underscores its importance in addressing global nursing shortages while contributing to the multiculturalization of the Finnish healthcare workforce.

2.2 International experiences in nursing education

2.2.1 Lived experiences of nurse students studying abroad

The lived experiences of nursing students studying abroad have garnered attention due to increasing global mobility and the rising popularity of international nursing education (Dorri, Abedi & Mohammadi 2020). As healthcare becomes more culturally diverse, nurses are required to provide competent care to clients from various cultural backgrounds (Ruddock & Turner 2007).

Studying abroad may offer transformative experiences for nursing students. Ruddock and Turner (2007) found that international professional exposure served as an eye-opening journey, fostering personal and cultural growth. This exposure not only broadened students' cultural understanding but also encouraged self-reflection and recognition of personal identity. Many

students viewed cultural shock as a valuable learning experience, essential for their development into competent nurses.

Edmonds (2010) further emphasized that immersion in an international environment deepened students' passion for nursing by reinforcing the core values of the profession. Short-term international exchange programs, in particular, enabled students to bridge theoretical knowledge of cultural diversity with practical applications in real-life settings, resulting in a more holistic understanding of nursing practices (Edmonds 2010).

Beyond academic enrichment, international learning experiences had a profound personal impact. Students reported gaining a broader perspective of the world, becoming more aware of their own biases and beliefs (Edmonds 2010). This self-awareness was closely tied to their ability to adapt to new cultural and social environments. Edmonds (2010) noted that navigating life in a foreign culture enhanced students' adaptability and their understanding of the importance of cultural integration.

The ability to adapt also influenced students' sense of belonging, determining whether they were perceived as part of the group or as outsiders (Ruddock & Turner 2007). While adapting to a new environment posed challenges, students often viewed these as opportunities for self-development. Many expressed that overcoming such challenges instilled a sense of accomplishment and personal growth (Edmonds 2010).

2.2.2 Integration experiences of international nursing students in Finland

International nursing students (INS) choose to study in Finland for several reasons, including the country's reputation for good occupational health services, a high standard of living, respect for human rights and equality, safety and security (Lu & Everson 2024). These factors are often cited as positive attributes that support the retention of these students in Finland (Ropponen et al. 2023; Kamau et al. 2023).

Students expressed a strong preference for workplaces with a multicultural team, where the presence of other foreign nurses made them feel a sense of belonging. They believed that such environments would foster better understanding and acceptance of the challenges they faced (Ropponen et al. 2023).

During clinical placements, students found that job offers were often contingent on their ability to demonstrate strong language and clinical skills. In some cases, job opportunities arose primarily because of a shortage of nurses and a need to fill vacancies (Ropponen et al. 2023). However, students graduating from English-taught bachelor's programs reported limited career opportunities compared to their Finnish-taught counterparts. This disparity was attributed to the different courses available in the programs, which often restricted English-speaking

students' access to diverse clinical placements. Such limitations affected students' career preferences and prevented them from securing positions in units requiring high proficiency in Finnish (Ropponen et al.2023).

Negative experiences during clinical placements had a significant impact on students' confidence and career aspirations. Some felt prejudiced against and faced uncertainty about their future as nurses. These experiences led some students to doubt their career choice, with a few even considering abandoning nursing altogether (Mattila et al. 2010). Despite these challenges, many students adopted a pragmatic approach, aiming to secure any nursing job to obtain licenses and financial stability, even at the expense of job satisfaction (Ropponen et al.2023). Once employment was secured, however, students noted that life in Finland offered stability and a sense of security, highlighting the potential for positive integration if systemic barriers are addressed (Ropponen et al.2023).

2.2.3 Challenges in clinical placements for international nursing students

Clinical placements are a significant part of the Finnish Bachelor of Nursing program (Alastalo et al. 2020; Laurea UAS n.d.; Metropolia UAS), and they present various challenges that impact students' learning outcomes (Pitkälä et al. 2013; Mikkonen et al. 2017; Mattila et al. 2010). These placements have been shown to evoke a wide range of experiences, from positive to negative (Mattila et al. 2010; Mikkonen et al. 2017; Pitkälä, Eriksson & Pitkälä 2012).

Despite clinical practice making up 90 ECTS credits of the curriculum, international nursing students (INS) often find that placement opportunities are limited. Few placements are available in English (Pitkälä et al. 2012), and most require native-level Finnish language skills (Mattila et al. 2010). INS in the study by Mattila et al. (2010) reflected that when introduced to the clinical environment, staff, and routines, they gained a sense of purpose and belonging, making them feel more integrated into nursing activities.

However, while INS felt welcomed in their clinical environments, many reported feeling unsupported. They often perceived less warmth from staff compared to their Finnish peers, which contributed to feelings of isolation and being treated as outsiders. This lack of trust in their competencies was also evident in patient interactions (Pitkälä et al. 2012; Mattila et al. 2010).

Language barriers were a major challenge in clinical placements, with students reporting that their limited Finnish language skills led to frustration from staff and hindered their learning experiences (Mikkonen et al. 2017; Mikkonen 2017; Mattila et al. 2010).

2.3 Immigration, integration and language competency

2.3.1 Immigration and internationalisation in Finland

Finland has mirrored this global trend with a substantial rise in the number of international students over the past two decades. The number of degree-seeking international students grew significantly, from 6,000 in 2000 to over 21,000 in 2016, driven in part by Finland's "Strategy for the Internationalization of Higher Education Institutions in Finland 2009-2015" (Ministry of Education 2009; Finnish National Agency for Education 2017, as cited in Mathies & Karhunen 2021a). By 2019, this number had tripled compared to 2001, with 31,913 international students enrolled in Finnish higher education institutions, representing 10% of the total student population (Institute of International Education 2024).

To attract and retain international students, Finland has implemented various measures, such as adjusting application periods, creating a centralised English-language application platform, and extending residence permits to facilitate job-seeking after graduation (European Commission 2018; Mathies & Karhunen 2021a). These initiatives align with Finland's broader economic and demographic challenges. As one of the fastest ageing populations in Europe (Valkama & Oulasvirta 2021; KC, Clarke, & Seppänen 2023; Lu & Everson 2024), Finland faces growing demand for care services and workforce shortages in various sectors, including healthcare (Valkama & Oulasvirta 2021).

The integration of international students into Finnish society is viewed as critical to addressing these challenges. Policies aim to ensure that graduates from Finnish higher education institutions remain in Finland, contributing to the economy and bridging the gap in labour demands (Lu & Everson 2024). Such measures are particularly relevant in the healthcare sector, where many OECD countries, including Finland, have increased enrolments in medical and nursing programmes to mitigate anticipated workforce shortages (OECD 2019). Finland, along with countries like Norway and Switzerland, has experienced rapid growth in the per capita number of nurses, reflecting concerted efforts to strengthen the healthcare workforce (OECD 2019).

2.3.2 Integration and language competency in nursing and education

The integration of foreign nurses and international nursing students (INS) into the Finnish healthcare system is influenced by both systemic support and language competency. Finland's ongoing nursing shortage has driven recruitment from diverse international backgrounds, as well as the inclusion of locally trained foreign nursing students. This multicultural workforce brings opportunities and challenges that shape integration experiences (Näre & Cleland Silva 2021).

Language proficiency stands as a critical factor for securing employment and establishing a nursing career. Foreign nurses and INS actively enrol in language programs to meet the linguistic demands of healthcare settings. Despite these efforts, they often encounter barriers where their professional competencies are overshadowed by judgments about their Finnish language skills. This "othering" creates a hierarchy in the healthcare system, making foreign nurses feel undervalued despite their contributions (Kamau et al. 2023).

In clinical placements, INS report restricted learning opportunities due to limited Finnish skills. Withholding patient information, exclusion from team activities, and limited mentorship interactions were common issues. Some mentors, however, made efforts to teach in English, creating positive learning experiences for students (Mattila et al. 2010; Pitkäjärvi 2012; Ropponen et al. 2023). Similarly, foreign nurses reported varying workplace dynamics, where supportive mentorship and structured induction programs promoted smoother integration. However, the absence of specialized support programs often led to feelings of isolation and challenges in adapting to the workplace culture (Kamau et al. 2023).

Interactions with patients and colleagues further illustrate the role of language. While many patients were supportive, others displayed discriminatory behaviors, such as mocking accents or refusing care from foreign nurses. This discrimination, coupled with a lack of workplace acknowledgment for language improvement efforts, hindered integration. Poorly scheduled language courses that failed to accommodate work-life balance also discouraged foreign nurses and INS from fully developing their skills (Kamau et al. 2023; Mattila et al. 2010).

Despite these challenges, foreign nurses and INS demonstrated resilience. Many sought to compensate for linguistic limitations with strong clinical skills, navigating systemic and social barriers with determination. Successful integration often depended on workplace support, such as team-building activities and inclusive organizational policies. For some, these positive experiences encouraged long-term residency in Finland. However, instances of discrimination and inadequate systemic support prompted others to reconsider their future in the country (Kamau et al. 2023; Ropponen et al. 2023).

3 Purpose, aims and research questions

The purpose of this study was to explore the personal experiences and challenges faced by international nursing students as they adjust to life in Finland, with a specific focus on the challenges they face during their study period in Finland.

The research questions were as follows:

1. What challenges do international nursing students face during their studies in Finland, and how do they navigate these challenges?
2. How do international nursing students experience their educational journey in Finland, and what opportunities and limitations do they encounter in their studies and practice?

By addressing these questions, the study aims to contribute to the understanding of the experiences and challenges faced by INS in Finland and enhance the educational experience of these INS in Finland. The findings can inform the development of targeted interventions and strategies to address the specific needs of international nursing students, ultimately contributing to a more inclusive and supportive educational environment. Additionally, by addressing the unique challenges encountered by international nursing students, the study can have far-reaching implications for the nursing profession and global health.

Therefore, this study aims to hold potential to not only improve the educational experience of INS in Finland, but also to contribute to the broader goals of enhancing the nursing profession and global health.

4 Methodology

4.1 Study design

This research was a qualitative descriptive study focusing on providing a detailed and rich account of participants' experiences and the research context (Moser & Korstjens 2017). Qualitative research methods are widely acknowledged in academic literature for their suitability in exploring complex social phenomena, human behaviour, and nuanced contexts (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik 2021). Indeed, because experiences are inherently subjective, this qualitative study was a suitable tool for uncovering how individuals construct reality within their natural context (Moser & Korstjens 2017; Anas & Ishaq 2022).

In the context of this study, these participating students come from diverse cultural backgrounds, each bringing a unique set of experiences and perspectives. Pope & Mays (2020), describes qualitative approach as an interpretative approach to data collection and analysis that is concerned with the meaning people attach to their experiences. Qualitative research allows for in-depth exploration of these individual experiences, enabling a deeper understanding of the challenges they encounter (Pope & Mays 2020, 2; Thelwall & Nevill 2021). This made it an ideal choice for investigating the challenges faced by international nursing students.

Qualitative research comprises both qualitative methods of data collection and qualitative methods of analysis; it gathers words and/or visual, descriptive forms of data and explicates these using text-based, interpretative analytical methods (Pope & May 2020, 3). This comprehensive approach allowed the researcher to delve deep into the experiences, perceptions, and feelings of international students, providing a holistic understanding of the challenges they encountered during their studies in Finland.

Secondly, a qualitative approach allowed the researcher to be responsive and adaptive, exploring emerging themes and issues as they came up during the interviews. Unlike quantitative methods that rely on predefined survey questions, qualitative research embraces the fluidity of human experiences, which enabled the researcher to ask probing questions and follow-up on unexpected insights (Pope & May 2020, 114) by generating non-numerical data (Anas & Ishaq 2022). This adaptability was essential in this study of a diverse group like international nursing students, as it ensured that the research remains contextually relevant.

Furthermore, the researcher acknowledged that investigating the challenges faced by international nursing students was a sensitive topic. Hence, with a qualitative research approach, the researcher aimed to foster an environment of trust and rapport between the researcher and participants (McGrath, Palmgren & Liljedahl 2019). This was a crucial factor that was taken into consideration with the adoption of this research method

4.2 Study site and sample

The study was conducted in Laurea UAS in Tikkurila Campus in Vantaa. The Tikkurila campus hosts degree programme in Nursing in the English language. Students enrolled in the degree programme during the data collection period, with a non-Finnish background were considered eligible to participate. Additional eligibility criteria included that the students were enrolled in their very first educational degree in Finland at the time of their studies and was in their final year of study during the recruitment period. The reason for recruiting students in their final year was to ensure that they had lived in Finland long enough to accumulate experiences and challenges to share.

Sampling and the recruitment of participants were conducted following a purposive sampling method. Purposive sampling is an approach for intentionally selecting participants based on meeting certain criteria of interest (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik 2021). Purposive sampling helped ensure that the selected participants represented the target population and provided valuable insights into understanding the experiences of that population (Guest, Namey & Mitchell 2013, 10). In this regard, purposive sampling fit as the most suitable approach for the objectives of this research.

Recruitment began once the research permit from Laurea UAS had been acquired in April 2024. Recruitment communication was sent to potential participants by an administrator teacher of the Nursing degree program in Laurea UAS Tikkurila on behalf of the researcher. This communication targeted two groups of 3rd-year nursing students at Laurea, totalling 42 students. An information sheet (appendix 1) detailing the research's purpose and procedures served as the primary source of information for students. This document also included the researcher's contact information, allowing interested individuals to reach out if they wish to participate.

The researcher aimed to recruit 5-8 student participants for the study initially. The sample size was reviewed and adapted until data saturation was achieved (Busetto, Wick & Gumbinger 2020, 7) after 5 interviews.

4.3 Data collection and interview guideline

The data was collected using semi-structured interviews, which aimed to capture participants' subjective perspectives on phenomena, experiences, and opinions (McGrath, Palmgren, & Liljedahl 2019; Busetto et al. 2020). This qualitative approach enabled the exploration of personal narratives, emotional responses, cultural adjustments, and coping strategies. To facilitate this, the researcher developed a carefully constructed interview guide (Appendix 3), informed by frameworks from previous studies on semi-structured interviews (Kallio et al. 2016; Saldaña 2013).

The interview guideline was designed to elicit in-depth, vivid, and spontaneous responses. It comprised two levels: main themes and follow-up questions. The main themes guided participants to share their experiences and perceptions, while follow-up questions enhanced understanding and encouraged deeper reflection. Verbal and non-verbal probes, such as expressing interest or allowing silence for contemplation, were used to encourage detailed responses. The guideline was crafted with layman language to ensure clarity and avoid technical jargon, following recommendations by research experts (McGrath, Palmgren, & Liljedahl 2019; Kallio et al. 2016).

The interviews were conducted over three months, with four out of five conducted in person at Laurea UAS Tikkurila campus and one conducted via MS Teams. Each session lasted 45 minutes to 1 hour. In-person interviews were manually transcribed by the researcher using MS Word, while the online interview was transcribed verbatim on Teams. The interview guideline was fine-tuned during the data collection phase, adapting to insights gained from participants. For instance, while the initial focus was on academic challenges, the guideline evolved to encompass broader themes related to life adjustments in Finland, as these emerged as significant factors.

A test interview was conducted with a colleague before formal data collection to refine the guideline. This iterative process ensured that the guideline could generate data fostering the emergence of new concepts.

Initial analysis was conducted concurrently after each interview (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik 2021, 1361), followed by more interviews. When the researcher was not able to find any more variant in already collected sample, data saturation was deemed achieved since any further data collection will not produce value-added insights and becomes redundant (Busetto et al. 2020, 7).

4.4 Data analysis

The researcher transcribed the data soon after each interview to prevent workload at the end. This approach, as suggested by McGrath et al. (2019), kept the researcher familiarized with the context and allowed for greater awareness of emerging themes and categories. By transcribing immediately, the researcher was also able to become familiar with the data early on and further develop the interview technique by closely listening to and reflecting on each interview.

Thematic analysis (TA) with an inductive approach was chosen for this study as it is a qualitative method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data (Castleberry & Nolen 2018; Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik 2021). This approach allows themes and patterns to emerge naturally from the data, without imposing preconceived categories (Castleberry & Nolen 2018, 809). TA is particularly suitable for analysing semi-structured interviews, as it enables the exploration of data at varying depths while offering flexibility and scope for interpretation (Kallio et al. 2016, Busetto et al. 2020, 2, Castleberry & Nolen 2018, 808).

The approach to data analysis in this study, as delineated by Braun and Clarke (2006), adhered to the thematic analysis (TA) framework consisting of six sequential phases (Figure 2). The guidance provided by Braun and Clarke (2006, 87), furnishes a structured methodology for conducting thematic analysis, commencing with the first phase of familiarizing oneself with the data and immersing oneself in the entirety of the data while making note of initial impressions.

Subsequently, in the second phase of 'Generating initial code', process of analysis started with thorough review and detailed coding, where the participants' accounts were coded with descriptive initial codes. This method involved annotating significant segments of the data and recording observations in a two columned table format on MS word.

The transcripts were descriptively coded individually, each saved in separate folders. Following the systematic guidelines proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006, 87) and highlighted by Naeem et al. (2023), the researcher meticulously identified noteworthy elements within each dataset, resulting in 141 initial codes. These initial codes were then organized into an "initial codes"

folder for reference, with a copy moved to a newly created "focused codes" folder for subsequent analysis.

Next, the initial codes and the contents were reread, and grouped to form fewer combined codes. Simultaneously, initial code names were made consistent within each dataset and across all data set. To achieve this, the existing, initial codes were first organised into overarching thematic categories (OTC) and these OTC were based on the judgment as to what topics the various codes represent.

Within these OTC, then, the codes were scrutinized and "cleaned up", which also ensured that there were no duplicates, or several codes that are describing the same or similar thing. Such codes were then merged into one code. As emphasized by experts (Braune & Clarke 2006) the researcher was thoroughly familiar with the data by this stage, as analyzing the data to discern how different codes may align with overarching themes (Naeem et al. 2023). At the end of this stage, there were 47 codes left which is presented in the Thematic framework (Appendix 4).

The codes were, then, copied and pasted to the final "thematic framework" folder. All codes were scrutinized, and their content re-read multiple times, and questions were asked as to how this newly developed understanding of the data may contribute to answering the research questions.

The analysis advanced to the third phase, which involved organizing the coded data into broader emerging themes. This process was informed by both cross-case and within-case comparisons, meaning that the data were analyzed in detail both between participants and within individual participants' responses. Through this comparative analysis, the codes were re-organized, allowing for the identification of overarching themes that began to emerge from the dataset.

This process required a keen understanding of the dataset to identify connections and patterns that lead to the formation of coherent themes. To facilitate this process, Braune & Clarke (2006, 89) advice on the use of visual tools such as mind maps to start the generation of a thematic map. For this the researcher used a simple table layout on MS word which would finalize as the thematic framework below (Appendix 4).

In the combined phases four and five, the researcher reviewed, refined, and finalized the identified themes. As the analysis progressed, individual themes took on greater significance, contributing to a deeper understanding of the dataset. Some codes led to the development of sub-themes (Castleberry & Nolen 2018; Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik 2021; Busetto et al. 2020). During this phase, the researcher gained a comprehensive understanding of the themes, their interrelationships, and the overarching narrative they conveyed (Braun & Clarke 2006, 91-93). The thematic framework was constructed to visually represent these interrelationships, ensuring that the themes were distinct while telling a cohesive story about the dataset. Through

multiple rounds of analysis, the final set of themes and sub-themes emerged, capturing the essence of the dataset and contributing to the overall findings (Braun & Clarke 2006, 92-93). An illustration of the thematic analytical process is shown in Table 1.

As Braun and Clarke (2006, 93-94) suggest, the researcher paid particular attention to the identification of sub-themes within the themes. These sub-themes provided structure to more complex themes and helped highlight the hierarchy of meaning within the data. For instance, one of the overarching themes in the analysis was *factors supporting positive experiences and success* and within this theme, the researcher identified sub-themes such as *Resilient mindset and turning challenges into opportunities for growth*, *Supportive teachers and supervisors*, *a good education system and educational culture*. Each sub-theme added depth to the overall narrative while maintaining a clear connection to the main theme.

Finally, the sixth phase involved writing the report. Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidance, the report was structured to incorporate ample examples and extracts from the data to support the analytical narrative to effectively illustrate the narrative being conveyed. The findings section includes sufficient data extracts to demonstrate the prevalence of each theme, with extracts carefully selected to construct a coherent reasoning in relation to the research question.

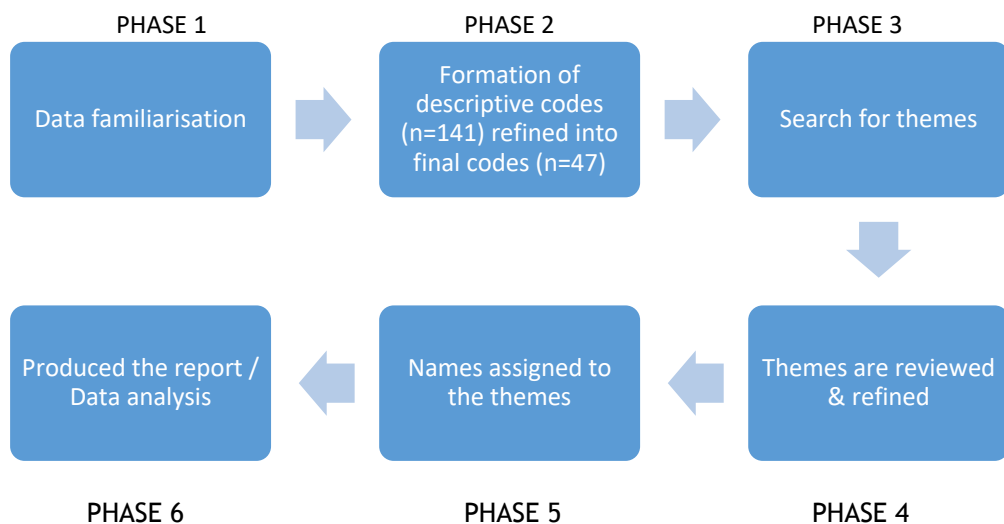


Figure 1: Six sequential phases of thematic analysis

‘Quotes’	Descriptive initial codes	Focused codes	Combined codes (sub-themes)	Theme
<p>‘I Initially, I thought I could work a few hours to support myself while studying, but the demands of the Bachelor’s nursing program make this impossible. Between assignments, full weeks of practice placements, and exams, there’s no time left to work without risking burnout. So, financially, it’s a struggle, I really need to always be on a strict budget.’</p> <p>‘Balancing practice placements and preparing for the exam is incredibly demanding. It requires a lot of energy to take notes and adequately prepare’</p>	<p>→ Working is difficult due to academic workload</p> <p>→ Workload is overwhelming, Simultaneous exams, study, Placements</p>	<p>→ Limited opportunities to balance work and study</p> <p>→ Strain of managing concurrent academic demands</p>	<p>Overwhelming academic workload</p>	<p>Academic challenges</p>
<p>‘I Find the studying method here is very self-directed. I say this because, it was not the kind of teaching or learning method I was accustomed to’</p> <p>‘I actually appreciate the teaching methods used here in Finland. It’s very collaborative between lecturers and students. Unlike where I come from, we’re not spoon-fed everything; there’s a strong emphasis on self-learning. However, adjusting to the idea that help is only given when asked took some getting used to’</p>	<p>→ Education is much more focused on self-study and autonomy; quite different</p> <p>→ Need to open up to teachers and ask for help, then they are very helpful</p>	<p>→ Adapting to an autonomous learning environment</p> <p>→ Challenges in seeking support in a self-directed system</p>	<p>Strong emphasis on self-directed learning</p>	

Table 1: Thematic analytical process

5 Findings

The findings focus was on the various challenges and barriers faced by the participants. Section 5.1.1 begins by addressing general challenges related to life in Finland. This is followed by an exploration of academic challenges and limitations in Section 5.1.2. Section 5.1.3 then focuses on challenges encountered in placements and work. Additionally, participants shared their experiences as international nursing students in Finland, highlighting factors that contributed to positive experiences and success, which are detailed in Section 5.2.1. The findings conclude with several suggestions for improving integration and professional development, presented in Section 5.2.2.

5.1 Challenges faced by international nursing students

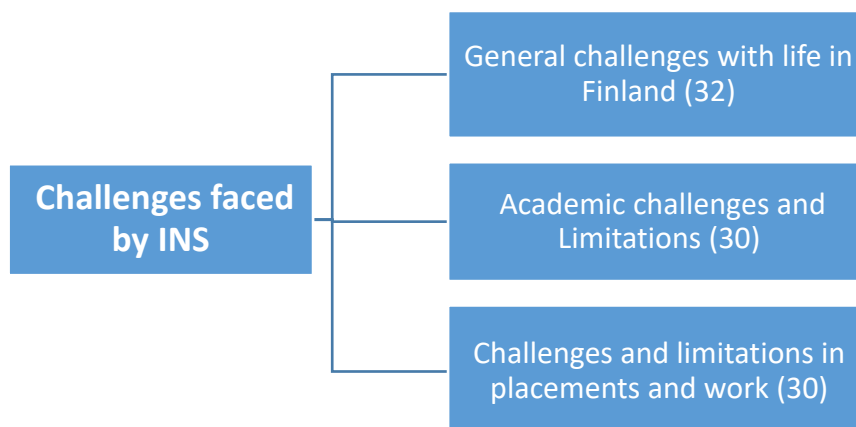


Figure 2: Themes representing the challenges faced by INS (Total number of times discussed)

5.1.1 General challenges with life in Finland

Participants highlighted difficulties in accessing essential information and resources for navigating daily life in Finland. While some praised the availability of online resources, others struggled to find the necessary support. Several participants expressed frustration with the *limited information and resources*, explaining that, although it exists, it is often hard to locate. For example, the introverted nature of local people was seen as a barrier to finding help, as "most things are online here and there's hardly any person-to-person information exchange," one participant explained. Accessing this information requires "knowing how to use technology and navigate the online world," which isn't always intuitive for everyone". The delay in

adjusting due to this was highlighted, with one participant noting, "this lack of information significantly delayed my learning process."

In fact, this *limited socialization and culture shock* that resulted from it were the most discussed challenge, with the participants feeling that "building enduring social connections can be tough" in Finland. There is a general "preference for no small talk" and a tendency for people to lead quieter, non-social lives. Some participants observed that locals "stick with their own groups" and may be reluctant to communicate in languages other than Finnish. This social dynamic further compounded the feeling of isolation.

Participants described the winter months as socially isolating, citing fewer activities and less visible interaction due to the weather, which leads to the *weather-related difficulties* that they mentioned. Vitamin D deficiency and a general lack of outdoor activities during this period contributed to feelings of isolation and reduced motivation:

The social scene can feel quite lonesome during the winter months because there's a lack of activity and people are less visible. Overall, while the weather and social dynamics presented challenges, I managed to adjust over time, or I think I am still adjusting (Interviewee 1).

due to cultural differences like the preference for no small talk and the impact of the pandemic, it wasn't easy to expand my social circle with locals. I've found it challenging to make friends with Finns because they can be less approachable (Interviewee 3).

Finally, although the participants did have some friend and/or family support at one point or another, *lack of family and friend support* was mentioned as a possible issue. As one participant shared, "they aren't as close or deep as I would like them to be." The absence of close family and friends nearby was seen as another significant challenge. One participant, who had separated from her partner, found the experience particularly difficult, remarking that the acquaintances made through her husband "never reached out" after the separation:

My separation was tough for me. I wished that my family was here with me. I mean no separation is easy, for anyone. But specially because I was alone, and with no friends, I had made my partner my entire world. The only other people I knew were my partners acquaintances and his friends. I didn't have a direct link to them, so after the separation, they never reached out to me (interviewee 5).

5.1.2 Academic challenges and limitations

Participants expressed concerns regarding *the overwhelming academic workload*, pointing out the numerous objectives they had to manage, including professional placements, exams, and adjusting to a new environment. The combination of these responsibilities, alongside teacher and supervisor evaluations, left many feeling exhausted and unable to work, leading to financial constraints:

Initially, I thought I could work a few hours to support myself while studying, but the demands of the Bachelor's nursing program make this impossible. Between assignments, full weeks of practice placements, and exams, there's no time left to work without risking burnout. So, financially, it's a struggle, I really need to always be on a strict budget (Interviewee 3).

Some participants appreciated the strong emphasis on *self-directed learning*, although adjusting to the expectation that help is only given when sought took time. While this teaching method was ultimately understood to be beneficial, it was initially difficult for some to adapt to, especially international students, who often felt there was insufficient guidance when navigating professional placements and the broader hospital system. Participants viewed the expectation of autonomy as a drawback, as it often left them feeling unsupported and having to navigate challenges independently.

Yes, we received some guidance, but I think it wasn't enough for international students who might need more support. After all, I had only been living in Finland for a few years at that point. This is where the self-search and self-directed approach of teaching here reflects a downside. When students need help, we don't always get it immediately, as it's expected that we figure it out on our own first (Interviewee 5).

This directly leads to the wider issue of *insufficient resources and support for international students*. In addition to limited guidance, participants mentioned inadequate training in the Finnish language and little exposure to the nuances of the "do's and don'ts" on how the education system operates in Finland. Local Finnish students who had had this exposure were perceived to have an advantage, being raised as "independent thinkers and planners" and do better in this system. It was also felt that Finnish students had better access to study materials and resources that were "crucial for preparing for the exam," which international students found unavailable which was perceived as "unfair" to the international students.

This discrepancy was particularly noticeable, when the participants discussed about *challenges related to the exam*. One participant explained how the translation of exams from Finnish to English sometimes altered the meaning of the questions and answers, adding unnecessary confusion. The exams were seen as an additional burden, especially given the already heavy workload, and some students felt that the penalties for wrong answers only added to the pressure.

Participants also commented on *insufficient and/or irrelevant placement preparation*, explaining that the students generally receive little information about these, and later their expectations do not match the reality of the placements. While the academic instruction was heavily focused on theory, it did not fully prepare students for the practical aspects of their placements. Moreover, the workshops provided were conducted in English, while the actual placements were in Finnish, exacerbating the language barrier and its impact on professional practice (see section 5.1.3).

The education we receive at school is focused heavily on theory and thematic knowledge, which is necessary, but it doesn't fully prepare us for practical placements. When we're in practice placements (PP), it feels like we're essentially working as hired employees in the nursing field. In this role, your practical skills—such as interacting with patients and performing tasks—are more crucial than just theoretical knowledge (Interviewee 5).

In my experience, while the theoretical classes are sufficient, the workshops need to be rethought. They should be more effective in teaching practical skills and better preparing us to face real working-life situations (Interviewee 5).

Finally, concerns about *lack of motivation and engagement from some teachers* were also highlighted. Some students found that a lack of motivation among certain teachers negatively affected the course as a whole, which was "frustrating" and demotivating for them.

5.1.3 Challenges and limitations in placements and work

The participants devoted a considerable amount of time to discussing various *challenges and limitations in placements and work*. All participants reported, for example, the issue of *language barriers causing stress in professional practice*. Although some had already taken some Finnish classes prior to their professional placements, they found that "it's totally different when you go to the hospital," where the real-life language used differs substantially from what is taught in courses. Everyday colloquial speech presented a particular challenge, with one student explaining that "colloquialisms and everyday speech are quite different from what is taught in language school." At the same time, the expectations during studies and placements were often the same as those for native Finnish speakers, compounding the difficulty.

This language barrier was considered by many to be a "significant issue" they faced, as it ultimately led to several other challenges, such as *workplace discrimination and alienation*. Participants often felt singled out and judged based on their Finnish language proficiency, which affected their confidence. The language barrier and the resulting experiences were also the main source of *stress and psychological strain in professional practice*. It was common for the participants to describe their professional practice as a "traumatizing", "nerve-wracking" and "scary" with one participant sharing how her self-esteem "really took a hit" as a result.

just because my Finnish language skills are average, it doesn't mean my learning capability is limited. I am a quick learner and grasp theories and new knowledge easily. I am adaptable and resourceful. However, I often feel like I am treated as if I am less capable or unable to learn by my coworkers or supervisors during placements (Interviewee 3).

My language limitations make me self-conscious, feeling like I can't fully reach my potential. I was very nervous during my first practice placement, feeling out of place due to my insufficient language skills. Despite thinking I had a good grasp of Finnish, it wasn't enough. This has been the major barrier affecting my studies and overall progress (interviewee 3).

The experience of finding and securing placements was, in itself, a stressful one. *Limited placement availability and high competition*, one student described the urgency of the situation, noting that "*positions are filled within seconds, leaving little chance even if you're fast.*" The fierce competition and stress of trying to secure a spot was described by one participant as being "like a bloodbath, almost like the Hunger Games".

The pressure to secure a placement quickly often meant that students had to accept whatever was available, which made it difficult for them to secure placements in areas of interest. Many worried about falling behind or potentially delaying graduation by a year if they could not secure placements in time. The problem is made worse by *geographical and systemic barriers* which mean that it is not recommended to try to find placements on your own and outside the online system. Also, the international students who have no family or connections outside the region they reside in are restricted to the limited options within the area where they stay.

Participants felt that the placement system was inequitable, and the above issue was only one of the perceived *discriminatory practices in placement selection* that the participants described. For example, many believed that Finnish nurses were often prioritized over international candidates, primarily due to language proficiency. Having experience in a Finnish work environment also increased the likelihood of securing a desired placement. Understandably, however, the international students have little experience in this context, and their overall *unfamiliarity with the field and local work culture* is another factor that puts them in a disadvantageous position in relation to their Finnish counterparts.

The above experiences are even more challenging considering *the lack of support in securing placements* that some reported, and some also raised concerns about the *Insufficient supervision and support during placements*. One student noted that although her supervisor "allowed me to pass," she felt she had not been given the necessary time or training. Another student was frequently left to work on her own, as her supervisor "wasn't interested in supervising me," which she described as "shocking and upsetting."

5.2 Experiences of INS and opportunities for improvement

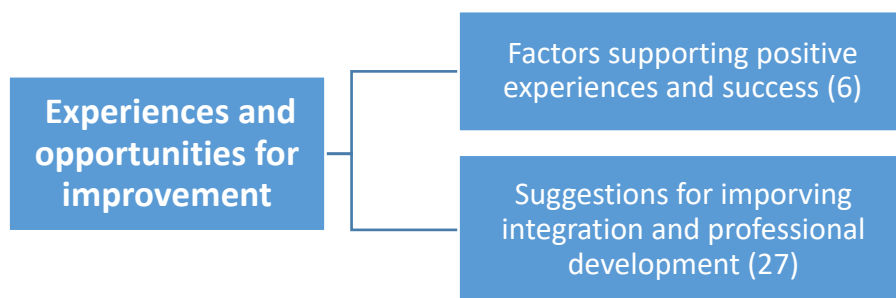


Figure 3: Themes representing experiences of INS (Total number of times discussed)

5.2.1 Factors supporting positive experiences and success.

While most of these factors were external and independent of the student, some could be described as internal and characterizing one's individual approach to managing their experience. An example of this is *proactive approach to finding support and making progress* that all participants discussed, and which refers to both their academic and personal experiences. Academically, several participants explained that the teachers are very supportive but one needs to reach out for help. One participant, for instance, shared that she had "never sent so many emails to my teachers in [her] entire educational history," noting that this could be an issue for students who remain silent, as "teachers might assume everything is fine if you don't speak up." Similar view was expressed by another participants, who initially struggled during her placement because she "stayed quiet" due to shyness. As a result, the supervisors did not realize that she struggled. Several other participants also emphasized that being proactive, whether in seeking placements or attending Finnish language classes, was essential for success in both academic and personal realms.

Partly related to this is the importance of *resilient mindset and turning challenges into opportunities for growth*. Several participants highlighted the importance of resilience and

motivation, such as the one described in the following extract, where one participant reflected on the effort required to make progress:

Having lived here for almost four years and nearing the completion of my degree, I feel that progressing to a better position or achieving my goals will require a lot of hard work. Although I am slowly learning the language and adapting, I understand that advancing in my career will take significant effort and dedication. It's challenging, but I am determined to push myself to reach my goals (Interviewee 1).

Initial setbacks often encouraged participants to work harder, particularly when it came to improving their language skills so they could compete with local nurses. Confidence and persistence were key, with one participant stating, "we learned that with confidence and persistence, we can succeed." Others expressed a growth mindset, viewing even the most challenging experiences as valuable learning opportunities. For example, one participant regarded the difficulties of navigating a different education system as a "way of learning [that] supports individual growth."

Despite the challenges associated with the local education system (see section 5.1.2), the participants also praised *good education system and educational culture*, drawing attention to such aspects as its capacity to build autonomy and independence, its flexibility, or the student-teacher dynamics. Some participants also praised *supportive teachers and supervisors*, explaining that once help was requested, they found the faculty to be caring and attentive.

Family and friend support were described as vital to the participants' ability to persevere. For all five participants, this support network helped them settle in, form friendships, and lessen the impact of initial culture shock. All participants also praised the importance of *international friendships and student support groups*. As explained in section 5.1.1, it was often felt that forming friendships with the locals can be challenging. Participants felt that it was easier to connect with people from international backgrounds. As one participant explained, "we're all in a similar situation of seeking connections in a new place, which has made building friendships more straightforward." These friendships and study groups provided much-needed emotional and academic support.

Lastly, participants praised the *good access to resources* available in Finland, such as language classes, housing options, and bursaries, which made studying and living in Finland somewhat easier. These resources were seen as contributors to positive experiences.

5.2.2 Suggestions for improving integration and professional development

Most of the discussed challenges that were reported throughout the previous sections 5.1.1, 5.1.2 and 5.1.3 were, then, reflected in the *suggestions for improving integration and professional development* that the participants made. Participants suggested *improved support systems to promote social, academic, and professional integration*. There was a shared view that “the school could have done more to address the unique challenges faced by international students.” One participant explained further, referring to the previously discussed challenges related to self-directed learning, “many students might not voice their problems, often because they feel it’s just the way things are or they’re hesitant to speak up”. The participant emphasized that, “the school needs to recognize that silence doesn’t always mean everything is fine,” and regular support should be provided through workshops and “a supportive framework that prepares students for both the practical and cultural aspects of their training.”

To address the challenges related to international students’ access to information, one participant suggested “a more equitable approach to assessment and support for all students, regardless of their background or language of study.” Another participant proposed “programmes where students can live with host families” to help those without a local support network.

Another form of support that some suggested is *cultural awareness training for life in Finland*. This could include “classes on Finnish work culture and work ethics,” as well as health-related considerations, like the importance of taking vitamin D supplements due to Finland’s limited sunlight during certain months. One participant emphasized the need for this support to be “proactively” delivered before students even arrive.

The universities (UASs) should proactively inform incoming students about the challenges of living in Finland, including the importance of taking vitamin D supplements due to the limited sunlight during certain months (Interviewee 2).

This information shouldn’t come as a surprise when visiting a public health centre for the first time. Instead, it should be part of the orientation or pre-arrival information provided by the school. Every immigrant, including families with mixed-race children, should receive this information to ensure they are prepared for the health implications of living in Finland (Interviewee 1).

Starting this education early would help prevent potential health issues related to vitamin D deficiency and better integrate international students into Finnish life from the outset (Interviewee 2).

Several suggestions were specifically focused on improving the professional practice experiences, reflecting the large proportion of challenges related to this aspect of the students’

experiences. Several participants suggested, for example, *improved workshops and resources to better prepare students for professional placements*. One participant suggested “having a workshop or seminar where students hear directly from those who have been through similar placements”, while another noted that more specific information about “what to expect” from individual units would be more useful than generic training on “Jobiili and how to use it.” Participants also believed that “international students would greatly benefit from receiving more practical training” and suggested that “clinical workshops should be tailored to match the upcoming practice placements for individual students”.

An increased focus on *Finnish language learning* was another key suggestion. Participants emphasized that “language is crucial in nursing in Finland,” with one suggesting that even in English-taught programs, learning the local language should be emphasized. This would help bridge the gap between the language and terminology used in the classroom and what students encounter in their professional practice

Several participants suggested *improved collaboration between school and clinics*, to address the previously discussed challenges of finding professional placement. One participant explained that this would ensure “all students would have the chance to experience various types of nursing units.” On a similar note, another participant suggested *exposure to various wards and departments through clinical rotations*.

Finally, two participants suggested *improved support to find placements that align with students' preferences*. As one participant expressed further, “it would be great if the system could be adjusted to better align nursing education and practical placements with students' aspirations.”

6 Discussion

The discussion chapter covers the study's findings, assesses the methods used, discusses, and provides recommendations. In recent years, the mobility of international students has shifted, with the Nordic region, including Finland, becoming an attractive destination for those seeking higher education. Internationalizing higher education is now a national priority for Finland (Ministry of Education 2009). This includes an increasing number of international nursing students. Nurses play a crucial role in promoting public health as they make up the largest group of healthcare professionals (WHO 2020).

Understanding the experiences of these students is important because it helps to identify the challenges they face during their long stay in a foreign country. The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of international nursing students adjusting to life in Finland. This study also explored the challenges faced by the students during their studies and life in Finland.

6.1 Challenges and obstacles

This research highlighted the obstacles INS encountered during their time in Finland. Accessing information in Finland was thought to be a challenge. The primary source of information in Finland, according to the participants, is online. Often, due to the overreliance on online resources, a lack of technological expertise was deemed to be a challenge. Some participants found it difficult to look for important information without personal interactions. Interactions with the locals and people, in general, were experienced as an existing cultural difference, especially due to the more reserved nature of locals in Finland. This also discouraged participants from seeking help in person. The lack of easily accessible information further added to these difficulties, causing delays in learning and settling in.

One of the most discussed challenges was limited socialisation and culture shock. This was compounded by the cultural aversion to small talk and the locals' preference for quieter, less social lifestyles. These factors created a social environment that was difficult for international students to navigate. Language barriers also played a significant role, as locals were often reluctant to communicate in non-Finnish languages, leaving participants feeling isolated and disconnected from their surroundings. Similar findings were reported by Mattila et al. (2010, 154), who found that international nursing students in Finland struggled with the reserved nature of locals, which hindered their social integration and overall adaptation process.

These social challenges not only contributed to feelings of isolation and culture shock but also had a broader impact on the students' overall adjustment to life in Finland. Without strong social integration, participants struggled to adapt to their new environment and understand local customs. Access to informal support networks, which could have helped them navigate both their academic and personal challenges, was not available. This disconnect slowed down the adjustment process, with effects on students' academic performance, mental well-being, and satisfaction with their international experience. Similar difficulties in social integration were observed in the study by Kamau et al. (2023, 3), where culturally and linguistically diverse nurses reported challenges in building social and professional networks, affecting their confidence and overall sense of belonging in the healthcare system.

The winter months in Finland specifically added another layer of difficulty for the participants, intensifying feelings of isolation beyond just the harsh weather. One of the main reasons for this was the reduced social visibility during winter. Finland's introverted cultural tendencies seemed to deepen in winter. With fewer people outdoors, opportunities for casual interactions or spontaneous encounters decreased significantly. This made it harder for students to connect with others. Lack of outdoor events and social activities also contributed to this isolation, as students found fewer opportunities to gather and meet new people. The shorter winter daylight hours and lack of sunlight further had a psychological impact on the international students,

affecting mood and motivation. Combined with the physical barriers posed by the cold weather and snow, these factors limited social engagement opportunities even further.

Because the participants' family and close friends were not with them, the lack of social support and the absence of deep, meaningful connections often left students emotionally vulnerable. This led to increased loneliness, making it harder for them to cope with personal challenges. Without family or close friends nearby, many struggled to find the emotional support needed during stressful times.

Participants also faced limitations and challenges in academia. Balancing academic workload and professional placements put financial pressure on international students. With full schedules of placements, exams, and assignments, they had little to no time for part-time jobs, leading to strict budgeting and financial strain. Many also felt overwhelmed and exhausted, which made it hard to work without risking burnout. The findings align with Kamau et al. (2023, 4), where internationally trained nurses faced financial constraints due to limited working opportunities, impacting their well-being and ability to focus on professional development.

Alongside the financial strain, international students encountered difficulties with self-directed learning. While some appreciated the independence, many found the adjustment challenging due to the lack of guidance unless specifically sought. They frequently felt unsupported, particularly during placements where navigating the healthcare system without clear direction was tough. The emphasis on autonomy became a drawback, as they were often left to manage complex tasks on their own, which was especially difficult given their unfamiliarity with the local education and healthcare systems. Similar struggles were identified in Mattila et al. (2010, 155), where international students reported feeling unprepared for the level of independence expected in Finnish nursing education, particularly during clinical placements.

The participants' concerns about inadequate training highlighted their limited exposure to the Finnish education system. They sought more than just basic language training, desiring guidance on cultural expectations, educational norms, and unwritten rules that local students seemed to know instinctively. This feeling of disadvantage was experienced due to their belief that Finnish students had several advantages, such as being raised as "independent thinkers," having better access to essential study materials, and understanding the nuances of the education system without facing language barriers. As a result, international students often perceived their situation as "unfair."

The language barrier emerged as a significant challenge for the participants, largely due to the gap between classroom Finnish and the everyday language used in hospitals. They struggled with colloquial expressions and professional jargon that weren't covered in their language training. Participants expressed that what's missing is more practical, profession-specific language training to better prepare them for real-life situations. This barrier also complicated

communication and understanding during placements, often resulting in underperformance. The challenges related to language and professional terminology were also found in Kamau et al. (2023, 5), where internationally trained nurses reported difficulties in adapting to local work culture due to language-related misunderstandings.

The language gap heavily impacted the participants' confidence during professional placements. Participants felt judged and singled out for their language skills, which led to lower self-esteem and a sense of inadequacy. Describing their placements as "traumatizing" and "scary," they felt out of place and underprepared. Compared to the study conducted by Ropponen et al. (2023, 3), this language gap seems to still exist as an issue for the students.

In addition to the psychological challenges during placements, participants found it highly stressful to secure a placement in the first place. The limited availability of placements and fierce competition is not a new issue in the case of INS in Finland, as proven also previously by Ropponen et al. (2023, 4). Limited availability created immense pressure for the participants. Positions would fill within seconds, leaving international students with little chance to secure spots, even with quick action. The difficulty in securing timely placements left many worried about falling behind academically and delaying graduation.

Many participants felt there was inequity in the placement process. They believed Finnish nurses were prioritized over international candidates because of their language skills and familiarity with local work culture. This perceived prioritization led participants to experience a sense of inequity. Many also reported a lack of support during placements, with insufficient supervision from their supervisors. These challenges were similarly reflected in Mattila et al. (2010, 156), where international students in Finnish healthcare settings experienced limited guidance and a sense of exclusion, further impacting their confidence and learning experiences.

6.2 Positive experiences and strengthening support systems

In this study, all participants discussed experiences that supported their studies. One positive perception shared by many participants was that taking a proactive approach played a key role in shaping their academic and personal success. Many noted that success in their studies and placements depended heavily on their ability to actively seek support, whether from faculty members or through personal efforts like attending Finnish language classes. This proactive attitude helped them address academic challenges and navigate a new educational and cultural environment. These findings align with those of Mattila, Pitkälä, and Eriksson (2010), who also noted that international nursing students who took initiative in seeking help and adapting to the system had a smoother transition into clinical practice. However, this study expands on this by highlighting how students' personal resilience, rather than just institutional support, plays a critical role in overcoming challenges.

Participants explained that resilience and persistence were extremely important in overcoming challenges. Setbacks, particularly related to language barriers, were interpreted as opportunities for growth. Many recognized that while they were improving their Finnish, mastering the language to a professional level would take time and effort. Instead of being discouraged, participants viewed these obstacles as motivation to push themselves further. This ability to see value in difficulties, coupled with confidence in their ability to adapt, enabled participants to approach their studies and placements with a growth-oriented perspective. This perspective is reflected in Kamau et al. (2023), where culturally and linguistically diverse registered nurses in Finland emphasized that language acquisition was an ongoing challenge but one that could be managed with perseverance. However, a new insight from this study is the emphasis on how students themselves actively reframed challenges into learning opportunities, which was not a strong focus in prior research.

Support networks, including family, friends, and international student groups, were crucial for adaptation and academic success. Participants emphasized how easier it was to form friendships with other international students, as they were going through similar experiences. Friendships with other international students and support from family helped alleviate isolation and provided both emotional and practical support. Kamau et al. (2023) similarly found that peer support was vital for internationally trained nurses, but this study further highlights the significance of peer connections specifically among students, suggesting that shared experiences during studies can provide a stronger foundation for adaptation before entering the workforce.

During the interviews, participants also highlighted positive experiences within the Finnish education system, particularly its flexibility and focus on fostering autonomy and independence. They described faculty members as supportive and responsive when approached, reinforcing the need for students to take responsibility for their learning. This finding aligns with Ropponen et al. (2023), which found that international nursing students appreciated the independence granted in Finnish education. However, the nuance this study adds is, embracing the self-directed nature happens after successful adaptation to the system. Lack of adaptation causes struggle and require additional structured support.

The availability of resources, such as Finnish language classes, affordable housing options, and financial support like bursaries, helped ease students' adjustment to life in Finland. These resources provided relief in managing the practical aspects of studying abroad, allowing students to focus on their academic and professional development. Prior research, such as Mattila et al. (2010), noted that financial and housing stability were key factors in students' integration, yet this study builds on that by demonstrating how students viewed these resources as enablers rather than solutions, indicating that systemic improvements are still needed for long-term success.

Participants also shared insightful suggestions on how educational or systemic changes could address gaps. One key observation was that many students hesitate to voice difficulties, often feeling resigned. This underscores the need for institutions to recognize that silence does not indicate a lack of problems. Regular support through workshops and a structured framework could better prepare students for the practical and cultural aspects of training. Kamau et al. (2023) also pointed out that a lack of structured guidance hindered international nurses' adaptation, which supports the argument that earlier interventions during education could mitigate later challenges.

A significant new contribution of this study is the proposal of host family programs to ease relocation for placements outside the city, an aspect not previously explored in the literature. Additionally, participants strongly advocated for more targeted professional preparation, such as practical training tailored to upcoming placements and seminars where students could learn from peers who had undergone similar experiences. While previous studies have acknowledged the importance of mentorship (Ropponen et al. 2023), this study highlights the need for peer driven knowledge sharing as a supplement to institutional support.

The importance of Finnish language proficiency was unanimously agreed upon. Even in English-taught programs, participants emphasized that learning the local language should be prioritized to bridge the gap between academic and professional terminology. This aligns with findings by Kamau et al. (2023), which showed that language barriers persisted even after graduation, affecting job opportunities and professional integration.

Collaboration between educational institutions and clinical placements was another area for improvement. Participants suggested that stronger partnerships would ensure students gained experience in a variety of nursing units, broadening their practical exposure. Prior research has acknowledged the role of clinical placements in skill development (Mattila et al., 2010), but this study underscores that the allocation of placements should be more strategically aligned with students' career interests.

Lastly, several participants expressed the need for better support in securing placements that align with their personal and professional goals. A participant emphasized the need for adjustments in nursing education to better connect theoretical learning with practical experience. This further supports the argument that international nursing students require tailored support beyond what is currently offered in Finnish institutions.

6.3 Methods and trustworthiness

In qualitative research, trustworthiness refers to the quality and rigor of the study, ensuring that the findings accurately reflect participants' experiences and are considered trustworthy. Evaluating the trustworthiness of qualitative research involves assessing criteria such as credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba 1985, 296). These criteria serve as benchmarks for the quality and rigor of qualitative studies (Stahl & King 2020).

For the background of this research, an effective literature review has been conducted to improve the validity and reliability of the study. Various credible databases such as CINAHL, Science Direct, Elsevier were explored to extract peer-reviewed articles on key concepts that form the theoretical framework of this research. This approach aligns with the emphasis on methodological rigor in qualitative studies (Adler 2022).

This study employed a thematic analysis using an inductive approach to explore the challenges faced by international nursing students at Laurea University of Applied Sciences (UAS) as they adapted to life in Finland. Participants were selected from two specific cohorts of nursing students, providing diverse insights into the adaptation process. Semi-structured interviews were used as the primary data collection method to allow in-depth exploration of participants' individual experiences (Busetto et al. 2020). This approach provided flexibility in conversation flow (McGrath, Palmgren, & Liljedahl 2019), enabling participants to lead discussions on key themes, including academic adjustments, language and cultural barriers, emotional and social struggles, and overall adaptation experiences.

Credibility is a key criterion for ensuring the trustworthiness of qualitative research, referring to the accuracy and believability of the study's findings as perceived by participants and readers (Stahl & King, 2020). One approach to establishing credibility is through peer debriefing, where researchers engage in discussions with knowledgeable colleagues or supervisors to challenge interpretations and enhance analytical rigor (Nowell et al. 2017). In this study, regular debriefing sessions were conducted with the research supervisor, offering critical feedback that refined the research approach and ensured that the findings accurately represented participants' experiences. This process contributed to a more rigorous and trustworthy interpretation of the data.

Transferability refers to the extent to which qualitative research findings can be applied to other contexts while acknowledging that results are specific to a particular setting (Nowell et al. 2017). In qualitative research, transferability is supported by providing rich, detailed descriptions of the study's context, participants, and findings, allowing readers to determine whether the insights are relevant to similar situations (Stahl & King 2020). In this study, transferability was ensured by offering in-depth accounts of participants' experiences, including

their challenges and adaptation processes. These detailed narratives enable readers to assess the applicability of the findings to other international nursing student populations or similar educational and cultural settings.

Dependability in qualitative research is strengthened when the research process is transparent, traceable, and systematically documented, allowing others to follow the steps taken by the researcher (Nowell et al., 2017). One way to achieve this is through an audit trail, where records of key methodological and analytical decisions are maintained, ensuring the study's findings remain grounded in a consistent and well-documented process (Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

In this research, despite conducting the analysis manually, the researcher ensured a rigorous and organized approach. Transcription and coding were carefully carried out, progressing from descriptive to focused coding. Throughout this process, extensive handwritten notes were kept, preserving original descriptive codes even as the analysis evolved. The researcher's engagement in regular discussions with the thesis supervisor helped refine interpretations. This ensured a logical progression in the data analysis. By maintaining a clear audit trail, including raw data, coding frameworks, and reflexive notes, this study upholds dependability and demonstrates a systematic approach to qualitative analysis.

Confirmability in qualitative research refers to the extent to which the findings genuinely reflect the participants' experiences rather than the researcher's subjective interpretations (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). One way to establish confirmability is through a systematic documentation process that allows others to trace the analytical decisions made throughout the study (Nowell et al., 2017). Maintaining transparency in how data was collected, analyzed, and interpreted strengthens the credibility of qualitative research (Stahl & King, 2020).

In this study, confirmability was upheld by ensuring that all interpretations were directly grounded in the raw data. The researcher maintained handwritten notes, detailed transcriptions, and a structured coding process to systematically analyze the data. The transition from descriptive to focused coding was carefully documented to ensure that emerging themes were derived from participant responses rather than personal assumptions. Although no external audits or participant validation were conducted, consistent documentation of decision-making and rigorous engagement with the data strengthens the study's confirmability.

6.4 Ethics and data management

In Finland, all research must be conducted with respect for general ethical principles, ensuring that the dignity, rights, and well-being of research participants are upheld. The Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity (TENK 2019) has established guidelines for the responsible conduct of research, emphasizing the importance of voluntary participation, informed consent, and data

protection. Research should be carried out in a manner that avoids significant risk, harm, or distress to participants.

The Human Sciences Ethics Committee of the Helsinki Region Universities of Applied Sciences oversees ethical reviews for research conducted at Laurea University of Applied Sciences. According to their guidelines, this study did not require prior ethical review because it did not involve medical research, interventions affecting participants' physical integrity, exposure to exceptionally strong stimuli, or situations that could pose a security risk to participants or their families. Additionally, participants were legal adults capable of providing informed consent, and the study did not involve vulnerable groups.

An information sheet (see Appendix 1) was distributed to the participants during the recruitment phase, elucidating the purpose and procedures of the study. The voluntary nature of participation was emphasized, and clearly stated that participants have the right to withdraw at any stage without facing any consequences. The information sheet also provided comprehensive details about the researcher's contact information, study goals, anticipated duration, and interview format, ensuring that the participants have a clear understanding of the research (Pope & Mays 2020, 31). Acknowledging McGrath et al. (2019) insight into the potential challenge of limited time for rapport and trust building during interviews, the inclusion of crucial study details in the information sheet was a strategic measure to facilitate smoother rapport establishment during the interview process.

Furthermore, the information sheet addressed procedural aspects such as the voice recording of the interviews, subsequent data analysis methods, and the dissemination of research results. It outlined the rights of the participants and emphasized the confidentiality of their identities. Additionally, the in-person semi-structured interviews did not involve any interference with the physical integrity of the research participants and were not expected to expose the participants to strong stimuli or pose a threat to their safety or that of their family. The researcher applied for a research permit before recruiting participants. A participant consent form (Appendix 2) was signed by both the researcher and the participant to indicate informed consent before the interview.

The researcher recognized the ethical responsibility to conduct the study with integrity, ensuring transparency, impartiality, and respect for the participants. As an independent researcher, there was no employment relationship with the institution beyond the academic setting, and no monetary compensation was received for conducting this research. This helped maintain an equitable researcher-participant relationship and ensured that students did not feel any external pressure to participate.

Additionally, the thesis supervisor, being a senior lecturer at the institution, was not the teacher responsible for the students recruited for the study. This ensured that the selection

process was free from conflicts of interest and that participants did not feel obligated to take part. The voluntary nature of participation was emphasized throughout the research process, and the right to withdraw at any stage without consequences was clearly communicated.

The researcher also acknowledged the responsibility of managing the personal data collected from the participants as per the correct code of research (TENK 2019). Therefore, in the capacity of the data controller for the research, the researcher deemed it their responsibility to protect the data collected during the study. The personal data collected for the study was limited to the name of the participant.

Any other personal data was deemed unnecessary for the study. The data was anonymized, and the names of the participants were not used in any way during data analysis and publication. Any data recorded in the interview audio that seemed personal or identifiable was omitted during transcription, and this was communicated to the participants when they signed the consent form. The study materials gathered for this study were destroyed after the study was completed. To uphold ethical research standards, the researcher adhered to the guidelines of the Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity (TENK 2019) and Laurea University of Applied Sciences. Proper referencing was applied throughout to ensure academic integrity, and the final thesis will be made available on the Theseus open-access platform to enhance transparency and accountability.

6.5 Limitations

While this study was conducted with careful attention to trustworthiness, certain limitations inevitably influenced aspects of credibility, transferability, and dependability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Recruitment challenges are common in qualitative research, particularly when participants balance academic, professional, and personal commitments (Busetto et al. 2020). In this study, data collection spanned three months, from April to early June 2024, with interviews conducted as single sessions rather than multiple engagements per participant. Despite multiple reminders and flexible scheduling, participation remained limited, reflecting well-documented difficulties in engaging students in research amid their demanding workloads (Nowell et al. 2017). One additional participant initially committed but withdrew due to scheduling conflicts as summer approached, highlighting the constraints of academic responsibilities and external obligations likely contributed to the low response rate, a challenge frequently noted in studies involving student populations (Korstjens & Moser 2018).

Although the study included five participants, the sample size aligns with qualitative research standards emphasizing depth over breadth. In thematic analysis, data saturation—where no new insights emerge—guides the adequacy of participant numbers (Braun & Clarke 2006, Korstjens

& Moser 2018). Despite the limited sample, the rich, detailed narratives provided sufficient depth to capture meaningful themes and patterns in the participants' experiences.

The data collection period spanned three months, from April to early June 2024, with interviews conducted as single sessions rather than multiple engagements per participant. One additional participant initially committed but withdrew due to scheduling conflicts as summer approached, reflecting the limited availability and prioritization of personal commitments among participants.

Thematic analysis was conducted manually, requiring significant time for data familiarization, transcription, and iterative coding. While this extended the analysis phase, it also enhanced researcher engagement and reflexivity, ensuring a deeper understanding of the data (Nowell et al. 2017). The process involved repeated coding, theme refinement, and careful within-case and cross-case comparisons to maintain analytical rigor and ensure that thematic labels authentically represented participant experiences.

Reflecting on methodological choices, conducting face-to-face interviews on campus may have influenced participation rates, as students managing multiple responsibilities faced scheduling constraints. While offering remote options, such as MS Teams interviews, could have enhanced accessibility and inclusivity (Archibald et al. 2019), the in-person format fostered rich, nuanced discussions and meaningful engagement. Research suggests that virtual interviews can also support qualitative depth (Gray et al. 2020), yet the decision to conduct face-to-face interviews was intentional, aligning with the study's emphasis on rapport-building and contextual understanding, which remain integral to qualitative research (Busetto et al. 2020,2-3)

Additionally, though gender and cultural backgrounds were not focal variables in the analysis, the final participant group lacked gender diversity and was limited in regional representation. This may have inadvertently influenced the findings, as experiences and challenges could vary across broader demographic contexts.

6.6 Recommendations

Despite these limitations, the depth of insights derived from each interview suggests that, within the scope of this study, the research effectively captured essential themes of challenges and experiences. However, expanding the sample in future research could yield a richer, potentially more varied perspective, broadening the understanding of international nursing students' experiences in Finland.

This study highlights the significant challenges faced by international nursing students in Finland, particularly regarding language barriers, workplace integration, and practice placement accessibility. Participants shared how language limitations hindered their

professional development and daily tasks in clinical settings, emphasizing the crucial role of Finnish language proficiency in the nursing field. To address this, it is recommended that schools expand Finnish language courses specifically designed to build medical vocabulary and proficiency, equipping students to engage confidently in healthcare environments specially during their practise placements.

Students also expressed feeling unprepared for the cultural and professional norms in Finnish workplaces. Offering workshops that introduce common workplace ethics, expectations, and communication styles in Finland would help students feel more at ease during placements. These preparatory sessions could bridge the gap, enabling students to enter placements with a clearer sense of what to expect, ultimately making their initial experiences less overwhelming.

The study also highlighted the pressing need for more practice placement opportunities, which is if not, the most essential to the nursing curriculum. It is recommended that schools and placement providers strengthen collaboration and enhance database systems to ensure placements align with students' learning needs and timelines. By doing so, schools could better support students in meeting their clinical rotation requirements within their study schedules.

Lastly, as the number of international nursing students continues to rise, hospitals and practice units are increasingly likely to work with a diverse student body. Preparing staffs in various medical units which act as the practise placement for students is recommended. To welcome and train international students by potentially offering some training aspects in English—would promote a more inclusive environment. This mutual adjustment could help prevent feelings of exclusion or discrimination among students and foster a more supportive atmosphere for all.

For future studies, a panel or longitudinal study could explore the motivations of students who choose to stay despite challenges. Participants in this study expressed a lack of confidence in seeking employment in their preferred units, so a follow-up study could track how their career paths have developed. This might shed light on whether interpersonal experiences during student placements influence the confidence and job satisfaction of these immigrant nurses.

7 Conclusion

This research studied the challenges and gaps prevalent in the Finnish nursing education program, delving deeply into the personal experiences of international nursing students. According to the interviewed participants, improvements are needed not only within the school system but also at the level of workplace integration, underscoring a twofold responsibility for educational institutions and healthcare employers. Based on the interviews and findings, it can be stated that tailoring support to meet these individual needs could enable smoother

transitions, helping students feel more prepared to enter Finnish healthcare settings and better integrate into Finnish work culture.

Personal experiences, as shared in this study, provide essential guidance for educational institutions aiming to create a curriculum that not only meets academic requirements but also supports students' professional and social integration. By implementing student-centered improvements, nursing schools can contribute to more comprehensive learning outcomes, benefiting both future nurses and the Finnish healthcare sector as a whole.

This study also opens avenues for further research into how specific support structures could facilitate integration and improve the retention of international nursing students in Finland. It is important to mention that many findings of this research correlates to previous studies(Ropponen et al. 2023, Pitkäljärvi et al. 2012), stating that changes have not been implemented still to cover the gaps that already existed. There is still a need of awareness of strategies that include and enhance understanding of the unique needs of INS in schools and healthcare settings.

Future studies might explore the long-term impacts of enhanced Finnish language instruction, workplace integration training, and more diverse placement opportunities, to determine which interventions most effectively ease students' transition from education to practice. Expanding on these insights could help build a sustainable and inclusive nursing workforce, fostering an environment that benefits healthcare providers, patients, and the international students themselves.

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Appendix 1: Participant Information Sheet



PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Study title: Exploring the experiences and challenges of International Nursing students adjusting to life in Finland: A qualitative Study of Laurea UAS students.

Invitation to participate in research study.

We would like to invite you to take part in this research study. The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences and identify challenges faced by international Nursing students (INS) in Finland.

This information sheet describes the study and your role in it.

Before you decide, it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it would involve for you. Please take time to read this information sheet and discuss it with others if you wish. If there is anything that is not clear, or if you would like more information, please ask us. After that we will ask you to sign a consent form if you wish to participate in the study.

Voluntary nature of participation

The participation in this study is voluntary. You can withdraw from the study at any time without giving any reason and without there being any negative consequences. If You withdraw from the study or withdraw Your consent, any data collected from You before the withdrawal can be included as part of the research data.

Purpose of the study

Finland has become a popular destination for international students, particularly in the nursing field, due to the various opportunities it offers. This influx of international nursing students in Finland has necessitated a comprehensive understanding of experiences and challenges faced by these students. By understanding the experiences and challenges of INS, the study aims to provide possible solutions that can help foreign nursing students to cope with the challenges and enhance their educational experience.

Who is organizing and funding the research?

A master's degree student from Laurea University of Applied Sciences is conducting the research. The research is supervised by Mika Alastalo, PhD, senior lecturer at Laurea University of Applied Sciences. The research requires no funding.

What will the participation involve?

Duration of involvement: Your participation in this study will include a single semi-structured interview session, lasting approximately 45 minutes to an hour.

Meeting format: The interviews will be conducted in person, providing an opportunity for a comprehensive exploration of your experiences. The location of the interview will be Laurea Tikkurila campus and the time will be arranged at your convenience, ensuring a comfortable and private setting.

Data Collection: During the interview, the researcher will utilize a semi-structured format. This means that while there is a predefined set of themes to be covered, there is also flexibility to explore additional topics that may arise organically in the conversation. The interviews will be audio recorded, and this recorded data will be the primary source for analysis. The questions will revolve around themes such as cultural adjustment, academic challenges, emotional well-being, and social support, aiming to capture a nuanced understanding of your experiences and challenges during your time in Finland.

Post-Interview Communication: If you have any further questions or concerns after the interview, you are welcome to contact the researcher via email or phone. Your feedback and additional insights are valuable and will be considered with utmost respect.

Privacy and Confidentiality: It is essential to note that all information shared during the interview will be treated with the utmost confidentiality. Identifying information will be anonymized in the final research report to ensure your privacy is protected. Your participation in this study is voluntary, and you may withdraw at any time without consequence.

Possible benefits of taking part

While there may not be direct personal benefits for individual participants, your involvement in this research contributes to a broader societal impact. By sharing your experiences, you play a vital role in enhancing the understanding of the challenges faced by international nursing students (INS) adjusting to life in Finland.

By sharing your experiences, you may contribute to fostering cultural understanding among educators, administrators, and fellow students. Increased awareness may lead to a more inclusive and diverse educational environment. Your willingness to participate is a valuable contribution to the improvement of academic and support structures for international nursing students. While the direct benefits may not be personal, the potential positive impacts on the broader educational landscape are substantial.

Financial information

Participation in this study will involve no cost to You. You will receive no payment for Your participation.

Informing about the research results

Once the study is concluded, the results, or a summary thereof, will be made available to participants through the final work published on Theseus.fi. Theseus.fi

is an online platform accessible to the public, providing a transparent and open dissemination of research findings. It is important to note that any report or publication placed in the public domain will not contain identifying information, ensuring the confidentiality and privacy of all participants.

This study is part of a master's thesis conducted by Upama Manandhar. Your valuable contributions will be presented in a manner that upholds the highest ethical standards and safeguards participant anonymity.

Termination of the study

The researcher(s) conducting the study can also terminate the study.

Further information

Further information related to the study can be requested from the researcher of the study.

Contact details of the researcher

Researcher / Student

Name: Upama Manandhar

Tel. number: [REDACTED]

Email: Upama.manandhar@student.laurea.fi

Supervisor

Name: Mika Alastalo, PhD

Name of the organization / Faculty: Laurea UAS, Senior Lecturer

Email: Mika.alastalo@laurea.fi

Appendix to the Participant Information Sheet: A Privacy Notice for Scientific Research

Within this study, your personal data will be processed according to the European Union General Data Protection Regulation (679/2016) and current national regulation. The processing of personal data will be described in the following items.

Data controller of the study

Data controller is the natural or legal person, public authority, agency, or other body which, alone or jointly with others, determines the purposes and means of the processing of personal data.

Data controller: Upama Manandhar (Researcher)

Contact person for matters related to the processing of personal data

Upama Manandhar

Email: Upama.manandhar@student.laurea.fi

Phone: [REDACTED]

Types of personal data that will be collected

- Name and signature of the participant only for consent purpose
- Voice recording of the interview

There is no statutory or contractual requirement to provide Your personal data, participation is entirely voluntary.

Personal data protection principles

The data will be securely stored and managed by the researcher. Audio recordings will be made using MS Teams software and manually transcribed with MS Word. All data will be stored exclusively on the researcher's device. The personal data will be protected by a user ID and password on the researcher's computer.

For what purpose will personal data be processed?

The purpose of the study is to investigate the experiences and challenges faced by international nursing students as they adjust to life in Finland. Personal data will be processed for this research, involving semi-structured interviews that will be audio recorded. Participant names will be included in the consent form signed before the interviews, ensuring transparency and compliance with data protection regulations.

Legal basis of processing personal data

Participant Consent form

If the legal basis is a consent granted by the data subject, you have the right to withdraw the consent at any time as described in this Privacy Notice.

Nature and duration of the research (how long will the personal data be processed):

One-time research Follow-up research

What happens to the personal data after the research has ended?

How the personal data will be processed after the research has ended:

- Any research materials containing personal data will be destroyed
- Any research materials containing personal data will be archived
 - without identifiers
 - with identifiers

Where the materials will be archived and for how long:

Data transfer outside of research registry:

Your data will not be transferred outside the research registry.

Possible transfer of personal data outside the EU or the EEA:

Your data will not be transferred outside of the EU or the EEA.

Your rights as a data subject

Because your personal data will be used in this study, you will be registered to study registry. Your rights as a data subject are the following

You can exercise your rights by contacting the data controller of the study.

- Right to obtain information on the processing of personal data
- Right of access
- Right to rectification
- Right to erasure (right to be forgotten)
- Right to withdraw the consent regarding processing of personal data
- Right to restriction of processing
- Notification obligation regarding rectification or erasure of personal data or restriction of processing
- Right to data portability
- The data subject can allow automated decision-making (including profiling) with his or her specific consent
- Right to notify the Data Protection Ombudsman if you suspect that an organization or individual is processing personal data in violation of data protection regulations.

If the purposes for which a controller processes personal data do not or do no longer require the identification of a data subject by the controller, the controller shall not be obliged to maintain, acquire, or process additional information to identify the data subject for the sole purpose of complying with this Regulation. If the controller cannot identify the data subject the rights of access, rectification, erasure, notification obligation and data portability shall not apply except if the data subject provides additional information enabling his or her identification.

You can exercise your rights by contacting the data controller of the study.

Personal data collected in this study will not be used for automated decision-making

In scientific research, the processing of personal data is never used in any decisions concerning the participants of the research.

Pseudonymisation and anonymisation

All information collected from you will be handled confidentially and according to the legislation. Individual participants will be given a code, and the data will be stored in a coded form in the research files. Results will be analyzed and presented in a coded, aggregate form. Individuals cannot be identified without a code key. A code key, which can be used to identify individual research participants and their responses, will be stored (by whom), and the data will not be given to people outside the research group. The final research results will be reported in aggregate form, and it will be impossible to identify individual participants. Research registry will be stored in the researcher's personal computer for 1 year, after which it will be destroyed by rebooting the computer system.

Please mention if you intend to cooperate internationally and clarify the confidentiality and protection of the data as well as possible agreements on data processing.

Appendix 2: Participant consent form



PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Title of the study: Exploring the experiences and challenges of International Nursing students adjusting to life in Finland: A qualitative Study of Laurea UAS students

Location of the study: Laurea University of Applied Sciences, Tikkurila, Helsinki, Finland

Researcher / Student

Name: Upama Manandhar

Tel. number: [REDACTED]

Email: Upama.manandhar@student.laurea.fi

Person in charge of the study /Supervisor

Name: Mika Alastalo, PhD

Name of the organisation /Faculty: Laurea UAS, Senior Lecturer

Email: Mika.alastalo@laurea.fi

I _____ have been invited to participate in the above research study. The purpose of the research is to explore the experiences and challenges faced by international nursing students adjusting to life in Finland, specifically focusing on students at Laurea University of Applied Sciences.

I have read and understood the written participant information sheet. The information sheet has provided me sufficient information about above study, the purpose and execution of the study, about my rights as well as about the benefits and risks involved in it. I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study and have had these answered satisfactorily.

I have had sufficient information of the collection, processing, and transfer/disclosure of my personal data during the study and the Privacy Notice has been available.

I voluntarily consent to participate in this study. I have not been pressurized or persuaded into participation.

I have had enough time to consider my participation in the study.

I understand that my participation is entirely voluntary and that I am free to withdraw my consent at any time, without giving any reason. I am aware that if I withdraw from the study (I can continue it later), any data collected from me before my withdrawal, can be included as part of the research data.

By signing this form, I confirm that I voluntarily consent to participate in this study.

If the legal basis of processing personal data within this study is a consent granted by the data subject, by signing I grant the consent for process my personal data. I have right to withdraw the consent regarding processing of personal data as described in the Privacy Notice.

Date

Signature of Participant

The original consent signed by the participant and a copy of the participant information sheet will be kept in the records of the researcher. Participant information sheet, privacy notice and a copy of the signed consent will be given to the participant.

Appendix 3: Interview guidelines

1.	What challenges do INS face during their studies in Finland, and how do they navigate these challenges?	<p>How would you describe your academic experiences in Finland so far?</p> <p>What kind of challenges have you faced during your studies in Finland?</p> <p>Practical placements experience. Challenges and experiences</p>	<p>What are some of the biggest challenges you've encountered in your studies so far?</p> <p>What are the academic challenges that you have faced so far?</p> <p>Can you elaborate on 'this' challenge and why was it so challenging?</p>
		How did you navigate through these challenges?	How did you handle these challenges?
2.	How do INS experience their educational journey in Finland, and what opportunities and limitations do they encounter in their studies and practice?	<p>How are you experiencing your academic journey so far In Finland?</p> <p>What kind of opportunities do you have as an INS in Finland</p> <p>What kind of limitations have you faced as an INS</p>	<p>What aspects of the Finnish academic system do you find most different from your previous educational experiences?</p> <p>What academic opportunities have you benefitted from?</p> <p>Can you share with an example what limitation/s you have faced as an INS.</p> <p>How could these limitations have been overcome?</p>
		What kind of limitations have you faced as an INS	<p>Can you share with an example what limitation/s you have faced as an INS.</p> <p>How could these limitations have been overcome?</p>

Appendix 4: Thematic framework

Theme/ Sub-theme	The number of transcripts where it appeared	The total number of times it was discussed
General challenges with life in Finland	5	32
Limited socialization and culture shock	5	15
Weather-related difficulties	4	11
Limited information and resources	3	3
Lack of family and friend support	2	2

Theme/ Sub-theme	The number of transcripts where it appeared	The total number of times it was discussed
Academic challenges and limitations	5	30
Overwhelming academic workload	4	6
Strong emphasis on self-directed learning	3	6
Challenges related to the exam	3	5
Insufficient resources and support for international students	2	6
Insufficient and/or irrelevant placement preparation	2	5
Lack of motivation and engagement from some teachers	1	2

Theme/ Sub-theme	The number of transcripts where it appeared	The total number of times it was discussed
Challenges and limitations in placements and work	5	80
Language barriers causing stress in professional practise	5	15
Limited placement availability and high competition	5	10
Stress and psychological strain in professional practise	4	14
Discriminatory practises in placement selection	4	10
Geographical and systemic barriers	4	8

Insufficient supervision and support during placements	3	5
Difficulty securing preferred placements	2	7
Workplace discrimination and alienation	2	5
Lack of support in securing placements	2	4
Unfamiliarity with the field and local work culture	1	2

Theme/ Sub-theme	The number of transcripts where it appeared	The total number of times it was discussed
Factors supporting positive experiences and success	5	6
Proactive approach to finding support and making progress	5	16
Family and friend support	5	11
International friendships and student support groups	5	9
Resilient mindset and turning challenges into opportunities for growth	4	12
A good education system and educational culture	4	5
Supportive teachers and supervisors	3	8
Good access to resources	2	4

Theme/ Sub-theme	The number of transcripts where it appeared	The total number of times it was discussed
Suggestions for improving integration and professional development	5	27
Improved support systems to promote social, academic and professional integration	3	7
Improved workshops and resources to better prepare students for professional placements	3	6
Improved collaboration between school and clinics	3	4
Cultural awareness training for life in Finland	3	3
Improved support to find placements that align with students' preferences	2	4
Increased focus on Finnish language learning	2	2
Exposure to various wards and departments through clinical rotations	1	1