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# Harriet Okumu-Nisula - Reflections of my internship

TEXT: Harriet Okumu-Nisula, project assistant at Novia University of Applied Sciences Foto: Johanna Sandström / Novia

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You never know what a click of a button could mean or where it could lead to. That's exactly what happened in early February 2021, peak winter in Finland, when a mass email was addressed to students at VAMK university of Applied Sciences. I was a final year student pursuing a degree course in International Business at the time. The content was eye-catching, let alone promising! It read:

*'...Our "Vaasa International talents" programme with focus on skills for Finnish working life and connections to the local job market might be something for you! The programme is free of charge and open for international degree students at higher education institutions in Vaasa. Grab the opportunity and apply!'*

23 students would be selected to the pilot round of the programme. I took my chance and clicked the submission button.

## **The Vaasa International Talents Programme**

A couple of days after submitting my application and related documents, I received an acceptance letter to the programme.

With networking opportunities shifting online due to the pandemic at the time, I had decided to actively participate in all online events that swayed my way. All I wanted was to network as much as possible, to get myself out there, and most importantly to regain my confidence and self-esteem into the job market after years of time lapse. The opening of the Vaasa International Talents programme was thus great timing!

I was incredibly happy to be selected to this pilot initiative!

## **The best surprises come when you least expect them**

The Vaasa International Talents programme comprises of competence development lectures – skills for Finnish Working Life, coaching sessions and networking possibilities among others. Besides the beneficial and insightful sessions, the highlight was when I received an email from the Programme's project manager, Pia Jünger at Novia UAS, who proposed an individual meeting a few sessions into the programme. I wondered what the meeting was about but thought it wise to have my CV ready for ease of reference.

It was after a series of discussions when the surprise question came in. Pia, who thought my CV was complementary to a role she had in mind, asked how I felt about taking on an internship role for the project. I was pleasantly surprised at her gesture yet shocked at the same time at how quickly it all happened.

In waiting for further details, I started benchmarking similar initiatives available in different cities within Finland, to familiarize myself with the project's objectives and deliverables. It came as no surprise that I accepted the offer, as I had long been looking

forward to a window of opportunity. Confirmation of my internship came on April 12, 2021 – it turned out to be my best birthday in Finland! I was excited and ready to venture into Finnish working life culture.

### **Internship experience with Vaasa International Talents**

I had a warm reception on my first day at work, thanks to Project Manager Pia Jünger who took me through the orientation process and made me feel welcome within the first week - It's a wonderful team!

My role as project intern has been extremely rewarding! Tasks have included routine schedules such as moderating lecture sessions facilitated by the programmes' lecturers, corresponding with talents and the various stakeholder groups and interviewing programme participants among others. The outcomes of the interviews resulted in a series of 5 articles that were published on the Vaasa International website.

I also got to challenge myself with tasks such as creating the projects' homepage as well as duties outside the project such as moderating an interview coordinated by the city of Vaasa in June 2021, themed "*what to do in Vaasa this summer*", and co-moderation of the '*Match and Catch*' panel discussions organized by Ely centre/Talent Coastline in September 2021.

Throughout the programme, I have had the opportunity to engage with international students, the various stakeholder groups within the regions Talent Coastline Ecosystem such as Ely Centre, TE office and representatives of the Higher Education Institutions, all of which are part of Finland's national Talent Boost programme. These stakeholder groups all have the shared vision of attracting and retaining international talents through activities that promote their well-being in Finland, for which the Vaasa International Talents programme is a part of. Involvement in talent boost activities has enlightened me of not only Finland, but a general perspective of a country's efforts in internationalization of its business activities through tapping into the expertise of internationals moving into a country for one reason or another.

### **Working life culture in Finland**

The country's work-life balance model compliments my busy family life - I like it! This, coupled with the careful thought put into the well-being of employees sets the country apart.

The Vaasa International Talents programme has been thought by many participants as a well-structured initiative that takes into consideration their individual career paths and wishes. Specific highlights are the way each talent is given individual attention by the Project Manager. This is thought to be exclusive and thus builds a connection with the various stakeholder groups, not only during the programme but beyond.

Vaasa International Talents is a joint programme initiated by the five higher education institutions in Vaasa and coordinated by Novia UAS, with the aim of bridging the gap between international students and the regions' working life actors.

Currently a Project Assistant with the Programme, I am grateful to still be part of Novia UAS!

Further reading:

Harriet's journey to Finland: <https://vaasainternational.fi/education/from-international-business-in-uganda-to-vaasa-international-talents/>

Article series from international talents: <http://www.vaasainternationaltalents.fi/vaasainternationaltalents/articles>

More on Vaasa International Talents: [www.vaasainternationaltalents.fi](http://www.vaasainternationaltalents.fi)