



Creating experiences for international students

Handbook for IDS Helga

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Abstract

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This thesis dives into the topic of experience creation with a twist on experience creation related to international students who are studying in Finland. To get relevant results on what international student's want from experience creation, qualitative research and semi-structured interviews were used to obtain answers for the question at hand. The answers were analyzed and through them the needed research was decided to get even more insight on valuable experience creation for international students.

The theory of this thesis and the research done for it explore the three main topics, education, culture, and experiences with a handful of subtopics like experiential learning, cultural dimensions, crossing cultures and experience design. With these subtopics, the author set out to find out what it takes to create genuinely meaningful experiences that can help international students to integrate better to the Finnish culture, student culture and way of life.

The product created with this thesis was a handbook for IDS Helga, who organizes experiences for international students in Haaga-Helia. The handbook was created for the IDS Helga event coordinators to help them with experience creation and what to take into consideration when creating experiences in a multicultural atmosphere. The product is the handbook that focuses on three main topics, education, culture, and experiences and how to use all these topics to create valuable experiences for international students in Haaga-Helia.

Keywords

Experiences, Culture, Education

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1 Introduction

Author of this thesis found IDS Helga, the action group of the student union of Helga, in 2017 when starting her studies and after three years of being a part of said organization in various roles like event coordinator, advocacy chair and chairperson, the only reasonable option for the making of her thesis seemed to involve IDS Helga and the international students studying in Finland whose struggles the author had become very familiar with during the past years. That is what brought the idea to life.

This topic is very relevant for student associations and universities all over Finland since the issues that international students are facing in Finland while studying are becoming a quite popular topic and schools and associations are waking up to the fact that international students might be struggling to adjust to the culture and school life here in Finland. People are demanding more transparency all over the world and especially we are starting to highlight the difficulties immigrants face when moving to a new country. For example, in the International Survey Reflection of IDS Helga (2020) written from the answers of their international survey, a respondent stated when asked if they have faced any discrimination during their studies that: "Language discrimination, some events/tools/opportunities that are only for Finns or those who speak Finnish. Even some teachers are sometimes unable to provide English translation to certain course materials". Therefore, the topic is quite relevant and the objective of the thesis would be concentrating on helping IDS in making more relevant experiences for international students that would help them more in adapting to the Finnish society.

The purpose of this thesis is to help IDS Helga to go more into depth about what international students need and how can IDS as an organization create experiences for them. The objective in this thesis is to figure out what kind of experiences international student's value during their studies. Do they want more educational experiences that can further their studies or possibly give them career opportunities or do they value the more entertainment related experiences? Based on the research, a manual for creating experiences for international students has been created to further the goals of IDS Helga.

The first part of the thesis starts with the introduction to IDS Helga and the purpose of the organization itself and the methods and key definitions in this thesis. Then we move on to discuss the components for the theory of the thesis.

The theory of this thesis consists of three parts; Experiences, culture and education. The theory part gives more insight on all three of these and merges the three in different parts to give a wider perspective on how to create experiences for international students while

taking into account how culture and education also contribute to the creation of an experience and how an experience will be perceived by a person and what factors affect that.

In the later parts the author will go more into detail on the processes and components of IDS Helga itself, the product plan, production of the product, limitations and risks and the evaluation for the finished product. This part will also include the semi-structured interviews and their analysing for the creation of the product.

The methods that will be used in this thesis include qualitative research with semi-structured interviews and analyzing the answers from the international survey conducted on international degree students of Haaga-Helia by IDS Helga in the spring of 2020.

The product that is created from this thesis is a handbook for IDS Helga and their event coordinators. The handbook gives instructions and insight on how to create meaningful experiences and what should be reflected on during the brainstorming, planning and execution of an event or experience. The handbook will consist of the three main topics and will also have several subsections to it, for it to be able to give as much detail on experience creation as needed.

The Harvard style of referencing has also been used for this thesis, as the author deemed it the best way to reference for this particular work.

This concludes the introduction to this thesis and in the first subchapter the aims and objectives of this thesis will be discussed to give a clear idea on what the thesis aims to achieve.

1.1 Aims and objectives

The objective in this thesis is to figure out what kind of experiences international student's value during their studies. Do they want more educational experiences that can further their studies, possibly giving them career opportunities, some cultural experiences where they get to know the country and its customs better than they are studying in or do they value the more entertainment related experiences, or possibly a combination of all three.

As creating experiences for international students is quite a broad subject, the topic has been narrowed down and during this thesis the main objective is focusing more on the international students who are coming to Finland to study or are studying here at the moment. Finland is quite known for its educational system, but we do have quite a lot of student organization activities in higher education, which is why the goal is to find out if the

experiences international student's value, are more on the educational side, cultural side or on the amusement side, or as said a combination of these different kinds of experiences.

- What kind of experiences do international student's value?
- Do they want educational, cultural or entertainment related experiences?
- What experiences give valuable knowledge to international students?
- What themes should IDS Helga focus on when creating experiences?
- How do the opinions of normal international students differ from the students who have been involved in association work in Haaga-Helia, to be exact IDS Helga board members?

1.2 IDS Helga

IDS Helga stands for International Degree Students of Helga. IDS Helga is the international action group of the Student Union of Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences, so it works under the jurisdiction of the Student Union of Helga. Helga created IDS Helga for it to be able to focus more on the international degree students, as Helga itself does advocacy, events and tutoring for all of the students present in Haaga-Helia. That is why IDS Helga is in charge of doing events and advocacy for the 8 international degrees in Haaga-Helia.

IDS operates through its 8 board members, which will be more broadly introduced in chapter 3. IDS works under the Student Union of Helga, but it still has its own mission and bylaws that have been approved by the board of Helga. The board of the Student Union of Helga has to approve the IDS budget, action plan and mission and bylaws every time they are changed, otherwise IDS Helga works independently with their processes. Some challenges in IDS Helga involve miscommunications with the student union and the other action group that works under Helga, creating relevant experiences for international students and finding new experiences and other things related to living in Finland that the international students would value. The biggest challenge for IDS Helga for a long time has been, creating more meaningful events for the international degree students in Haaga-Helia. As most of the events organized by IDS have been focused on the entertainment side and in recent years there has been a decline amongst university students in these kinds of events. Students have been asking for different kinds of events, but have not specified what kind of events would they prefer, and this is a challenge for IDS Helga, since they have realized that they need to make a change, but they do not know what the change should be.

1.3 Methodology in brief

Qualitative research has been used in this thesis. It has been done for the purpose of acquiring information on what international students studying in Finland value regarding experiences. The research used includes the international survey concluded by IDS Helga (2020) and some research that the author has concluded on their own in the form of interviews. The survey and interviews are both qualitative, which allows the author to dive more in depth into the experiences that international students have had while studying in Finland. Both the survey and the interviews would be analyzed and compared to each other to see if consistent results occur in both. The survey of IDS Helga has been done in the time span of 1 month and the interviews within the time span of two weeks. The international survey was answered by 26 international students and for the interviews the author is expecting 10-15 interviewees to answer the questions. One or two of these interviewees would be from the board of IDS to get more in depth answers from the board members themselves. This way the author can also see how the board member's answers differ from those of a student who has not done any organization work.

To meet these goals set in this thesis, qualitative research is the best way to move forward. With using qualitative research, during this thesis process, international students who are studying in Finland will be interviewed on the subject matter and also a couple international students from the IDS board to reach results for the objectives.

Qualitative research was chosen, because it is the best way for the author to reach the objectives set for this thesis. The qualitative research interviews were made as semi-structured to give the interviewees more possibility for self-expression. (More information can be found in chapter 3.) The author came to the conclusion that qualitative research and the semi-structured interviews were the best option for this thesis, because; "Structured interviews typically offer a high response rate and the interviewer is present to explain the question to avoid misinterpretation from respondents (Queirós, et al., 2017, p. 377). As the research is made to find out what kind of experiences international student's value, qualitative research is the most optimal to use in this thesis as by using it the answers of the interviewees are usually also quite easy to compare to each other (Queirós, et al., 2017, p. 378).

1.4 Key definitions

The key definitions in this thesis are experiences, education and culture.

The first one, experiences. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines an experience as: "direct observation of or participation in events as a basis of knowledge (Anon., 2021). The

experiences talked about in this thesis from the international student's point of view are exactly that. Participation in events as a basis of knowledge, through the experiences created for the international students they will gain knowledge of the type of experience that they participate in and that way they will come to a conclusion on whether or not they value the type of experience they have just experienced.

When diving more into the definition of experience we find a lot more validation for the definition that experiences work as a basis for knowledge. "We suffer experiences and, as a result, acquire bits of knowledge about the world" (Gendler & Hawthorne, 2006, p. 181). So, proving more to the point that experiences can be thought as a basis for knowledge, as when we experience something, we acquire bits of knowledge about the aspect of the experience and the experience itself. The experience can be linked to many different aspects, like for example education or culture that are the two other key definitions in this thesis. In the same book a more detailed explanation is given; "I walk into a room full of people, I have a particular experience, and I come to know that Fred is wearing a red tie. My experience makes a causal contribution to my knowledge. It is an important causal factor in the process that produces in me the belief that Fred is wearing a red tie— or at least it is plausible to suppose so." This experience also ties to the questions of what is rational and what is not, but in this case the experience is just looked at as a way to acquire something. When looking at experiences in this thesis, the meaning in question is always about how experiences contribute to the acquirement of knowledge when international students experience something during their student life in Finland. From this knowledge that the international students get from the experiences they can more decide if they value that experience.

On another note, in this thesis the meaning and context of experiences is heavily tied to experience design. As experience design is summarized as; "Experience design is concerned with developing a holistic understanding of the relationships between person and product over time--meeting needs and exceeding expectations in ways which users perceive as valuable, effortless, and emotionally satisfying. Key to an emotionally satisfying user experience is the speed of need fulfilment--a product's ability to meet needs as soon as possible, or better yet--anticipate needs before they arise". (Schwartz, 2017). This means that in this thesis when talking about experiences, we are diverging also to the experience design side, for the reason that this thesis is looking for solutions to creating valuable experiences for international students studying in Finland. So, it is important to realize the complex meaning of experience design and the way it can help customers of businesses and members of organizations by giving meaningful customer experiences, as said by Newbery and Farnham; "In fact, experience design should help customers get more value from the products and services they buy, not just by improving usability, but by unlocking options and potential" (Newbery & Farnham, 2013).

To wrap up the definition of experiences in this thesis, it can be looked at from the point of international students and the knowledge and value they receive from events and experiences that they participate in. But also, from the point of experience design and how that can help the international students to potentially get more out of that experience than just what can be assumed.

Education in this thesis relates to the education that international students get from the experiences created for them. As said by Smith in an article; "Education, as we understand it here, is a process of inviting truth and possibility, of encouraging and giving time to discovery" (Smith, 2015, 2021). So, in this thesis we focus not on the schooling side of education, but to the educational side of experiences and what international students can discover in the process of an experience and how they feel about educational experiences.

The key definitions of experiences and education are tied in this sense since both of the definitions also are tied in experiential learning that will be discussed more in depth in chapter 2. As is said in a book discussing experiential learning; Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (Kolb, 1984). It gives the main idea of what these definitions of education and experiences together mean with the examples of both of them that are provided in this chapter. This is also supported by a study made by multiple authors, who found out through their study that; "Transformative experience was found to be positively related to conceptual understanding" (Pugh, et al., 2009).

The third keyword for this thesis is culture. Zimmermann defines culture like the following; "Culture is the characteristics and knowledge of a particular group of people, encompassing language, religion, cuisine, social habits, music and arts" (Zimmermann, 2017). In this thesis the way we will be looking at culture from the international student's perspective. So, culture in this thesis relates to two things, the cultures of the international students migrating to Finland to study and also differences and abnormalities of the Finnish culture that they have to acclimate to.

Culture itself is a vast subject, but the main idea that also applies to this particular thesis and its key definition of culture is the following; "This vast definition of culture includes tangible behaviours such as eating, dress, language, customs, and traditions as well as intangibles such as beliefs, values, assumptions, expectations, and attitudes. Collectively cultivated and reinforced by a group over time, these factors combine to create the basis for cultural identity. They dictate how we interact with each other and with our environments" (Landers, 2017) (Landers, 2017).

2 Merging culture, education and experiences

In the theoretical part of the thesis, the author will look into the three topics and how the merging of the three is relevant to creating experiences. The topics for this theory were chosen through the types of experiences that IDS Helga, that the handbook is being created for, organizes and what they have found to be valuable in the past for international students studying in Finland.

The merging of these topics may not seem too essential for standard experiences, but as this thesis is regarding experiences created for international students studying in Finland, the topics are very much essential.

As explained in chapter 1.4. culture in this thesis means the culture of the international students living in Finland and the Finnish culture that they need to get accustomed to. Culture was indeed chosen as one of the three main topics for this theory, because of the types of experiences IDS Helga creates, but moreover because of the fact that culture affects the way people behave and perceive things (Landers, 2017), for example, experiences.

Education was chosen for the same reason as culture, but it is also very crucial to experience creation, because there has been quite a lot of discussion regarding the fact that knowledge is derived from experiences and people only learn through experiences.

For experiences, we need not to mention much as it should be self-explanatory why the topic of experiences is so important for this thesis as experiences is the main topic of all. The two others are looked at from the experience point of view and how they might be essential for creating meaningful experiences.

2.1 Culture

In the topic of culture this thesis will be focusing more on the differences and crossing of different cultures and how those affect behaviours. In this chapter the crossing of cultures is discussed to give more understanding on how different cultures might react to each other and what kind of situations might occur when two completely different cultures collide. Later on, in this chapter the author will be diving more into the cultural dimensions of Geert Hofstede with a couple example countries to see how the dimensions differ from each other and what that might mean in regards of creating experiences. Through culture the way people react to different kinds of experiences and how culture in itself affects the creation of them is researched to find what kind of experiences do people with different

cultures value. This is done to find ways to create more valuable experiences for the international students who are studying in Finland.

But first, let's dive in to the meaning of culture itself. As already mentioned in this thesis in chapter 1.4. Zimmerman defines culture as the knowledge and characteristics of a certain group of people. (Zimmermann, 2017), but when looking more into the meaning of culture we find that culture is much more than that. Culture affects an enormous amount of how a person might act and how they react to things happening in their life. Culture can mould the whole social construction of a group, the power relations among people, their social identities, social relationships, all of it (Ikpeze, 2016). Culture is a thing that affects very much of how a person is, what their social relationships are like and even gives meaning to people.

Undoubtedly, in different cultures the impact that culture has on a person varies and in some cultures the behaviours and traditions might have been honed down to more acceptable forms for today's society as time has passed, but the author thinks that culture still has a high impact on how a person turns out to be. And that is why the author has deemed it important to research culture and its whims, to better understand its importance for creating experiences.

2.1.1 Crossing cultures

In creating experiences for international students, some culture crossing is always bound to happen at one point or another, so it is important to understand the mishaps that might happen when cultures cross and also the differences in non-verbal and verbal communication between cultures.

Landers talks about culture crossing in his book, where the cultural influences that can be seen in people are discussed as the following;

“Besides being a fun bit of knowledge to share at a dinner party, animal sounds are a good example of how people from different cultures are programmed from an early age to interpret the same experiences in different ways. It also underscores how culturally specific perceptions can get deeply lodged in our brains. Imagine if you suddenly had to convince yourself that your dog was saying “voon-voon” (Landers, 2017).

This example that Landers gave shows exactly how culture can influence the meaning of something and the experience that a person has of some particular thing. Thus, if you have been told from a young age that the sound a dog makes is for example “hau” as it is in Finnish culture, and you move to another country that has a different culture than yours and they tell you that the sound a dog makes is actually “voon-voon”, it might confuse you

and it might be hard to understand at first. These kinds of situations also make it easier to misunderstand things when two cultures intersect. When creating experiences, the differences between people and cultures is something that can affect even the smallest things regarding the experience, so it is important to find the middle where no cultures can negatively be impacted by the experience itself and the different cultures present for said experience can enjoy it without confusion or misunderstanding.

In addition, Landers explains more in his book about how people might react to the intersecting of different cultures. Culture affects a person's persona in profound ways even if we are not aware it, so when unlike persons intersect and we; "encounter people whose cultural programming is different from ours" (Landers, 2017); we might freeze up or crash in a similar way as electronic devices do and that can affect the way we react in such a situation. Of course, as people are not devices, the situation would more likely result in feeling uncomfortable or frustrated. Landers explains that, in such situations; "We may shut down, explode with emotion, or simply give up and walk away— thereby missing out on opportunities to build positive relations and achieve success at work and in other aspects of our lives. I call these kinds of encounters culture crashes" (Landers, 2017). Needless to say, it varies from person to person, how they react to such cultural differences, but in a multicultural atmosphere it is extremely important that it is taken into account that cultural crashes might happen and people should be prepared for those.

This theory is also supported by Lewis in his book; "When Cultures Collide: leading across cultures", where he gives the following example where there is a cultural scenario happening. There may be an Italian, who comes to a scheduled meeting late. In no way do they mean it as disrespectful, as in their cultural environment this would be deemed as normal as others would be late too. But if they were to turn up late in another culture, like Germany, they might involuntarily create a culture shock for their German co-workers as Germans are very particular with time and do not like to be kept waiting. Especially for thirty minutes. (Lewis, 2005, pp. 19-20). Further on he explains that a heated argument might commence between the Italian and someone from Germany if the Italian turned up to a meeting late, but when comparing to some other culture, for example France, they would not be so offended about the Italian coming to the meeting late, but might even joke about the situation. People's perceptions about things highly vary between cultures and often that might be overlooked when working in a multicultural atmosphere or when organizing events for a multicultural community.

When creating experiences for international students, the aspect of culture and the differences regarding cultures between countries and regions have to be taken into account to be able to create experiences that serve everyone regardless of where they are from. And

especially when these experiences are being created in a country that has a very different culture from many other countries, the simple things that might seem normal or ordinary for the organizers, might not seem so for the people that the experiences are being created for.

Lewis further said in his book; "We shall never fully understand the "others", particularly if the separating factors of language, geography and ideology have been distant. The best we can hope for is to acquire an orientation that enables us to lessen the communication gap between ourselves and our partners (Lewis, 2005, p. 580). Which gives us theory that to understand other cultures, how they might act, how they would react to things, acquiring cultural knowledge must take place. To be able to create meaningful experiences regardless of cultural differences, the cultural differences must be studied and the people who are creating these experiences must be aware of them and integrate the mindset of multiculturalism directly to the thought process of the experience creation.

2.1.2 Hofstede's cultural dimensions, Germany vs. Vietnam

Hofstede's cultural dimensions research has 6 cultural dimensions altogether. The dimensions are the result of extensive research, by Professor Geert Hofstede, Gert Jan Hofstede, Michael Minkov and their research teams (Hofstede, et al., 2010, pp. 255-258).

For this part of the theory, two example countries were chosen to highlight the cultural differences in different countries and also to highlight even more on how culture affects behaviour, since there are vast differences in for example how people communicate in certain cultures. In some cultures, mainly non-verbal communication is preferred, and body language says a thousand words, but in others the verbal communication is key to understanding each other.

The dimensions of Germany and Vietnam are being inspected and compared to each other and to Finland, to see how cultural differences may affect studying atmosphere and how people respond to certain experiences. Germany and Vietnam were chosen since both countries are on the list of top countries that most international students come to study in Finland from and because the results of the dimensions differ in these countries and also differ in some way when comparing the results of both countries to the results of Finland.

Hofstede's dimensions have been widely criticized, but they still remain as one of the most quoted sources regarding cultural differences. One of the reasons why the author of this thesis decided to use Hofstede's dimensions is, because even with the dimensions being

relatively old, they are constantly being modified and it has been proven that even with the dimensions being replicated by other researchers, the validity has not been compromised which means that the cultural differences have remained the same and are basic (Zainuddin, et al., 2018). With these results, the author decided to look into the Hofstede dimensions for this particular thesis, even when there has been criticism surrounding the fact that the study was made based on the employees of one company which even Hofstede has explained in one of his books that there is statistical proof that the differences between the survey answers are due to the nationalities of the employees who answered the survey. (Sent & Kroese, 2020) But even after all the criticism, Hofstede remains as one of the most important sources of knowledge for cultural differences and as Hofstede has been known to even engage and discuss with his critics, it goes to show that he himself believed in his work. Hence, the fact that Hofstede answered the criticism and modified his work when new information came to pass and there are studies and statistics supporting his dimensions, are the reasons why the author used Hofstede's cultural dimensions as sources for this thesis and to explain more in detail why culture matters in regard of experience creation.

2.1.3 Looking into Germany's cultural dimensions with comparisons to Finland

The second country for this comparison part of the theory is Germany. The author chose Germany for this comparison since it is a European country and on the list of most common nationalities among international students studying in Finland, Germany ranked 9th (Anon., 2017). Also, one of the reasons was that the author could look more into the cultural differences of countries from different continents. This way more variation in the results of the cultural dimensions regarding the countries could be found. Germany was also chosen since it was mentioned already in subchapter 2.1.1.

When looking at the results of Hofstede's country comparison regarding Germany, some of the results are quite predictable, but there are still some surprises along the way. Germany is a masculine society and it values work on top of everything as people in Germany more generally "live to work", which differs very much from Finland as Finland is a feminine society where people usually work so they can afford to live (Hofstede, ei pvm) As a masculine society Germany also then values status and showing their status through materialia, which is not so highly valued in Finland as the working conditions and wellbeing are more important than status and flaunting what you have and how much. Germany is among the countries that avoid uncertainty which correlates to their love for work as they avoid uncertainty to a high degree by people trying to maximize their expertise to cover for feelings of uncertainty. Finland also scores high in this dimension which makes it an uncertainty avoidant country, but the uncertainty avoidance is different from Germany as

Finnish people live by the rules and can be more like slaves to their own timetables than just working towards expertise.

But as Germany is also an individualist society like Finland is, this shows more togetherness within the results in European countries. Germany also is a pragmatic country, so the people in Germany can easily adapt to changing conditions and they also want to achieve results and don't mind if it takes them long to achieve them. Adapting to change is something that most probably can help German people who are coming to study in Finland as they will not experience as much culture shock as people coming from some other countries. Germans also believe that context, situation and time are strongly tied to if something is true or not.

Below a table is shown about the results of country comparison at Hofstede Insights, where you can see that the results are similar in more than one dimension, but as already highlighted there are also differences like in the masculinity dimension.

Hofstede Insights, Country comparison

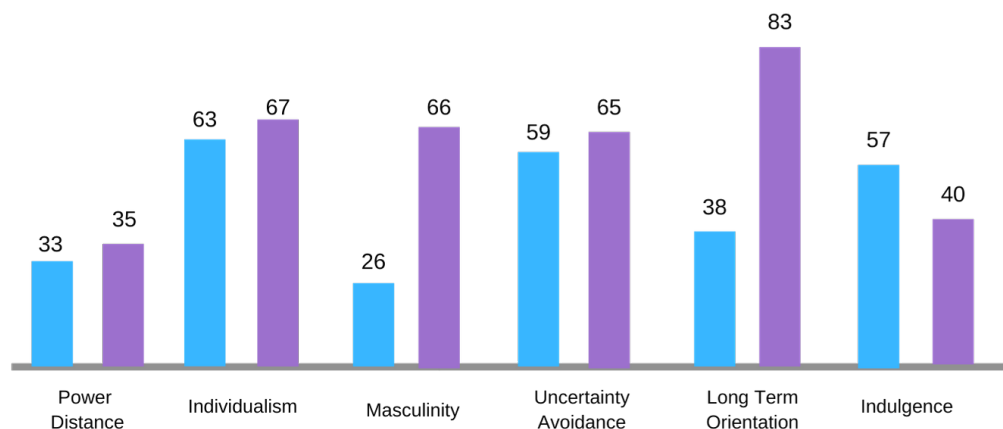


Table 1. Cultural dimensions, Finland vs. Germany (Finland as blue and Germany as purple, in accordance with Hofstede Insights).

With the many similarities to Finland, international students from Germany might be more easily accustomed to the Finnish study culture, but there are still cultural differences that should be focused on to create experiences that truly are valuable to all cultures and these are discussed more in subchapter 2.1.2.3.

2.1.4 Looking into Vietnam's cultural dimensions with comparisons to Finland

Vietnam was chosen as one of the example countries, as Germany was, as there are a big number of Vietnamese students studying in international degrees in Finland. In 2016 alone, there were 2516 international students from Vietnam, making Vietnamese students the second largest group to come to Finland to study in higher education (Anon., 2017).

Surprisingly to the author, there are some similarities between Finland and Vietnam when it comes to the cultural dimensions. Vietnam is a feminine society, which Finland also is, and it gives them the same values regarding equality, flexibility, free time, and the thought that people work in order to live. These similarities make it easier for Finnish and Vietnamese people to interact in working life as they value the same type of working. But as these cultures are quite far apart from each other, on different continents as well, there are many differences between them and the cultures that they possess, and this shows highly in the dimensions. Opposed to Finland, Vietnam scores relatively high in the power distance dimension, therefore making it a collectivist society and this contradicts a bit the aforementioned easy working life interaction between Finnish and Vietnamese people, as Finnish people are not so fond of hierarchy and Vietnamese people usually are, at least according to these dimensions. Finland and Vietnam further differ in almost all of the other cultural dimensions as their scores in Individualism, Uncertainty Avoidance, Long Term Orientation and Indulgence are not on the same level. Uncertainty Avoidance can be one of the dimensions to create the most issues if these two cultures were to collide, as Finland scores high on this dimension and Finnish people have this type of need for rules, and Vietnam scores low and therefore their feelings towards rules are not as strong. The reason this might create issues is if there were to be a situation where rules should be defined and the two cultures would have very opposite ideas on what the rules should indeed be.

Below a table is shown about the results of the cultural dimensions country comparison between Finland and Vietnam, that more in detail shows the differences between the two countries.

Hofstede Insights, Country comparison

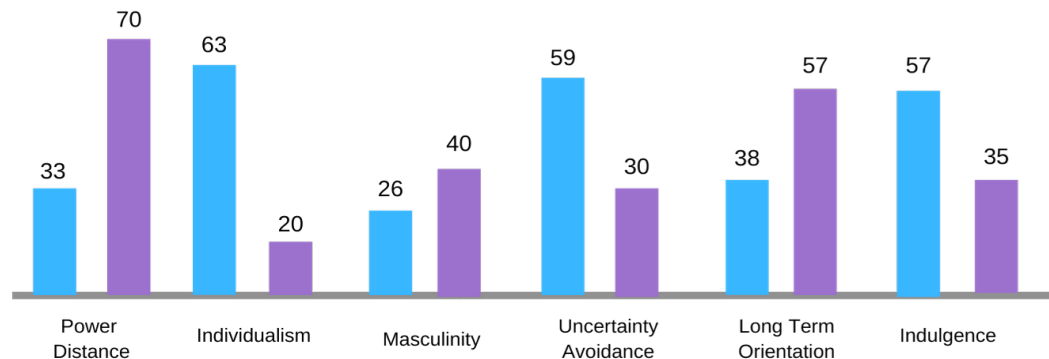


Table 2. Cultural dimensions, Finland vs. Vietnam (Finland as blue and Vietnam as purple, in accordance with Hofstede Insights).

Of the two countries being compared to Finland in these dimensions, Vietnam has more variation to the Finnish culture dimensions and therefore the differences between continents can also be seen very clearly and in the next subchapter these are looked into more in detail to see how the differences really affect creating valuable experiences for international students.

2.1.5 Cultural variations and how the differences affect creating experiences

Cultural variations highly affect the way a person perceives an experience. A Finnish person might perceive a drunken adventure around the city as the best night of their life, when again in other cultures this might be viewed as reckless or, as bad behaviour. While discussing the differences in cultural dimensions in Germany, Vietnam, and Finland, we do see some similarities between the countries, but also a lot of differences that might affect the way people from these countries behave in certain situations. For example, if three people are put in a room where one of them is from Finland, one from Germany and one from Vietnam and then they are told to do a project together without almost any help, the results might be quite peculiar. As Vietnam scores high on power distance, the people from Vietnam usually tend to have their tasks told in great detail to them and they might be told to never stray from the way they should be doing their job. That might also affect the outcome of their work in this type of a project, since they might rely a little too much on the given directions and get confused when not that many directions are given. Then, again the people from Finland and Germany might be used to working more freely and be innovative, so they might be more used to less directions and succeed better in a task like

this. When adapting this information to the creation of experiences, it might be easier to create experiences that will be suitable for people from all cultures (Hofstede, ei pvm).

When thinking about the dynamic of these three countries, the differences that they have are obvious. Finland and Germany are both European countries, and their dimensions are more similar than when comparing Finland and Vietnam together. In this sense, Vietnam is more probable to have increased similarities with countries that are located in Asia as well, for example China, with which Vietnam has similarities in multiple dimensions (Hofstede, ei pvm). The difference between continents and their cultures is a matter that highly affects how an experience that has been created for a more Eurocentric audience (which is very likely to happen when creating experiences in Finland) is perceived by person who is not from Europe. Things that are simple and even normal for people from Europe might not be so for other people. This is exactly why taking culture into account when creating experiences for international students is so very important. If only the Eurocentric mindset is taken into consideration when creating experiences, the experiences will be mostly enjoyable to only European people. Of course, experiences usually are quite easy to enjoy even if the culture that the experiences were made in is very different from the culture of the person experiencing it, there still might be some aspects that could be more accessible for all cultures. For example, if an experience is created in Finland and all the aspects are only created to serve the drinking culture of Finland or the Finnish language is only spoken at the said event, the event is not very accessible to people who are not from Finland and might even feel unwelcome to the event. Or if an experience is created by only taking into account the strict respect for schedules that Finnish people have (Lewis, 2009), someone from Italy, where people are not so strict about schedules (Lewis, 2005), might feel embarrassed when they come late or have not been following the schedule.

The Hofstede dimensions are indeed a great source for understanding cultural differences, even with the criticism that they have endured, and the dimensions could provide many things for creating experiences. But the main thing that should be taken from this, is that culture, in itself, is something to take seriously and certainly take into consideration when creating experiences for international students as it affects the fundamental aspects of what a person is like.

2.2 Education in terms of statistics and experiential learning

In this chapter the author will be looking more into the statistics of international students in higher education to see how the numbers have changed and what areas of study are more popular than others. This gives more idea on how important the topic of creating ex-

periences for international students really is as we see statistics on how many international students Finland and especially Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences has as IDS Helga, to which this thesis is made for, operates in said university.

The author will also be looking more into the concept of experiential learning as well and how it ties into creating experiences for international students and to them finding employment in Finland. Because it is a bit harder for international students to find a job in Finland, as explained in this article by Helsingin Sanomat; “While 51 per cent of international students who graduated in 2009 were working in Finland one year after graduation, the corresponding share for those who graduated in 2012 was 45.5 per cent” (Liiten & Teivainen, 2014), the topic of experiential learning and its ties to career success is an important part of this thesis, because through understanding how experiential learning can help with employment, more experiential learning focused events and experiences can be created for international students.

2.2.1 Statistics of international students in higher education

To understand more in depth how important creating valuable experiences for international students studying in higher education in Finland is, the statistics also play a major role in it. When looking at the statistics, we can see that about 4,150 foreign students started in higher education in Finland in 2017, excluding those who started in a doctoral education, which would make the number even higher if those were included (Anon., 2017).

The statistics of Haaga-Helia also show that it does accommodate a lot of these incoming international students, since altogether Haaga-Helia has about 1,100 international degree students (Anon., ei pvm) and each year around 400 international exchange students coming from all over the world (Sciences, ei pvm). Haaga-Helia also offers students eight bachelor's programs and three master's programs taught in English.

Finland introduced tuition fees for Non-EU and non- EEA students in 2017, this includes students studying in master's and bachelor's programmes, exempting only doctoral students or students studying in Finnish or Swedish. And as the tuition fees for non-EU/EEA students are a slightly new decision, it still affects the number of applicants coming outside of the EU/EEA area. It can be seen in the statistics that fewer foreign students applied to degree programs starting in autumn 2017 compared to previous years. This applies to both UASs and universities in Finland (Anon., 2017). One light at the end of the

tunnel for the international student coming outside of the EU/ETA area is that they can apply for scholarships to fund for their education, because Finnish universities offer a variety of different scholarships for international students to apply for (Team, 2017).

Also, in the research done by the Finnish National Agency for Education, it was researched that what fields are most popular amongst the international students who come to Finland to study. Three fields stood out; business administration and law, and engineering and information and communication technologies. And more in detail regarding UAS studies: "Especially those studying at UASs favour the field of business, administration and law" (Anon., 2017).

In conclusion, the studies do show that there are quite a lot of international students studying in Finland (even after the tuition fees were introduced) and that is why the experiences made for them are important to make them integrate to the Finnish way of living more easily.

2.2.2 Experiential learning

In the experiential learning subchapter, the topic of experiences and education as a whole will be analyzed and looked into more in depth.

In a book by Kolb called *Experiential Learning*, which was mentioned already in chapter 1, he goes very much into detail on the three different models of experiential learning that exist, but also the Lewinian, Dewey's model and Piaget's model that contribute to the model of experiential learning. The Lewinian model is rooted in that learning is a process that involves a feedback loop with concrete experiences, the observations and reflections of the experience and forming of the concepts and generalizations. Dewey's model then again focuses more on how a person should include recalling the experience into the learning and then creating questions regarding that experience to find out why a situation turned out as it did and how it could have been changed to achieve a different outcome. And lastly, Piaget's model. It thrives from the viewpoint that the birth of adult thought is created from different dimensions. These dimensions are experience and concept, reflection, and action. These models have been studied by Kolb and have contributed a lot to his experiential learning model. And as it is said in this particular book about these models and the theory of experiential learning; "It should be emphasized, however, that the aim of this work is not to pose experiential learning theory as a third alternative to behavioural and cognitive theories, but rather to suggest through experiential learning theory a holistic integrative perspective on learning that combines experience, perception, cognition, and behaviour"; the theory of experiential learning is not in the same scale with the cognitive

and behavioural theories, as it only is to shed light on a new perspective on learning and experiences. (Kolb, 1984).

But the idea of how learning is so closely tied to the process of experiences, is a quite fascinating one. As said by Kolb relating again to the existing models; “Experiential learning theory, however, proceeds from a different set of assumptions. Ideas are not fixed and immutable elements of thought but are formed and reformed through experience. In all three learning models just reviewed, learning is described as a process whereby concepts are derived from and continuously modified by experience”. The three learning models very much contribute to this thought that learning is derived and/or modified by experience. And that makes it plausible to think that experiences are very important when thinking about international students and their learning during their studies in Finland. In Kolb’s words, as he made the assumption that through the transformation of experience, knowledge is in fact created. His idea was that when an experience is understood and transformed, knowledge is created and there are four different kinds of knowledge that are created with the different steps of the experience (see Figure 3. below). This idea of transformative experiences was also supported by Frie who explained in his work that experiences are transformative, but it all depends on how a person lets a given experience affect them. (Frie, 2003).

Kolb, D. Experiential Learning

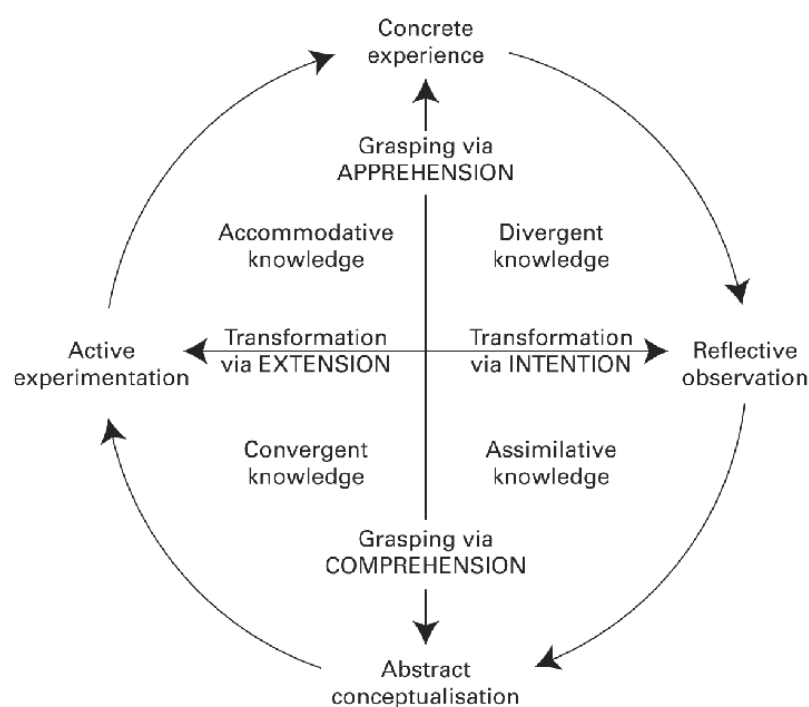


Figure 3. Kolb’s Structural dimensions regarding experiential learning.

Many other authors support the idea of knowledge being derived from experiences, with their own thoughts about the subject, for example, as said by Gendler and Hawthorne in this thesis in chapter 1., subchapter 1.4. where the key definition of experiences is discussed. Especially the phrase; “My experience makes a causal contribution to my knowledge” (Gendler & Hawthorne, 2006, p. 181). Gendler and Hawthorne discuss in their book very clearly that experiences directly affect a person's knowledge thus giving us the belief that every experience that a person experiences during their life, gives them knowledge and that those experiences should be made to be meaningful to contribute as much knowledge to the person as possible. This ties in with the experience creation as it gives the idea that the experiences should be made to support learning and they should be made so that the international students acquire as much knowledge as possible from the experiences they receive.

And a phrase from a book by Hutchinson and Helen, brings us to our next topic in experiential learning. The phrase goes as the following; “Learning is grounded in experience” (Hutchinson & Helen, 2011). This topic precedes the previous observations made in this subchapter, which then brings us to career success and experiential learning. If learning is indeed grounded in experience, then experiential learning should be very beneficial for a person's future career success, should it not? And to more understand the cause and effect relationship between the two, studies need to be looked at relating to the subject in hand. For example, a study was done in 2020 by applying experiential learning to career development training for biomedical graduate students and postdocs, where the authors describe different ways to apply experiential learning and compare the ways to apply it to different environments (Van Wart, et al., 2020). The study was conducted to help understand how experiential learning should be applied to studies, how it ties into career success and to also bring awareness about the topic of experiential learning altogether. In the study it was concluded that;” introducing experiential learning in a variety of doses and formats can be extremely beneficial to the professional development of trainees” (Van Wart, et al., 2020)”. In the study a few good ways to create experiential learning for students were mentioned, for example, job simulation, employer site visit and job shadowing. And the positive effects of experiential learning is supported by other studies made about the subject as a study made for certain canadian alumni of international development studies stated that;”Graduates perceive experiential learning as beneficial for furthering their knowledge learned in the classroom, developing new skillsets, and networking with potential employers” (Tiessen, et al., 2018).

Experiential learning can be very beneficial to creating experiences for international students as it can, for example, help international students to develop their professional skills

and get more in contact with possible future employers. Experiential learning should be taken into consideration when creating experiences as it can give more ideas to what kind of experiences might be valuable, especially if international students are hoping for more educational experiences.

2.3 Experiences

As already mentioned in chapter 1.4., experience is one of the keywords in this thesis, maybe even the most important one. Experiences are looked at from several points of view in this work, because experience itself is a word that may be hard to define as explained here; “For example, in the scientific community experience entails the accumulation of empirical knowledge through the use of experimentation, an inherently active emphasis. On the other hand, experience may suggest something that happens to us passively when we are sensitive to stimuli, such as the experience of watching a movie in a darkened theatre (Frie, 2003). Experience has many different meanings, but in this chapter, it will be looked at through a couple of topics.

These topics include that the author will be looking more into the experiences of international students from around the world to more see what kind of experiences they have had in different countries and what their struggles have been to understand more in detail of what they might need in relation to experiences. The author has in addition researched the aspects of creating valuable experiences and the topic of experience design and how using it can support the creation of valuable experiences. With these topics the author gives more insight on what international students usually struggle with and how creating experiences could help with those struggles and how, for example, experience design can contribute to the making of meaningful experiences.

Researching experiences and the creation of them is important for this thesis, because as explained and theorized in chapter 2.2.2., the assumption is that learning in general comes from experiences and in that way creating valuable experiences for international students is critical, hence in that way international students can get value from the knowledge gotten from the experiences. Naturally, the great experiences that international students experience while studying are also reasons for them to stay in Finland after graduation and grow accustomed to the culture and way of life in Finland.

2.3.1 Creating valuable experiences

In this subchapter, the author will look more into the creation of experiences and experience design as a way to create more value for the experiences created for international students. Let's start with the explanation, what is experience design?

“Experience design is taking a more systematic approach to how design and business look at opportunities, frame problems and projects, and evaluate solutions. The goal of this approach is to ensure that customers are receiving and recognizing the maximum value in a way that also keeps them engaged with the business. Experience design naturally assumes it makes sense to provide adequate levels of quality in customer service at all stages of a customer relationship” (Newbery & Farnham, 2013).

Experience design is in short, a way to make sure customers get the most value possible and to make sure that the customer relationship is taken care of so the value that the customer gets from the brand or business is high enough for them to come back and use the services of such business again.

Now that we have gotten familiarized with the concept of experience design, the question would be why experience design should be used to create valuable experiences for international students? The reason is that experience design takes in consideration the relationship between value and time to connect value identification, creation delivery, and support from brand through to product/service offerings across the entire lifetime of the customer relationship and the objective of it is to build understanding of how to look at opportunities, issues, strategies and tactics. This way the value of an experience that is created for an international student increases because the whole lifetime of the customer relationship is looked at thoroughly and enough measures are taken to understand what kind of experiences people want and/or need and why certain experiences are deemed valuable. Experience design is also a way to strengthen the brand of an organization by a brand starting to understand that their actions are guided by behaviours, concepts and patterns unbeknownst to them, and all because after recognizing this fact, they are able to make experiences that are recognizable to customers over time (Newbery & Farnham, 2013). Using experience design can be very beneficial when creating experiences for international students as through it, organizations and brands can more in detail find out what international student's value and they will start getting more recognized amongst international students through the valued experiences they created.

In relation to creating experiences, what are the important factors that experience design provides? One important one is the brand itself. Using experience design as a tool in experience creation provides an organization more information about what their brand should be like and what to take into consideration when creating experiences. A brand should have an up to date brand promise and, for example, could use brand attributes to

enable a level of coherency to deliver an experience that customers differentiate from other brands, but at the same time they are flexible enough to affect the qualities of the experience that the customer may have at any point of their customer journey.

By using experience design, an organization can also recognize the needs of a customer better, by understanding the three kinds of them, existing, unmet and emerging. (Gendler & Hawthorne, 2006) When an organization makes a survey, for example, they should differentiate in the answers which of the three needs the customer has explained in order to create something that can truly affect the situation. This way an organization can understand their customer's better and give them the most value with up to date and molded experiences.

Experience design is a high-end tool that many companies or organizations may not understand or see the point in using it, but especially when creating experiences for international students who may already have a lot of struggles and needs, experience design can be of great use with those. Experience design thrives on finding what a person wants and needs, and in that way creates the most value to the experiences and should be used to bring more value to international students.

2.3.2 International student experiences in higher education

When creating experiences for international students, it is important to get the students' point of view to the research as well. When researching on the topic of experiences of international students, some main subjects arose across studies from different countries. These topics include; social isolation, racism, difficulties finding work and difficulties integrating to a new way of life.

There are a lot of studies available that are referencing this topic, but they are mainly conducted in bigger countries like the United States of America. For example, the author found one study which is focusing on finding the challenges that international students face when they move to study in a new country. In the study, they found out through qualitative interviews that international students deal with for example social isolation very often (Wu, et al., 2015). These challenges are important to our research, because to create experiences for international students and to understand what they might need, the things they struggle with need to be researched.

In another article, the author wrote about ideas to help improve the university experience for overseas students. Also, in this article there are many great points to understanding what international students need and what kind of experiences they would value since one

of the people whose point of view the article has in it, is an international student themselves. Discussed in the article is how to make the international students immigrate better to the country that they are studying at. Here are some ways that the article mentioned; “A good welcome programme, with a buddy scheme, will help to make international students feel more integrated in the university community from the start. Societies and clubs are crucial to the social experience that students have, both internationals and home students” (Anyangwe, 2012). These already give some idea on what experiences to consider when creating meaningful experiences for international students, while reflecting on what they would actually need.

Then again, when looking into the experiences of international students who are studying in Finland specifically, a few main topics arise. Language issues, racism and employment issues are amongst these topics. Finland is often praised as the perfect country to study in because of the education system, but very rarely the issues that international students face during their studies in Finland are highlighted. For example, in a study made by Alho, the following was mentioned; “Had I interviewed people who had *not* found a job, instances of racism would have most likely been more prevalent. Additionally, many interviewees said they were unable to ascertain why they so often received no response to their application. Could racism have played a part? In all likelihood, yes, since prior research has shown that there is structural racism in the Finnish labour market. Many believed that a ‘foreign’ sounding name was enough to impede finding a job. (Alho & Gröning, 2020). Even though not proven directly, the issue with international students not finding a job in Finland may be due to structural racism, which in itself paints a quite negative picture of Finland and directly affects the experiences that should be created for international students for them to be meaningful and valuable and help with such struggles.

Relating to international students seeking jobs in Finland, Mathies and Karhunen, researched a similar topic with what makes international students want to stay in Finland and why they are leaving. In this research they mentioned that: “This suggests countries interested in increasing international students’ stay rates should develop policies aiming to enhance family life and the ability of international students to enter their labour markets. (Myklebust, 2020). If Finland indeed wants to increase the stay rates of international students, something ought to be done to the difficulties that they are facing when trying to enter said labour markets.

And this brings us back to why this matters regarding the creation of experiences for international students? The racism and language issues and any other difficulties international students face, should be reflected on when creating the experiences for them, to make them more aware of the difficulties they might face. These also need to be looked into to

possibly give them more experiences to help with said difficulties and make their integration into the Finnish student life and Finnish society more effortless. Hence making the experiences meaningful and valuable as they are getting something that they truly need out of them. And as already said, Finland should take the experiences international students have during their studies into consideration, because in that way Finland is able to stay desirable to international students even after graduation and it could be made sure that the international workforce stays in Finland to strengthen the Finnish economy.

3 Planning and Use of Product

In this chapter the planning and use of the product will be explained more in depth. This part will look into the background of IDS Helga and what the action group is about and what their processes are, but also more into the methodology used in this thesis and the product plan itself.

3.1 Background of IDS Helga

In chapter 3.1. the background of IDS Helga will be explained more in detail, to understand why the handbook that is the product of this thesis is important and something that IDS will have use for. The subchapters will give more information on topics such as board positions and responsibilities, and mission and processes. This information here about IDS Helga, the author has attained from being in the board of IDS Helga for 3 consecutive years.

As said in Chapter 1, IDS Helga has 8 board positions. Chairperson, Vice-Chairperson, Marketing Chair, Advocacy Chair, Secretary, Cultural Coordinator and two Event Coordinators. IDS Helga can also recruit actives if more people are needed to create the experiences for international students.

Then let's dive deeper into the responsibilities of the board members. The chairperson and vice-chairperson are in charge of keeping together all the processes that IDS has and overseeing that all the board members are doing the duties that they have been assigned. Some of the processes that the chairpersons of the board are only in charge of include the making of the action plan and making sure the processes listed in it are done during the year, budget approvals, chairs meetings, agendas for the meetings, calling the board meetings, development of IDS and each board member individually, supporting the board in their processes and general check-ins with the board members regarding their tasks and motivation levels. The chairperson holds the meetings usually, but if the chairperson is unable to attend the meeting, the vice-chairperson will hold them.

The event coordinators are in charge of the project planning and reporting of all the events that IDS Helga organizes, delegating tasks, booking dates and booking the venues. Everything regarding the events is under the event coordinators, unless other arrangements are made. The event coordinators are also in charge of the IDS actives if those are recruited at the start of the year.

Marketing and communications coordinator is in charge of social media and task delegation regarding it, creating promotional material for example event posters and patches, following the IDS marketing plan and maintaining the IDS Helga brand.

Cultural coordinator then again is a very new board position in IDS Helga. The cultural coordinator is in charge of coordinating possible excursions and local culture exhibitions, cooperating with the advocacy chair, communications with other associations and also the creation and development of the IDS website that should be done at the start of the year 2021.

Advocacy and wellness chair represents IDS at all advocacy related meetings, cooperates with Helga's advocacy representatives, identifies needs and opportunity areas for the international community in Haaga-Helia, works closely with the cultural coordinator and keeps up with the news concerning international students.

Last but not least is the secretary position of IDS Helga. The secretary is in charge of the meeting minutes for board meetings, making and updating the budget, having monthly check-ups with the Executive Director of Helga, allocating the finances accordingly, keeping up with the receipts of the IDS card and maintaining the budget during each event.

Then moving on to the mission that dictates what IDS is about and why it was created. The mission of IDS as stated in their mission and bylaws: "IDS' mission is to represent the students of the International Degree Programs in methods such as, but not limited to, events, activities, and/or advocacy and wellness work. Our mission is to encourage and facilitate intercultural communication between the international and Finnish students of the school and to create an international atmosphere that benefits each student" (IDS Helga, Updated January 2020).

IDS in general has three different aspects when it comes to their processes, organizational development, advocacy and events. Next, we will be dive more into these three aspects.

The organizational development in IDS Helga is quite interesting. As IDS is an action group of the student union of Helga, it follows the rules set by the student union, but also the rules that were made for the action group in particular. The organizational development inside the action group is tied to all of its board members, but most importantly the Chairperson and Vice-Chairperson are in charge of making sure that the organizational development is ongoing and the goals set in the action plan actually do happen. The action plan of IDS Helga is made each year by the Chairpersons of the current year and also the Chairpersons of the following year. The action plan for the next year is always made at

the end of the year, when the new board has been elected. This is to make sure that the goals set for the following year have been approved by both the current Chairpersons and the Chairpersons who will take over the positions from the start of the following year. Organizational development ties in all the aspects of the processes that IDS has.

When looking at advocacy in IDS, the reason behind advocacy processes is quite clear. Advocacy work is done in IDS to better the experience that international students get from studying in Finland. The processes in the advocacy aspect are more looking into things that international students might need information on when they come to study in Finland. That is why in IDS it is very important to stay up to date on advocacy related material, like news articles, announcements from the school et cetera, to make sure the international students are getting as much information regarding studying and living in Finland as the Finnish students, if not even more.

One of the main things that IDS does is events. As IDS stands for International Degree Students, the events organized by IDS are aimed towards students who are studying in international degrees in Haaga-Helia. But even though they are more aimed towards international students, all students of Haaga-Helia are welcome at the events. All of the events are always held in English. IDS Helga organizes a lot of different events, from pizza & poker-evenings to bigger events like appros that are very popular in Finnish student culture.

3.2 Product Plan

As IDS' mission is to help international students in their student life in Finland, the product for this thesis is the handbook for creating experiences for international students. This handbook will help IDS and in particular their event coordinator's in creating valuable experiences for the international students coming to study in Haaga-Helia.

In May 2020, the author came up with the topic for this thesis and started planning on how the thesis could be of help for IDS Helga, where the author has been working as a Chairperson for the academic year of 2020. The author decided to make a product-based thesis after consulting her thesis coordinator and the thesis process began.

The idea for the thesis was clear from the very start, but the objectives, the outline and theory for this thesis were decided during the summer and fall of 2020.

The theory of the thesis was started during October and it was an ongoing process for the rest of the year of 2020 and start of 2021. The author decided all of the theory that the

thesis would include and her own framework for it, and was able to finalize the topics for the handbook and the subchapters that the topics would have.

First part for the interviews was to begin drafting the interview questions for the international student interviewees and also the questions for the IDS Helga board members that would be interviewed. The interview questions deemed themselves to be a much harder task than the author had anticipated. Even though the interviews would be semi-structured and the interviewees would be able to answer more freely to the questions and tell about their experiences, the drafting of some of the exact questions needed for the achieving of the objectives set in this thesis did prove to be a bit more difficult than presumed. After some struggles, the author did get all of the interview questions ready during the third week of October. Then the author started messaging people to get people to interview for this thesis. In October 2020, 6 people had already volunteered for the interviews and two of them were from the board of IDS Helga to give more insight of the opinions and point of view of IDS Helga.

Then in November the author started booking times for the interviewees to get the interviews going and the results taken care of. During November all the interviews were concluded and the author started going through and analyzing the answers to find out similarities and possible deviations in the answers. In December the author analyzed all the answers from interviews and wrote the interview answers to the thesis. Then at the end of December the author wrote the analyzing of the answers.

In January to February the author focused more again on the theory part of the thesis to tie in all of the loose ends regarding it. Theory was finished during the spring of 2021, the author focused on the theory for a few months to get it exactly right.

After the theory was done, the author started to tie in the theory with the actual product, how to apply the theory to it and what really mattered. The author started to build the outlook of the product in April, to have the graphic part ready before starting on the evaluation. What colour schemes to use and what the product itself would consist of were all decided before the evaluation.

The evaluation was started in April, where the author focused on the content of the product itself after which, the topics of the product and how they would be divided were decided. All parts of the theory were used for the making of the product and the contents of it together with the interview answers and material from IDS Helga. After the evaluation was done, the actual product content was started from the contents of the evaluation. The

product was the last thing created for this thesis, as the author wanted to have all the possible information that they could for the product during the planning and production process.

After the contents of the product were made, the author went through all the text of the actual thesis and the product to make sure all the writing was according to standard and no misspellings were made.

3.3 Methodology

In this thesis the international survey of IDS Helga has been used and also a survey has been conducted and shared to international students all over Finland to get answers to the objectives for this research.

The objectives will be pursued using the two surveys in this research paper. The international survey results provided by IDS Helga and the author's survey which will only focus on the experience side of the objective. In the said survey different kinds of experiences will be listed and the respondents rate the experiences in numerical order to see which experiences are more valued than others among international students in Finland.

The data of the surveys will be analyzed with different steps. A journal will be kept of the observations made during the data collection. To see if the questions are taken out of context or something that can alter the answers to a different direction than what was intended.

Since the survey that will be conducted will have questions regarding the types of experiences organizations, associations and universities can offer international students and which of those experiences do international student's value and would want to experience during their studies. With these results, the analysing is quite simple, we will see from the amount of respondents what types of experiences are the most popular and what are less popular.

In the end we will have the results of both of the surveys and we will see if there are correlations in the answers of them. When comparing the questions and answers of the two surveys and then compiling them all together, we will have a better picture on what kind of experiences are mentioned more or voted highest.

The research method chosen for this thesis is qualitative research and the interviews conducted will be semi-structured to give more freedom to the interviewees regarding their answers. The reason for choosing qualitative research is simple. As said in the QuestionPro website on an article called Qualitative Research: Definition, Types, Methods and

Examples; “Researchers make use of qualitative research techniques when they need to capture accurate, in-depth insights. It is very useful to capture “factual data””. And that was exactly what was needed for this particular thesis, accurate data, but the semi-structured interviews that were conducted also give some freedom of expression and possibility for deviations, so the results would be more accurate as people might have similar opinions, but deviations are common.

3.4 Production

The product itself consists of the three keywords of this thesis, and some other topics lining under those three main ones.

With the first keyword, education, there are two subsections falling under the keyword with the first subsection being about statistics of international students in Finland and specifically in Haaga-Helia and the second one being experiential learning in experience creation. Experiential learning subsection then again has a few subsections to itself to give some further introduction and insight to the topic. These subsections include how and when to use experiential learning, why it should be used and insight on possible experiences to create with experiential learning, while also using critical thinking in the planning stage of the experience.

Second keyword, culture, has a bit more subsections in the handbook than the first one. The subsections are Crossing cultures, Cultural dimensions and how to create cultural experiences. The first subsection, crossing cultures, has a few subsections of its own, with Finnish culture keypoints and how to avoid cultural shock. Cultural dimensions section has subchapters about how and when to use them and what they can give to experiences. The last section how to create cultural experiences and what kind, is all about what kind of experiences international students want and need, and how to create valuable experiences related to culture.

Third and last keyword is experiences and experiences is the most significant keyword in this thesis and also the most significant one regarding the whole handbook. Experience section in the handbook has two subsections called international student experiences and experience design. International student experiences subsection gives insight on what international students struggle with in Finland and what to do to solve these issues or help them with coping with them. Experience design subsection then again has a bit more subsections to it. These include how to develop and maintain your brand with experience design, using the three needs of experience design for experience creation, what to question in the planning process and how to get the most benefit from the feedback of experiences.

The last part of the handbook is called Merging of culture, education and experiences - How to create valuable experiences, and as can be deduced from the headline of this section, it is all about the merging of the three keywords and how it can help with experience creation in all parts of the process. When creating experiences for international students, these all three keywords are important in all kinds of experiences and that is why they should be reflected on at all points of creation.

3.5 Looking at experiences, education and culture from the international students' perspective

In this chapter the topics of experiences, education, and culture are looked at from the international student point of view and specifically the feedback from the IDS Helga international survey and the interview answers of international students studying in Haaga-Helia and IDS Helga board members are reflected on and analysed, to get a better understanding of what the international students studying in Finland want and need from the experiences made and organized for them. The international survey reflection of IDS Helga was made in the spring of 2020 and the interviews for this thesis were concluded in fall 2020.

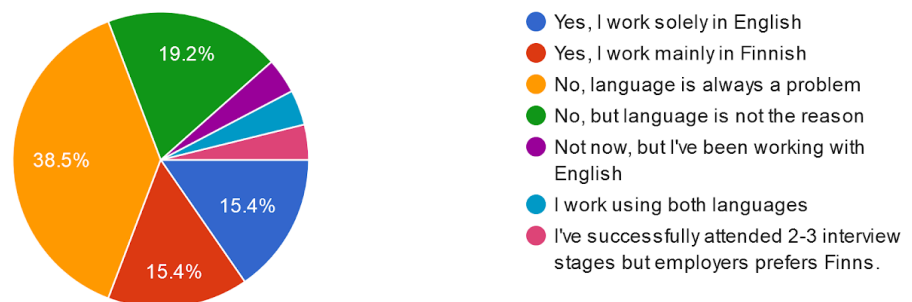
3.5.1 International survey

The international survey of IDS Helga consists of several parts and only some of these parts are actually tied to experiences. But as there are parts relating to experiences, it was taken as a source to research the thought processes and struggles that international students face and what kind of experiences would help them in adjusting to the culture and student life in Finland. In the international survey of IDS Helga, the respondents were asked if they had an idea for an event that they would like IDS to organize. Excursions were very requested as events as many people also asked for less parties. Outside of school activities were also requested such as camping trips, gaming nights, live music nights or trips to amusement parks (IDS Helga, International Survey, 2020)

On the website of goabroad.com, in an article regarding Finnish universities, it is said that: "Finland is continuously ranked as one of the top countries in the world for non-native English speakers, which is naturally reflected in their higher education as well. Finnish universities offer a large selection of degree programs in English; thus, as an international student, you will have no problems communicating with fellow students, professors, or strangers". (8 Best-Kept Secrets About Universities in Finland, 2019). But what is the real proof that there will be no communication issues for international students while studying in Finland? Even though almost everyone in Finland does speak English, the international students struggle with finding a job in Finland, mostly because of lack of Finnish language skills. In the International Survey Reflection by IDS Helga, this matter of communication is

looked at from the employment side. When asked if international students are currently working in Finland (excluding work placement), 38.5% of the respondents answered no. And they answered no, because language in their opinion is always a problem when international students are seeking employment in Finland as stated in the below graph (IDS Helga, 2020). So even if the communication might be easy in some places, there will be some language barriers regarding certain areas of life.

Are you currently working in Finland (excluding work placement) and in which language?
26 responses



So what else do international students struggle with or they would like help with? One person answered to the survey that; “Making the fairs in English, or for English speakers too, since Haaga-Helia has many different languages and there are many more opportunities for Finnish students, which is understandable, but in a place like Haaga-Helia, there should be more options”. As said before that Finland takes pride in the fact that our educational system is respected around the world, but there are a lot of room for improvement when looking at the education from the international student’s point of view. Some other things that popped up in the international survey reflection is that international students need help with Finnish bureaucracy, for example, Kela aid, maistraatti meetings and unemployment aids.

With already touching up a bit on the employment side, the last part that international students really struggle with in Finland is finding employment. And in the survey international students were asked how IDS Helga could them with finding employment. These answers included excursions to English speaking companies in Finland, creating a data base of companies that don’t require Finnish language skills, publishing infographs about job hunting tips in English and also creating job fairs in English that was also mentioned before.

The international survey reflection gives a glimpse to the lives of international students studying in Haaga-Helia and as we can see, they struggle with various different things that

could be helped with with proper experiences that accommodate the needs of international students.

3.5.2 Semi-structured interviews

Interview questions for the thesis theory and the answers of the interviewees are presented and analyzed in this subchapter. First will be the questions for the international degree students who are not in association work and then secondly the interview questions for the board members of IDS Helga to determine how the opinions between these people differ and how it can affect the creation of experiences for international students. The importance of interviewing both the international students and board members of IDS Helga is that if there are huge deviations in the answers, a lot can be learned from the answers and it will help the board of IDS Helga to more in detail realize the thought processes of international students when they are deciding what events to attend and what experiences to seek for. The interview questions were made in October 2020 and then the interviewees were decided in November when the author reached out to IDS Helga board members and also to different international degree groups. The interviews were held at the end of November with 4 interviewees who were international students from Haaga-Helia and 2 interviewees that were IDS Helga board members. The questions for international students and IDS Helga board members revolved around what experiences would the international students want, what themes were important in these experiences and what kind of feedback had some IDS events gotten. The questions were of course different for the international students and the IDS board members, to better reach the objectives of this thesis which were to figure out what kind of experiences do international students want (educational, cultural or entertainment related), which experiences give valuable knowledge to international students and what themes should IDS Helga focus on when creating experiences.

3.5.3 International student interviews

The interviews were concluded in November 2020 and the interviewees were asked ten (10) questions in total. These questions were made after the theory was finished to understand more in detail what the interviewees should be asked and what things needed answers to reach the objectives of this thesis as mentioned before. The interviews were also concluded to figure out how do the opinions of normal international students differ from the students who have been involved in association work in Haaga-Helia, to be exact IDS Helga board members. All together there were 4 interviewees who are studying full-time in different international degrees in Haaga-Helia. The interviewees were picked randomly as the author reached out to different international degree groups and asked if some people would be interested in taking part in this interview. The interviewees are referred in this

subchapter as R1, R2, R3 and R4 to make it as clear as possible to who is being referred to at what point.

The first question to the interviewees was regarding what kind of experiences in general do they value. This was asked to get a broad understanding on what kind of experiences international students usually want. The most valued experiences were job related and educational events. R2 and R4 wanted to attend more job-related events, with R2 mentioning that from her experience a lot of the job-related events in Haaga-Helia do not consider the non-Finnish speaking students that much and R4 was hoping to integrate better to the Finnish job market, since they were already studying their second bachelor's degree. R1 wanted more educational events as they felt that educational events give them more value in terms of knowledge. R3 valued all kinds of events, they had already participated in several educational and job-related events and thought those to be very good regarding their degree. They also valued entertainment focused events but said they only attend those if they do not overlap with courses or work.

One question was regarding what kind of events they have attended during their studies. R1 had just started their school so they had only attended entertainment related events such as fresher's party and IDS Helga international sitsit. R1, R3 and R4 had all attended several types of events, but one that seemed to be lacking was cultural events, as only one of the respondents (R1) told of a cultural event called Language Day. The events that R1, R3 and R4 have attended include events such as IDS Murder Mystery, career events, XES events, Dash Hackathon and StartUp School Social Media Trends 2021.

Next the respondents were asked if they thought there were enough cultural events to attend. The answers to this were not consistent. R1 thought there were enough cultural events, but R3 thought there should be more cultural events. R2 thought that there possibly are enough cultural events, but for those who do not know how to find them it might seem like they do not exist. R4 compared her experiences to those that they had gotten in their previous bachelor's degree in Spain and said that there is a great effort made by student organizations in Finland to bring culture to the international students and that they do see a lot of interesting events, but just might not have enough time to attend those.

Next question was regarding educational events and if there are enough of those. R1 felt that there should be more of them with different kinds of topics and R3 thought that the ones organized by XES (entrepreneurship society at Haaga-Helia) and StartUp School (Haaga-Helia's program that offers courses and activities for students who are interested in entrepreneurship) are enough. Then again R4 thought that there are enough of these events, but because of lack of marketing efforts they might not be so easy for students to

find. R4 said that they work with XES and that the marketing should be done better to reach more students and audience for the events organized. This argument was supported by the answer by R2 who said that they are quite confused about the educational events in Haaga-Helia.

Next question for the interviewees was what kind of educational events would they like to attend during their studies. R1 wished for events regarding mental health and emotional intelligence. R2, R3 and R4 wished for events that would help them in their studies and career. R2 wanted workshops with different topics such as IT and insights on their studies. R3 wanted something closely related to their studies and/or career and R4 wanted events/workshops related to marketing which they are specializing in. So definitely a bigger range of educational events related to studies was something that the respondents all agreed that would be needed. The topics included tools that would help in making a CV and hone their talents such as Google tools, Adobe, SEO, SEM. Additionally, photography and videography.

Keeping up with the topic, one question was regarding cultural events and what kind of cultural events would the interviewees like to attend. R1 and R2 had similar answers as they wanted events related to music or art and R2 also said that they would want to not only listen but participate too and would like to learn about other countries and the world around us. Then again R3 had some other ideas as they wanted international dinners or cultural appros, the latter one being an event that IDS Helga organized in the fall 2020. R4 would like to attend more events relating to the Finnish culture such as cultural events regarding Finnish food, beverages, traditions and history.

As in the Finnish student culture, many events are focused around alcohol consumption and so one of the questions was regarding if the interviewees liked to attend events that are alcohol focused or not. R1 and R4 liked attending events that were alcohol focused with R1 even saying that alcohol makes events interesting, but they do understand that it's not for everyone. R2 and 3 were okay with both types of events, but R2 felt like it heavily depends on the event if they would want it to be alcohol focused or not.

Next the interviewees were asked why they had attended the events that they had. R1 did not have specific reasons as they just mentioned classmates and hearing about the events somewhere and R3 answered that they were just interested in the events. R2 had a bit of a different approach to this question as they said that they attended the events since they were new to Finland and wanted to meet friends and also just enjoy their time in Finland and have fun. R4 also had similar kinds of answers as they attended the events

so they could meet like-minded people, have fun, learn about new cultures, network, and be more active.

Then the interviewees were asked a question that was an open feedback for them to answer what kind of events they would want student organizations to organize. R1 wanted student organizations to do events related to mind consciousness as a meditation group event and art event where everybody can express its artistic side (any kind of art). R3 wanted events like Alumni stories, excursions to companies, international dinners and movie nights. R4 had actually liked an event that IDS did in 2019 called Wings Day. That event was held in Siipiweikot restaurant in Helsinki and people were tasting all of the hottest wings from their menu and also playing some games during the event. R4 hoped for some similar kind of events to be organized in the future. R2 pointed out that student organizations should be clearer on who the events are for since they had an experience where they thought a certain event was just for a couple degree programmes and not open for all and that is why they didn't attend the event.

Last question was regarding how the interviewees found out about the events that they had attended. R1 and R3 answered simply that they find out about events through social media. R4 said that through social media, by checking the channels of certain associations that they are interested in. R2 answered social media as well, but also pointed out that they find out about events through their classmates too and also at the start of their studies IDS Helga and the student union of Helga had their presentations for freshers and they found out about events through that.

3.5.4 IDS Helga board member interviews

Two IDS Helga board members who have also moved to Finland to study from another country were also interviewed to get more insight on the events of IDS and also to find out if there might be some variations between the board members of IDS Helga and regular international students regarding experiences. The board members were asked five (5) questions altogether and the questions were structured based on the international students' interview questions and the theory of this thesis to further the research of what kind of experiences international students might value. The board members will be referred to in this part as simply by B1 and B2 to avoid confusion.

The first question was regarding what kind of events are most popular usually amongst international students. B1 felt like events that were focused on much more than just partying were more popular. B1 mentioned IDS events like international sistsit and murder mystery

which have some kind of activity/theme that the students can participate in. B1 also mentioned that as *sitsit* is a traditional Finnish student culture event it is also very popular as IDS has that event in English. This event was also mentioned by B2 as they said that events that are linked to some sort of tradition are very popular usually. B2 also mentioned that events that happen yearly are popular since they hold a lot of value, when people have already attended them before and liked them.

Next the interviewees were asked if they have gotten any requests for events. B1 said that *sitsit* has been requested before which was why IDS started doing *sitsit* in the first place and in general more events in English get requested each year. It was also mentioned by B1 that it should be put into the IDS strategy that event requests would be asked from the international students more. B2 said that people have been requesting more non-alcoholic events which coincides with the answers of B1 in the previous question when they mentioned that people usually want something more in an event than just partying. B2 also mentioned that as the global pandemic has been halting events all over the world in 2020, more online events are being requested from student associations.

For the next questions about what events get the best feedback, B1 and B2 both had similar answers. Both interviewees said that it depends on different variables, like theme, attendees and so on. All events usually get mainly good feedback, but B1 mentioned that *pizza&poker* that is an IDS event organized at the start of the semester in the spring and fall usually gets very good feedback as it is a cheap and very chilled event where people can just get to know each other and have fun. Also, *santa appro* was one that B1 mentioned as that is a big event that IDS organizes yearly, and it usually gets mainly good feedback. B2 then mentioned *cultural appro*, which was done during the pandemic year and it being a great opportunity for people to do something without breaking any pandemic restrictions. *Cultural appro* got really good feedback as it included checkpoints, tasks and visiting places.

Next the interviewees were asked what kind of events do they think that international students would want. B1 and B2 both agreed that more relaxed events are something that students usually welcome with open arms. B1 mentioned that as a foreigner themselves, they had recognized that foreigners usually do not have such strong student culture as Finns have which is why some foreigners might feel uncomfortable doing group competitions and checkpoint races. B1 suggested that people should not be pushed to be as competitive and active as it is done in some events, but to make it so that some activity is included in an event, but the activity is not the base of it. This way there would be room for much more, like music, food, no pressure of high achievement and the event environment would be comfortable for foreigners so that they would have space for actual talking and

getting to know other people. B2 also had a similar thought to this question as they mentioned that for international students coming to study in regular degree programs for the whole 3,5 years, it is hard to create friendships. Their classmates are not necessarily sharing the same values and needs - students might be of different age (literally varies from 18 to 35 and even higher), some students have families, some have full-time work with their studies, many students in international DPs are Finnish and so on. So international students need events focused on meeting people, who share their values and have the same needs. More relaxed events with nothing big happening.

In this part B1 also said that the most important thing in their opinion is not the question of what event, but how it is handled by the association/organizer and to look at things from the customer service point of view. People have to feel welcomed, not forgotten and definitely not judged. B1 said that there has to be the opportunity to find new friends, and the associations have to encourage people to do so. B2 also mentioned something similar; that it is important to create a welcoming and inclusive atmosphere at all the events.

Lastly the interviewees were asked what kind of events they prefer as the board members of IDS Helga are also students at Haaga-Helia. B1 mentioned that they are not so competitive which is why they enjoy activities that unite people and where it is possible to talk with other people. She mentioned sitsit and IDS murder mystery as her favourite events, but also said that intercultural tasting events would also be great if somebody organized those. B2 enjoys events that are specific to Finnish student culture like sitsit, appros and vappu celebrations. B2 said that for international students, those events are an awesome opportunity to immerse themselves completely into the student culture, that is very specific for Finland. And as well, these events are something that international students might not have in their own countries so that is why they like these kinds of events. Both B1 and B2 mentioned sitsit being an event that they enjoy which is something that can be taken into consideration in this thesis and making of the handbook.

3.6 Limitations and risks

When creating a product-based thesis, limitations are always possible. For this particular thesis and the product of it, the first to discuss is the sampling size of the interviews. As only 6 people were interviewed for this thesis, the sample size may be too little to get realistic data of the experiences of international students based on the interviews. On top of that, as there are variations and deviations between the interviewees the limitations may be even bigger.

Regarding the handbook itself one of the limitations may be that the handbook would not be able to give probable guidance in what experiences would be valued most by international students and how to create valuable experiences. This of course depends highly on the people using the handbook, as people interpret things differently and some may find more use for the handbook than others.

The theory used for the making of the handbook might as well be one direct limitation for the actual product created. If the theory is not relevant enough for the creation of the handbook, it may come out as not useful to IDS Helga and its event coordinators.

As the product created was not dependent on any organized experiences or such there are not that many risks relating to the creation of it. The only risks related to this product are the ones that could be possible when the handbook is used to create experiences. If the handbook does not give enough relevant instructions and help to the IDS Helga event coordinators, it could be risky to create experiences based solely on the instructions gotten from said handbook.

In the next subchapter, the theory and interviews of this thesis are evaluated and analysed to give more insight on if they are applicable for the creation of the product.

3.7 Evaluation

Evaluation part of this thesis is for summing up the interviews and theory and tying them together to create the structure and the foundation for the product itself.

First, we have culture, which is very important to creating experiences for international students as has been learned from the theory part. With culture the key points are how to understand how crossing cultures and specifically crossing onto the Finnish culture affects the experiences created for international students studying here and how to make use of the Hofstede dimensions (Hofstede, ei pvm) to create the experiences.

The Hofstede dimensions mentioned in the theory part and especially Hofstede insights which is a webpage where you can compare the cultural dimensions between countries can be used when planning an event, if the nationality is asked from the participants beforehand. The most frequent nationalities in Haaga-Helia could be singled out to already see what kind of differences those have between the dimensions and how these affect behaviours towards different things. Differences regarding authorities or maybe differences regarding innovation? The differences between European countries might not be as big, but how about when moving to a whole new continent? How does the distance affect the

dimensions and how could that be considered while planning the event? These are questions very critical when creating experiences in a multicultural community. The dimensions could be used to help with the process of planning the experiences. And definitely as mentioned by the interviewees, there have not been that many cultural events and the dimensions could substantially help with creating these cultural events as the differences between cultures can be studied.

As gathered from the theory, Finnish culture does have similarities with other cultures, but also many differences that need to be realized during the process of experience creation (Lewis, 2009). Finnish people are always on time and follow rules to a fault which also shows in the Finnish student culture. Finnish student culture is strong as it may not be in other cultures and it should be explained more the new students coming to study in Finland, so no culture shock will be experienced at an event or during an experience catered for the international students. As taken from the theory and the interview answers of international students, the Finnish culture and student culture can be, for example, very alcohol-focused and the Finnish language can be quite hard to learn, which then directly affects the experiences that are developed in the Finnish student culture. If an event is only in Finnish or even if it is not and people are speaking Finnish there and drinking heavily, a person who does not speak Finnish or does not drink might feel excluded and not get the best experience they could have gotten. This creating then again, a cultural problem where there should not be one if all the fragments of an experience would have been considered during the planning process of said experience. The interviewees did mention that they did not mind alcohol-focused events, but that highly depended on the event and the sampling with the interviews is quite small so the validity of the responses need to be considered in this part.

The statistics of international students in Finland shows that more effort should be put to make the immigration of international students to Finland and the Finnish culture more flowing. This is why more effort should also be put into creating experiences that international students would value and get the most out of.

Tying in the experiential learning portion of the theory and the educational events. Experiential learning was discussed in the theory and has been used for the product as well (Kolb, 1984). The idea of experiential learning that all experiences give a person some kind of knowledge has been used, to create check-points for the product, for example, that when creating an experience, make sure that the knowledge received from it is valuable enough. The theory has been used to give tips on the use of experiential learning in events such as job simulation, employer site visits and job shadowing (Van Wart, et al., 2020). These are something that the interviewees mentioned as they wanted more job-

related and educational events to help with the development of professional skills and getting help getting contacts to possible future employers.

The experience design related part of the theory has been used for the product in many ways. The benefits of experience design, brand strengthening, better customer connection, that are just some of the benefits of it, have been used to show the organization that experience design is valuable for creating meaningful experiences (Newbery & Farnham, 2013). The theory part has also been used to create questions that should be asked during the planning of an experience or things that should be thought of during the process of planning each experience. The things to consider are the brand attributes and brand promise, are they up to date and do they bring enough value? What is the brand giving to the international students? Listening to their customer's, what have they said that they need or want? All the feedback from surveys and feedback questionnaires, but how about the ones gotten verbally during the events? Those need to be documented as well, and from that feedback it has to be concluded which of the three needs each feedback about. Which are existing, which are unmet and which are emerging needs and how they all should be handled. During the brainstorming process, the experiences need to also be looked hard into, do they tie in with your brand? What do they give to the international students?

Lastly the theory subchapter on experiences of international students has been very crucial to the creation of the product as understanding the experiences that international students have had before has a high impact on how the author looked at the product and its valuability to the creation of experiences for international students. The experiences of international were also analysed through the interviews held for international students and IDS Helga board members. The interviews gave a significant amount of insight into the lives and opinions of international students, but as the sampling size of the interviews is rather small, the data is quite limited and the data is not able to represent every international student there is in Finland. But the research made for the theory and the international survey reflection of IDS Helga help with these limitations.

4 Discussion

In chapter 4, the thesis process and learning outcomes of this thesis will be discussed. In subchapter 4.1. the author will discuss what the thesis process was like for them and give more insight on what the struggles were regarding it. Then again, in subchapter 4.2. the learning outcomes relating to all parts of the thesis are discussed to show how the making of this thesis helped the author and what new knowledge they got from the process.

Chapter 4 is wrapping up the thesis before the references and appendix are presented to the reader.

4.1 Thesis process

The thesis process for the author started from the point when the topic of the thesis was created. As the author had been part of IDS Helga for three consecutive years, it felt like the topic had to be something related to this organization. IDS Helga creates experiences for international students all year round, so experiences was the most reasonable one from the options. And as the author had seen the struggles of international students and heard about them during her years in the organization, the author decided that creating valuable experiences for the international students during their studies was something, that international students clearly needed and should be researched more to help them to adjust better to the Finnish culture and way of living.

The thesis process for the author was reasonably difficult even as the topic of the thesis was meaningful for the author. The author wanted to give the best possible handbook about creating experiences and it was the reason why the author also felt some slight pressure about creating this product. These high expectations that the author had for this whole process and the product made the progress moderately slow and it took the author several months to get everything just right, but as the author gave it time and went over the topic and all it included several times, the product became the greatest version that it could ever be, at least that is what the author thinks about the product.

Overall, the thesis process, even though difficult, proved itself also quite enjoyable and it definitely gave much more than it took. The process was heavy, but the results speak for themselves and the author finished the thesis on a delighted note as they did the best they could for the thesis and the final product.

Even with the process being relatively heavy to finish, the author got a good amount of support for it. The supervisor of the thesis was there for the author from the very start of the thesis process, and often checked on the author and their progress to see if the author

needed any guidance or help with proofreading the work. The author had some difficulties during the process of creating this thesis, but the supervisor of the work helped immensely to get the author to be able to create this thesis work and to make it the best possible version. There are always things that could be improved in any work, but for this one, the author got all the support needed and the thesis and its product came out to be what the author wanted.

In the next subchapter the author will be discussing their learning outcomes from this thesis and how these learning outcomes are meaningful to the author.

4.2 Learning outcomes

The author had quite many learning outcomes from this thesis process. The whole process of making this thesis about creating experiences for international students was educational in many unexpected ways that the author had not thought about. First of these learning outcomes included that the author learned even more about the struggles of international students and how it may affect a person when they move to a new country. The struggles and learning that it entails when a person submerges themselves to a whole new culture that has its own quirks and oddities to adjust to.

The author had been familiar with creating surveys and doing interviews, but the making of this thesis taught them more about how to make the questions more purposeful for the creation of a product that was based on the answers of the interviews conducted. The interviews were also a great way for the author to be in more direct contact with the international students and to get more out of the feedback that they had for experience creation. Analysing the answers for the research purposes was something that the author holds to high value as they feel like the experience they got from the process will help them after they graduate.

The making of the product was in addition a learning process for the author as they had never done an extensive product like this all by themselves before. The graphic design of the product was an enjoyable process for the author, because graphic design has always been a hobby of their and this product was a great way to further their know-how on the subject. The content creation for the product was very challenging as it required plenty of research and going over the theory and interviews to find the relevant information for the product. The whole process regarding the product, full report on the planning, doing and evaluating it was a matter that the author had not experienced before this thesis and it gave the author more tools for when they will fully enter the working life.

The author in addition to all the mentioned learning outcomes, learned more about the three main topics of experiences, culture and education. Regarding culture the author learned about the many ways that culture affects the way people behave and how they react to different things. Experiential learning was a topic unbeknownst to the author before this thesis, therefore it gave the author plenty of new knowledge. On top of these the author learned more about experience creation, and definitely more about how to use experience design to its full-potential while creating experiences.

Hence, the author had many learning outcomes from the making of this thesis and the whole process helped them more understand what it takes to create valuable experiences and how organizations can better their practices in experience creation to reach their full-potential.

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Appendix

Appendix 1. Interview questions

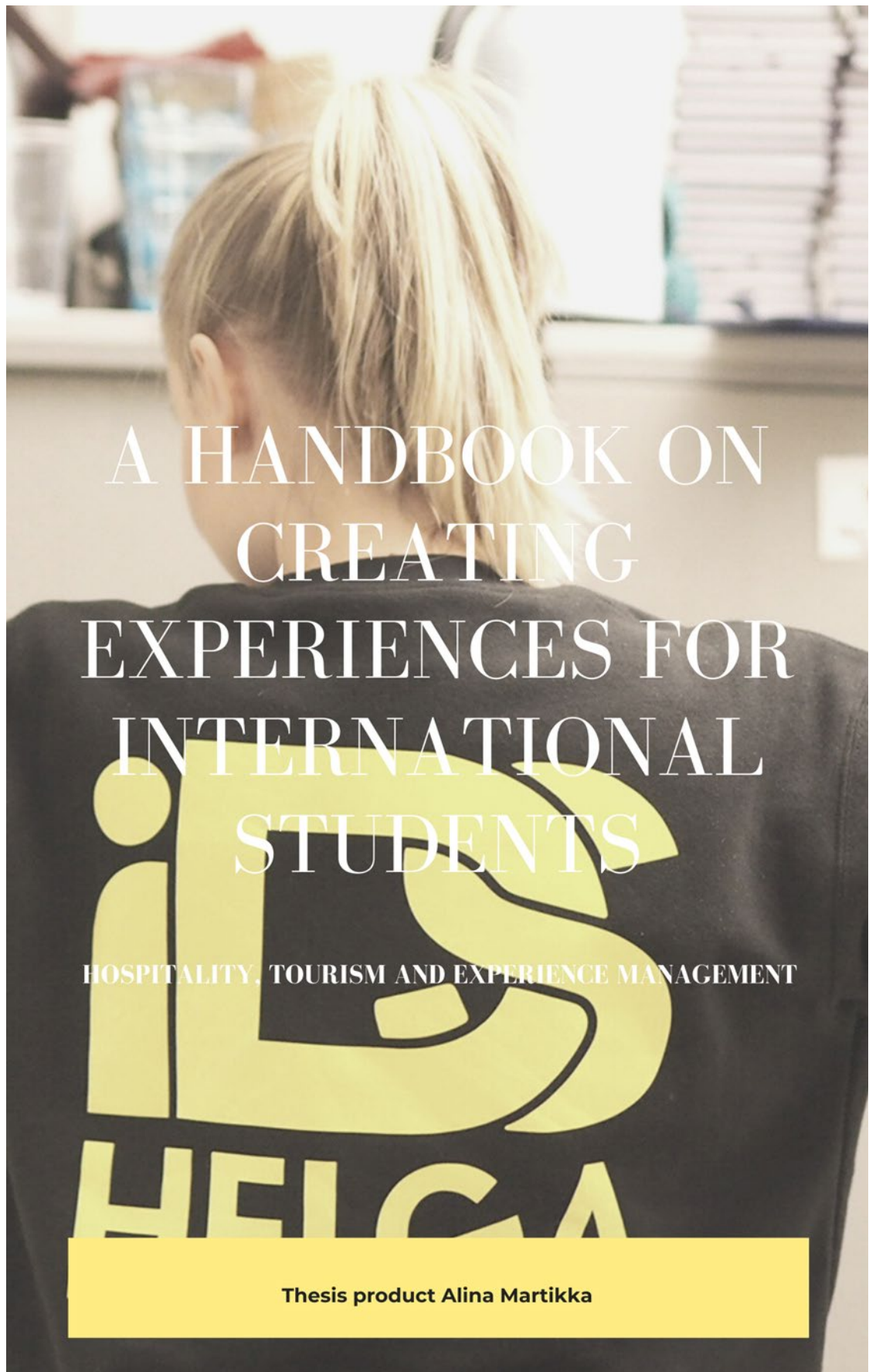
Interview questions for international students in general:

1. What kind of experiences do you like? (educational, job-related, entertainment related)
2. What kind of events have you attended during your studies?
3. Do you think there are enough cultural events?
4. Do you think there are enough educational events?
5. What kind of educational events would you like to attend during your studies?
6. What kind of cultural events would you like to attend during your studies?
7. Do you like to attend events that are alcohol-focused or not? Or something in the middle?
8. Why did you attend these events?
9. Open feedback, what kind of events do you wish your student associations would organize?
10. How do you find out about events usually? Through social media or through a friend?

Interview questions for people from the IDS board:

1. What kind of events are most popular usually?
2. Have you gotten a lot of requests for some kind of events?
3. What kind of events get the best feedback?
4. What kind of events do you think international students would want?
5. What kind of events do you prefer?

Appendix 2. Thesis product



A HANDBOOK ON
CREATING
EXPERIENCES FOR
INTERNATIONAL
STUDENTS

HOSPITALITY, TOURISM AND EXPERIENCE MANAGEMENT

Thesis product Alina Martikka

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Education

In the first chapter there are two main topics. The topics are statistics and why it matters in regards of experience creation and experiential learning.

In the statistics part the statistics of international students in Haaga-Helia and in Finland in general are looked at to see why creating experiences for international students is important.

In the topic of experiential learning, the topic itself is discussed and then there will be some examples on what kind of educational events are possible to create with experiential learning and why it should be used.

Education is important to international students as they come to Finland to learn about a new culture and study in their chosen degree. That is why educational experiences should be created for them to help them with their academic career and their work career after they graduate.



Statistics and why it matters

4,150 foreign students started in higher education in Finland in 2017 (Anon., 2017).

Haaga-Helia does accommodate a lot of these incoming international students, since altogether Haaga-Helia has about 1,100 international degree students (Sciences, ei pvm).

Each year around 400 international exchange students coming from all over the world (Sciences, ei pvm).

Haaga-Helia has 9 bachelor's degree programmes and 5 master's degree programmes taught in English. In these degree programmes students from about 100 different nationalities study together.

Looking at these statistics, you can see why it is relevant to create valuable experiences for international students. These students are possible future workforce for Finland and that is why their well-being and orientation to the Finnish culture and way of life is very important and the experiences created for them during their studies can have a huge impact on whether or not they will stay in Finland after their graduation.

Experiential learning in experiences

Experiential learning is a good way to include as much learning in the experiences that you create. So how to make use of experiential learning in experience creation and why?

International students regularly ask for more educational events. These events may include things like developing ones professional skills or getting help with employment.

Think of this example - you have to choose between a drunken adventure around the city or a workshop about innovation regarding Finnish technology.

Some people might prefer the first one, but that is always the case and the people who would prefer more educational experiences need to taken into account as well.

And this is exactly how you can use experiential learning in experience creation. The core thought of experiential learning is that when an experience is understood and transformed, knowledge is created. So the experiences created must be designed to involve as much knowledge as possible.



Experiential learning in experiences

So what kind of experiences can you create using experiential learning?

The most common ones include for example, job simulation, employer site visit and job shadowing. And these ones can be further developed to a direction most requested by international students.

Here are some example topics that international students in Haaga-Helia have in the past asked for regarding educational experiences:

- Events regarding mental health and emotional intelligence
- Experiences regarding to studies and career
- IT workshops, marketing workshops
- Bigger range of learning in workshops catered for all degrees
- Making a CV and hone their talents such as Google tools, Adobe, SEO, SEM. Additionally, photography and videography.

Think about these for a moment, *how could you combine the most common examples of experiential learning related experiences and the topics requested by international students?*

Culture

This chapter will focus on culture. This chapter includes information about the Hofstede cultural dimensions, what kind of cultural events to organize and how culture actually affects experience creation.

Why does culture matter in creating experiences for international students?

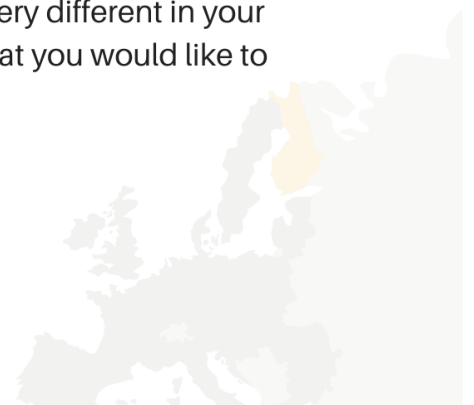
Culture affects everything as it affects the way people behave and react to things. The cultural programming that is in our brain may seem like the norm for us, but someone from a different culture may think completely differently and this is why culture also affects creating experiences for international students as most of them have different cultural programming than those who have lived in Finland their whole life.



Culture

To understand more about culture, gather your board in the organization and discuss these things with everyone answering these questions (the more different nationalities you have in the board, the more you will get out of this exercise)

- Time, how is time perceived in your culture? Is everyone always on time in meetings or is it more normal to come a bit late or a bit earlier than the meeting actually starts?
- How often do the people in your home country usually eat daily? And what are the times you usually eat in your home country?
- What is the drinking culture like in our home country?
- How is working perceived in your home country? What is more important, that you make more money and have a respectable career choice or that you like your job?
- To those who are not from Finland, what were the most surprising things about Finland when you came here to study?
- Are there any other things that are very different in your culture versus the Finnish culture that you would like to discuss about?



Cultural dimensions

Hofstede's cultural dimensions include 6 cultural dimensions that can be used through the Hofstede Insights webpage through the country comparison tool. This tool is great for experience creation and in this chapter we will see how to use these dimensions. (Hofstede, ei pvm).

How to involve the Hofstede cultural dimensions in experience creating?

If you are planning an event and the nationality of the participants is asked beforehand, for example when they are buying the ticket, you can use the cultural dimensions to compare the cultures of the participants to see if they have some big differences that could affect how they perceive the experience they have bought a ticket for.

To think beforehand, The most frequent nationalities in Haaga-Helia could be singled out to already see what kind of differences those have between the dimensions and how these affect behaviours towards different things. This way when creating experiences, the most common differences would already be known.

These also help when creating cultural events, for example when creating a Finnish culture related experience, the Finnish dimensions can be compared to other dimensions to give more insight on what Finnish people and culture are like.

Cultural experiences

What kind of cultural experiences to create and what international students might need? Remember that these are just suggestions based on the answers of international students, because with culture, the world is your oyster! Brainstorm with your members, ask other international students and make the events that are needed and requested.

Sitsit, or other events related directly to Finnish student culture (remember to also explain the events well enough for international students as they're culture may be very different.

Finnish culture events
(for example, a quiz night about different areas of the Finnish culture)

International dinners, with food from different cultures

Events involving music or art from different cultures (for example, going to see a Finnish artist perform or going to a certain museum together)



Experiences

In the chapter of Experiences, the topics of experience design, making meaningful experiences and how to take into account the past experiences of international students are covered to help event coordinators with experience creation.

These topics should be researched by event coordinators in all organizations if creating valuable experiences for international students or students at all is an organizational goal.

At the very end of this chapter there is also some additional information regarding experiences that event coordinators may consider during experience creation.



International student experiences

One important part is understanding the experiences that international students get during their studies.

As an event coordinator, you have to know how to take these into account and what kind of experiences would help with the struggles that international students might face during their studies.

The main point is always that even if international students have not given you an answer of what they want, you should think of the solution for their issue or issues.

If you want more information about their struggles or issues that are not enough highlighted in the international student survey created yearly, make another survey specifically to target these issues and what students would wish to be done about them.

Some main issues international students experience during their studies in Finland that should be taken into consideration when creating experiences include racism, language issues and employment issues. The issues are of course different for each individual, but these are some that are highlighted by international students all over Finland.-

International student experiences

Here are some ways for you as event coordinator to understand the experiences of international students better to create better experiences for them:

- Go through the feedback surveys and all other surveys created by the organization together with all members. After analyzing the answers, what topics rise most often?
- Research the experiences of international students in Finland particularly. What key issues pop up? What could be done to solve these issues? Brainstorm with your organization. This can also be done with other countries, research what international students mostly experience when moving to a new country to study? What key issues pop up?
- After you have researched enough and you have answered the question of what international students most often experience, think of the experiences that you could create that would help with the struggles mentioned. What should the timing be? Right away when they arrive to Finland, or within their study years?
- Think of the events you already have, do they bring people together? Do they give enough value?
- When you have an experience planned, think of what could be done to bring more value to the experience?

Experience design - Brand

The way your organization shows itself is very important as that is the very first experience that the international students get from you. Here are some things listed that you should be keeping an eye on and make sure that they are up to date to maximize the value of your brand.

What is your brand promise? If you do not have one, brainstorm inside the organization to create one that is relevant to international students and shows what your organization is all about.

What are the goals of your organization this year? Regarding all processes and the development of the organization itself?

Is your marketing up to date with your brand promise and the goals of the organization? What should be changed? One thing to better the marketing is by creating graphic guidelines for future event coordinators to use.

Think of what differentiates your brand from other similar ones? Here you can take examples from other organizations near you and research how they do things and see if you could learn something from them.



Experience design

Key points of experience design to include in experience creation:

- Experience design can be used from the very start of the year when brainstorming for future events
- When an organization makes a survey, for example, they should differentiate in the answers which of the three needs the customer has explained in order to create something that can truly affect the situation. These needs are existing, unmet and emerging. For example, from the international survey answers these three needs can be differentiated to understand what things to focus on when creating experiences.
- In experience design time can be used to explore different scenarios and ask questions that point to information (or the lack of it) that can be beneficial to creating more value. For example, think about two different events that you usually organize. How long are they usually? How would they change if they were significantly shortened in time?
- Think about what potential situations will your customer's be in, and what experience relating to this would be of most value to them while still aligning with the goals of the organization?

(Newbery & Farnham, 2013).



Experience design

- Think of the experiences you already have created. How was the customer's situation before? What did they get out of the experience? What are the next steps? Did the experience answer to a need that a customer had? Do you think all of the customer's who got the experience will attend future experiences of your organization because of the one they already had?
- Think of the other things that affect the potential customer's mind when they are almost purchasing your experience. What other parallel processes or touch points are relevant to consider (including other businesses, products, services and solutions)? How do these affect the customer decision, what are your competitors doing and how could you make sure that a potential customer chooses your experience instead of others?
- Think of what are the areas that might change so that a customer might not want to purchase the experience that you are offering? For example, a global pandemic. How should you react to these kinds of situations?
- Think of what do international students want outside of the things that they request from you. One thing is the website being piloted in 2021, what should be added to that? Next steps? What about virtual events? After corona?

(Newbery & Farnham, 2013).

Additional points

Here are some additional points about experiences and how to create meaningful ones that international students will value.

Take into consideration that the international students most likely do not speak Finnish, or are just learning to speak it, how can you better their integration and their learning of Finnish language?

Since the global pandemic, there has been a rise on demand of online events. Online events may be something that will stay even after things go back to normal, how can you get the most out of online events?

Do you think the organization needs more relaxed events for all people of all ages, people with different values and maybe for people with families? There are many international students who already have families when they start studying so they might want some different kinds of experiences catered for them.

International students have said that they usually find out about events through their classmates, how could you take advantage of this? And students may as well be busy with school, is the amount of events you are doing too much or is it too little?

There are a million things to think about when creating experiences and these are just scratching the surface. But keep yourself busy with learning and you will do great things!

How to work on your understanding of international students

The last part of this handbook is regarding bettering yourself, whoever you may be. To create meaningful experiences for international students, you have to be able to understand them and that is what this last chapter is all about.

Here are some ways for you to work on our own understanding of international students:

- Research all the topics presented in this handbook and gain knowledge on different cultures and ways to create experiences, educate yourself on the recent issues in other countries and in Finland.
- Listen to what the international students are saying, even if the feedback is not from traditional channels, make sure that the feedback is documented and heard.
- Create examples - Finland vs. some other country, how they differ, show the results to the board and document them for future event coordinators.
- Innovate, think of what you need to do to understand better what international students go through and how differently people react to moving to a new country and culture. Is it through an event or through asking feedback from international students about some particular things.



Thank you!

Thank you for reading this handbook. This handbook was created as the product of the thesis work called Creating experiences for international students - a handbook for IDS Helga by Alina Martikka.

This handbook was created for IDS Helga to help with creating valuable and meaningful experiences for international students to help with their integration to the Finnish culture and way of life during their studies in Finland.



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