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How to improve the employability of non-Finnish speaking foreign students in healthcare industry in South Savo and Kymenlaakso regions

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Abstract		
<p>This study focused on mapping the current scenario of healthcare in Finland and providing relevant data to be used by South-Eastern Finland University of Applied Sciences' (Xamk) Talent Boost team when designing and implementing projects that will promote the future employability of non-Finnish speaking foreign students who acquire their Nursing degree in Finland.</p>		
<p>A growing elderly population and the decrease in the number of Finnish healthcare professionals entering the market motivated the creation of the new Nursing degree program in Kotka and the Talent Boost program that operates nationwide. Attracting foreign students is a response to the shortage of workforce in the field faced all around Finland and worsened by new legislation increasing the ratio per patient recently passed.</p>		
<p>This study used a qualitative research method plus an interpretive approach. Inductive analysis was used to assess the data collected through semi-structured interviews with key informants who are experts in the field in the South Savo, Kymenlaakso and Uusimaa (as benchmark) regions. Individual interviews were conducted remotely.</p>		
<p>The key findings in this study consist of the extreme relevance of the Finnish language, how poorly prepared employers are to employ and manage foreign workforce and the struggle foreigners face when attempting to integrate in Finnish social life. Underemployment and emigration of foreign students after graduation have been identified as a possible by-product of limited fluency in the local language.</p>		
<p>This study is concluded with practical suggestions offered to promote the employability of foreign workforce in the healthcare environment in Finland, such as partnering with local actors who promote language immersion activities and social integration as well as activities which facilitate networking between employers and foreign students.</p>		
Keywords		
healthcare, internationalization, foreign workforce, employability, language, integration		

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1 INTRODUCTION

The healthcare scenario in Finland has been facing challenges regarding finding suitable workforce to fulfil the number of nurses needed to provide quality services to the growing elderly community. The compliance with the new HE 4/2020 vp legislation which determined the increase in the ratio per patient by forty percent (from 0.5 to 0.7 per patient) by 2023 poses a threat since the current number of active nurses in the country is already not sufficient and fewer Finnish students pursue a career in the healthcare sector each year.

This study aimed to initially understand in more depth the general elderly population growth situation as well as the current healthcare industry context in Finland, the participation of universities of applied sciences and the government in the matter, with special attention to the deficit of fluent Finnish-speaking professionals in the elderly care sector in South Savo and Kymenlaakso regions.

The future employability of foreign students who are currently having their nursing program studies in Finland but who are not fluent in the local language yet and the barriers the lack of fluency can bring to finding a job and settle in Finland were also matters investigated in this study. Information on the difficulties and potential risks the lack of fluency can bring to the daily performance of the nursing duties and the actual level of language needed were investigated and analyzed to verify how much in accordance the legal demand of B1 level of fluency in the local language is with the reality faced by professionals and patients. Efforts regarding the development of the fluency in English by the local population so that communication between local and foreign workforce could be scaffolded in a *lingua franca* as an alternative measure at the early stages of the foreign workforce practice when executing their nursing duties were also examined in this study.

Additionally, the mindset towards the employment of foreign workforce who gained their degree in Finland of both public and private healthcare employers as well as native Finnish workers was observed and discussed via interviews with relevant actors from different areas the field. The embracing of those who come

to Finland already with a nursing degree acquired in their home countries by the local workforce and employers was also mentioned in this study. Initiatives around the country that are being taken to promote awareness and facilitate the employment of international workforce by public and private healthcare organizations were also investigated. Another aspect considered in this study was how much the requirement of fluency in the language can be and is used to avoid hiring foreign workers and prevent radical changes in the daily routine at the workplace.

The impact of the recent changes in the immigration legislation with the scope of facilitating the procedures regarding skilled workforce coming to Finland and the awareness of the Talent Boost initiative activities by the key informants were topics discussed in the interviews with the intent of understanding how effective some of the recent measures taken by the government to help solve the demand for professionals in the healthcare sector are. Such understanding can be contributive to possible future adjustments or improvements and new measures.

Subsequently, the report tried to bring light to the matter by offering viable suggestions on how to retain the international students who come to Finland to attend the recently launched nursing degree program at Xamk's Kotka campus by finding ways to facilitate the achievement of professional fluency in Finnish and attempting to create a more favorable context where employers and workers in the healthcare sector as well as the Finnish community embrace foreign professionals who received their nursing qualifications in Finland as a natural development of society. The suggestions intend to actively contribute to the development and designing of relevant and effective projects or activities by Xamk's Talent Boost team that serves the university of applied sciences' four campuses in the regions included in this study.

1.1 Objectives of the study and research questions

The research questions and objectives are presented in this section with the scope of offering the justification for why they have been selected in addition to how they have been implemented and analyzed in order to provide answers and

shed light on possible best practices that will favor the employability of foreign nursing students after graduation.

The new HE 4/2020 vp legislation implementing the increase in the ratio per patient in the healthcare sector recently passed in the country was the central starting point of the study. Subsequent to the acknowledgement and understanding of the new legislation, a brief contrast between the soon needed number of healthcare professionals and the current context in the healthcare sector around Finland evidenced a significant deficit suggesting the urgency of dealing with the matter and finding innovative solutions.

Considering the insufficient number of professionals currently available in the country and the ongoing decline in the incoming Finnish students in nursing programs nation-wide, authorities started drawing alternative solutions to the matter. Facilitating the immigration of skilled workers in the field as well as foreign students who can fill in the open vacancies in the healthcare sector in Finland has been one of the measures taken. However, having non-Finnish speaking foreign workforce and students does not solve the issue promptly once both the Finnish colleagues and the patients to be served expect the work relations to be held in their mother-tongue, Finnish. Thus, this thesis aimed to provide relevant and practical information by answering the main question "*How to improve the employability of non-Finnish speaking foreign students in healthcare industry in South Savo and Kymenlaakso regions*".

South Savo and Kymenlaakso regions have been selected as the geographical limits in this study once the South-Eastern Finland of University Sciences (Xamk) has campuses operating in both areas in the cities of Kotka, Kouvola, Mikkeli and Savonlinna. Having operating campuses that offer Nursing degree programs suggests greater access to data regarding these regions and moderate influence capability over the educational processes in their degree program that might be affected by the possible implementation of results and suggestions presented in this study.

The suggestions are offered after finding answers to the three key sub-questions below:

- What are the challenges regarding foreign students' skills?
- What are the expectations from hiring companies?
- What are the challenges regarding companies' work practices?

The foreign students' own capabilities, possibilities, needs and challenges were considered in the light of the hiring companies' perspectives and demands in addition to technical and legal requirements. Additionally, the role of the employers in the equation was observed in a way to promote the employment of the foreign workforce after they conclude their degree program in Finland or arrive in the country as possessors of a Nursing degree diploma acquired abroad.

1.2 Research method

This study follows the social constructivism philosophy since elements of ontological relativity and epistemological subjectivity are present in the data collected via one-to-one interviews. Additionally, an interpretive approach was used as the main goal was to extract meaning and significance through interpretation of such data. However, it is important to mention that, as King *et al.* (2019, 15-16) state “there are a variety of philosophical positions within qualitative research”, thus this study does not bring an *absolute* approach, but a major line of thought (interpretive) when covering subjective aspects of data collected and a more positivist look when regarding objective data, as will be described in more detail in the next chapter.

Patton (2015, 22) states that “there is no formula in making method decisions” adding that in research, a single and ideal standard is inexistent. Silverman (2022, 10) complements the concept by stating that “methods cannot be always ‘right’ or ‘wrong’, only more or less appropriate. Therefore, a mixed-method research method was used to collect and analyze a combination of data carrying a substantial degree of subjectiveness through interviews with experts in the field

focus of this study and objectiveness through official statistics and reports to understand the current context and challenges of the healthcare sector in Finland.

As most of the topics to be investigated, i.e., students' skills, employers' expectations and work practices, imply a great amount of subjectiveness in the information related to it - therefore non-numerical data to be collected and analyzed - this study applied primarily the qualitative method of research with focus on key informant sampling through semi-structured individual interviews with a smaller sample of stakeholders directly connected to the field holders of different nationalities. That way, in-depth and dependable first-hand information could be collected contributing to the validity and reliability of the study. A quantitative research approach was used when collecting and analyzing data such as the current number of active and needed healthcare professionals in Finland, population growth and distribution statistics (both geographically and by age groups, for example), immigrant population and profile, general educational level by mother tongue, employability of foreign workforce, etc. Such data were relevant to better understand current opportunities and gaps and estimate future challenges.

It is note-worthy to mention that utilizing a qualitative method represents dealing with a smaller data sample, therefore the selection of participants has been extremely thorough and well-considered so that the information collected was relevant and accurate.

Oliver (2021, 44) establishes that a vital element of the qualitative research is the flexibility regarding the necessary size of samples which is influenced by several factors, e.g., the aim of the research. The number of samples can be increased later in the study in case the need to investigate new elements which have appeared in previous samples arises. Four new key informants were invited after some previously unforeseen information arose during some interviews with the initial key informants.

Additionally, Oliver (2021, 49) states that, although the key informant sampling is a strategy for collecting data which offers the possibility of a restricted number of samples and the selection of the informants can follow any method or approach, the content from the interviews must originate from expert witnesses who possess specialized knowledge and understanding on the matter. Being from different types of roles, positions in the specific field of study and nationalities is considered by the author a favorable aspect of the portfolio of informants to participate in the study. King *et al.* (2019, 57) reinforce the concept by stating that “the criterion most commonly proposed for sampling in qualitative studies is diversity”.

The above mentioned has been the criteria for the initial decision on the number of samples to be collected and the profile of the interviewees, considering both their backgrounds and the heterogeneity of their areas of expertise or perspectives on the matter as well as countries of origin. Professionals from educational institutions in Finland as well as employers from both private and public healthcare sectors have been invited to contribute to the study, in addition to other stakeholders such as elderly community representatives, one of the healthcare professionals’ labor union and nursing professionals (local and international), among others. In total, fifteen representatives of stakeholders of the healthcare context were invited to participate and thirteen contributed to the sampling of this study which added up to 725 minutes of conversations and 231 transcription pages. One group invited that did not participate in the study was the elderly community, although contacted multiple times and initially having shown interest in participating. The reasons for the absence are unknown.

Additionally to interviews, data were collected from official sources such as government and educational institutions’ websites, academic articles and traditional media outlets in order to exemplify and understand the context regarding the elderly population current traits and future trends, healthcare scenario and relating legislation, changes in political mindset and procedures involving initiatives to facilitate and enhance the skilled foreign workforce and students’ settlement in Finland.

For practical reasons, time and cost reduction as well as for consistency in the process, all the interviews have been conducted remotely via an online platform. The platform used allowed both the recording of the meeting and the automatic transcription of the conversation which required subsequent review and corrections. Interviews were held between 28 September and 28 October 2022.

Interviewees have been informed in advance and in writing via email of the purpose of the study and the main question that delineates the study plus the three sub-questions that unfold the scope in more details. They have also been informed of the reason why they have been chosen to contribute to the study, the language used during the interview (English) and the estimated length of the meeting. After the invited key informants had agreed to the interview, the open-ended questions to be asked were sent to them in advance so that they were comfortable and prepared for the meeting.

As King *et al.* (2019, 77) as well as other authors, inform us that building rapport with the interviewee is “a key ingredient in successful qualitative interviewing”, therefore, at the beginning of the interviews the author tried to create as an informal and comfortable environment as possible. Participants were then offered additional information on the purpose of the study and the author clarified that the information they would share was anonymous, would be transcribed and quotes from their speech could be added to the final report in addition to the fact that the study would be made public to those interested in the subject. Also, participants were informed that they were not obliged to answer any of the questions they were not comfortable with and that they could stop the interview at any time they found fit. The information that both the recordings and the transcripts of the meetings would be destroyed later when they were no longer necessary to the study was also shared at the beginning of the interviews.

The interviews followed a semi-structured approach with mostly open-ended questions. A total of ten questions were initially elaborated as a guiding script and, in case more in-depth information was understood to be needed, additional questions were asked to complement the concept or idea being shared. The

questions tried to avoid using inducting or biased words so that the information collected would originate mostly from the interviewees' contributions. Also, interruptions to the interviewees' speech were kept to a minimum to offer them the possibility to elaborate their thought carefully and fully express them as desired. At times, the interviewer repeated or summarized the interviewees' speech to clarify the information or confirm if the information shared was understood accordingly.

It is worth noting that neither the participants nor the interviewer speaks English as their mother tongue. Therefore, it was possible to observe that some interviewees occasionally struggled to find the precise vocabulary and then utilized Finnish terms or an online translation tool to complement the meaning or idea they wanted to convey. Also, participants who seemed to be less fluent in English showed to be slightly more tired closer to the end of the interview, most probably because the foreign language required extra effort from their part. However, the language factor did not seem to have jeopardized the quality and accuracy of the data collected. This factor is relevant as it illustrates the reluctance some of the local workforce members possess when needing to interact in a language other their native one. A third person participated in one of the interviews as language support/sporadic interpreter (in the respondent's native language) when clarification of questions and answers was needed considering the respondent had intermediate level of English.

As mentioned earlier in this report, there were basically two different major sources of information: objective data from official outlets such as figures and statistics from the Finnish government and its institutions as well as academic and journalistic articles on the subject, and subjective data collected via individual interviews with key informants who are experts in the field.

The subjective data collected during the interviews, which contain the root information to answer the main question of this study and were examined under an interpretive light, was transcribed, coded (descriptive and interpretive), separated into themes and scrutinized so that details in the discourse were:

- grouped and crosschecked according to similarities to confirm validity and reliability
- compared and contrasted according to divergences
- complemented according to possible close or *semi-close* connections between or among different sources
- disregarded considering the inexistence of direct relevance to the matter

However, objective data was examined through a positivist order to understand the context in which the question to be answered lies so that the key findings could lead to effective conclusions and possible practical recommendations.

Subjective information was provided by different actors from different countries, but currently living in Finland, who exercise different roles in the field and possess different expertise in different geographical regions. Therefore, a combination of values (participants' worldviews and cultural values) and *in vivo* (direct quotes from participants) coding methods were applied, and a thematic analysis approach was used. As Patton (2015, 551) clarifies, the inductive analysis searches the data for patterns and themes removing all preconceived analytical categories starting with specific cases, creating general patterns and detecting common themes by cross-case analysis. Discretion was also used when analyzing each source of the data, with great care to eliminate any bias by the study from the analysis. Thus, when interpreting data on challenges regarding interaction in English between local and foreign workforce within nursing teams in Uusimaa (a multicultural metropolitan region where several international companies have English as their working language), Espoo (a municipality that has a significant number of foreign residents) and Mikkeli (a municipality with approximately 50 000 residents located 230km away from the capital city Helsinki), it is insensible and unfruitful to use the same measurements and perspectives to reach reasonable conclusions. Therefore, particularities of individual expertise and backgrounds, nationalities, areas of action, namely public or private sector, hospital or clinics, home care or elderly care, direct (peers) and indirect (team managers) contact with foreign workforce and geography were examined with special consideration. Such approach was chosen in the attempt

to reach in-depth and clearer understanding of what was being said and sometimes of what was *not* being said such as inferred or subliminal information regarding taboo matters such as racism and xenophobia. This approach follows King *et al.*'s (2019, 197) concept that awareness of "contextual features beyond spoken words" is essential when preparing the transcript for accurate analyses.

Objective data was analyzed objectively using a positivist approach and mostly used to contextualize the reasons for this study and the general scenario it is inserted in. New information that was released after the objective data collection process was concluded but which could impact the current scenario in healthcare and influence the outcomes of this study, namely the conclusion of the negotiations between employer and healthcare labor unions regarding salaries and work conditions, was also added to this report and considered. No qualitative analysis software was utilized in the analytical process.

1.3 Structure of the study

This study was initiated as a consequence of the launching of the new Nursing degree program by the University of Applied Sciences (Xamk) in Kotka in the autumn of 2022. The final decision on the company was the result of the student's request for assistance from the International Business Management master's program coordination at Xamk to find a commissioning party, Xamk's new Nursing degree program and the national launch of the Talent Boost project.

The topic was selected once new legislation had been recently passed regarding the adjustment of the ratio of healthcare professionals in the sector which resulted in the decision to increase the recruitment of foreign skilled workers and students to fulfil the new healthcare ratio standards. After a meeting where the interests and needs of the research were discussed, a proposal was sent for the approval of the commissioning company which finally defined the main scope of this study.

After the scope of the study was decided, main questions and sub-questions were defined, the method (qualitative research through individual interviews of

key informants) and methodology to be used were selected, and the approach (constructivism). Subsequently, the context where the study would be inserted in was established and portrayed through the collection and analysis of the relevant data.

The next step was to define the profile of the prospective interviewees according to their areas of expertise and action as well as geography as diversely as possible. Experts in the field were contacted mostly via email, but some needed an extra effort such as phone calls. However, surprisingly, all except one showed extreme interest in taking part in the study and one of the members of the elderly community management team even mentioned that “being invited to the discussion table and being heard” was an innovation of extreme importance. Such interest facilitated the technical and practical arrangements to proceed with the interviews which were held in a brief period of time of a month. Interviews were held, recorded, transcribed; codes were then attributed and divided into themes to aid in the analysis to be performed.

Theoretical basis and data collected via interviews formed the basis of this study in addition to an interpretive approach “collecting data which is in verbal form and using analytic procedures which try to reveal meaning and significance in the data” (Oliver; 2021, 10).

Some meetings were held with the master’s program coordinator as checkpoints and additional guidance so that the study kept its desired route and reached its intended goal. No official meetings regarding the study were held with the representative of the commissioning company once the conductor of this study was invited to become a member of Xamk’s Talent Boost team as a project researcher and some of the topics of this study were sporadically inserted in the work meetings held bi-weekly.

The thesis research was conducted within a period of eleven months between December 2021 and November 2022 after the decision on the subject and the selection of the commissioner company had been made. The process was then

sub-divided into the formalities regarding the commissioning of the study and sporadic meetings with the master's coordinator for discussion on the method to be utilized. Subsequent arrangements included elaboration of the questions to be asked during the interviewing of key informants, the scheduling and holding of the interviews which have been then transcribed for further analysis and finally, the formulation of the conclusions and recommendations.

2 OVERVIEW ON HEALTHCARE IN FINLAND

This chapter describes the current situation of the healthcare sector in Finland, including healthcare customers and healthcare services offered to these customers. Additionally, this chapter presents healthcare as a career in Finland and education possibilities in the field in the country. Recent changes in legislation in Finland that create an increase in the demand of healthcare workforce from January 2023 and the consideration of foreign healthcare workforce to supply the growing demand of professionals are also presented in more details in the sub-topics below.

2.1 Current situation of healthcare in Finland

The ageing of populations around the world is a widely spread topic of discussion, both in formal and informal settings. The situation would not be different in Finland as evidenced in Figures 1 and 2 which bring the numbers separated by percentage of each demographic group in the last three decades (1991-2021) and their growth throughout the same period.

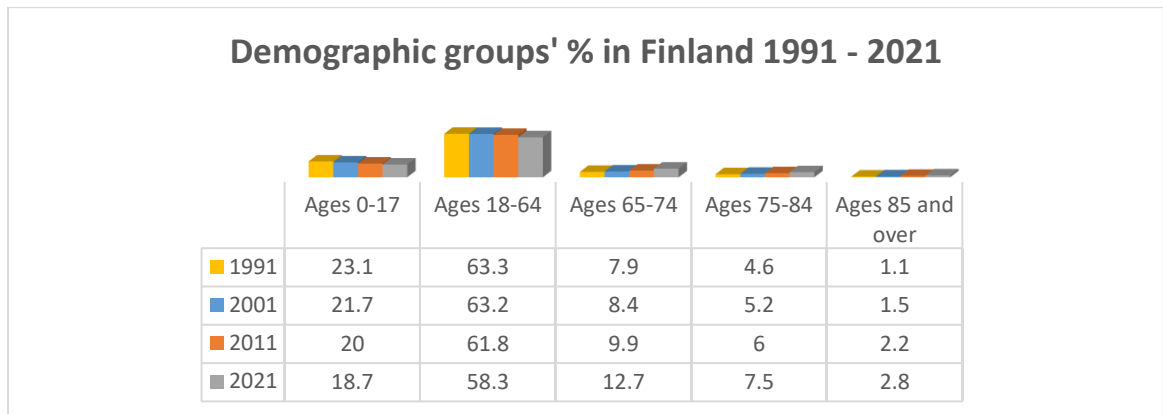


Figure 1. Demographic groups' % in Finland 1991-2021. (Sotek.net. n.d.)

Special attention should be given to the fact that not only the population under 65 years of age is slowly but gradually declining, but also the group 65 and over has grown an average of 60%, with the group 85 and over with a staggering 2.5-fold growth.

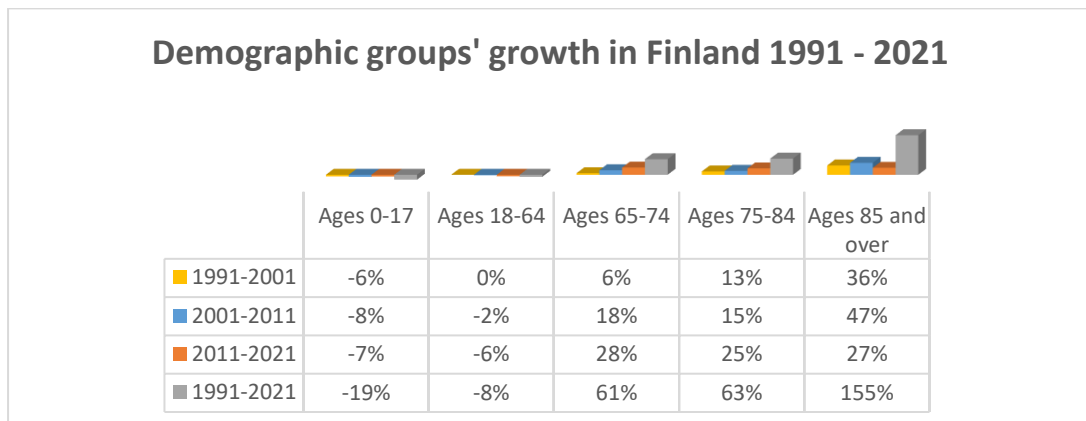


Figure 2. Demographic groups' growth in Finland 1991-2021. (Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare website – Result table n.d.b-e)

Additionally, according to the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health's (STM) quality recommendation report (2020, 14), as of 2018 twenty per cent of the residents in the country belong to the 65 and over populational group and the forecast number for 2030 is for it to be almost one third of the population in most regions as seen in Figure 3. The increase in the elderly population number is nationwide, although not homogeneous since it presents variable growth rates per region, therefore different challenge sizes as well.

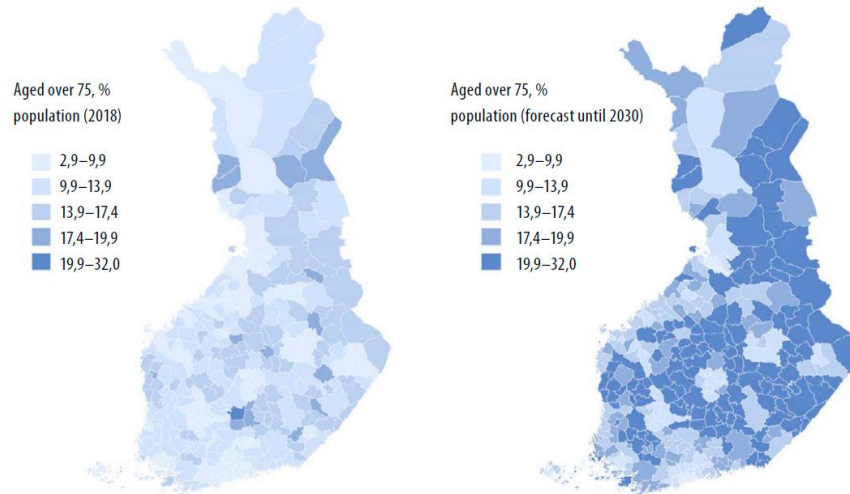


Figure 3. Share of those aged 75 or over, population by municipality A) in 2018 B) forecast until 2030. (Publications of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health 2020:37, 14)

Figure 4 demonstrates in more detail the numbers which refer to the elderly population in the Kymenlaakso region over three decades, showing that it presents a more challenging situation regarding the population aged 75-84 where the growth between 1991 and 2021 is 63% nationwide whereas the growth in the Kymenlaakso region for the same group is 87% over the same period.

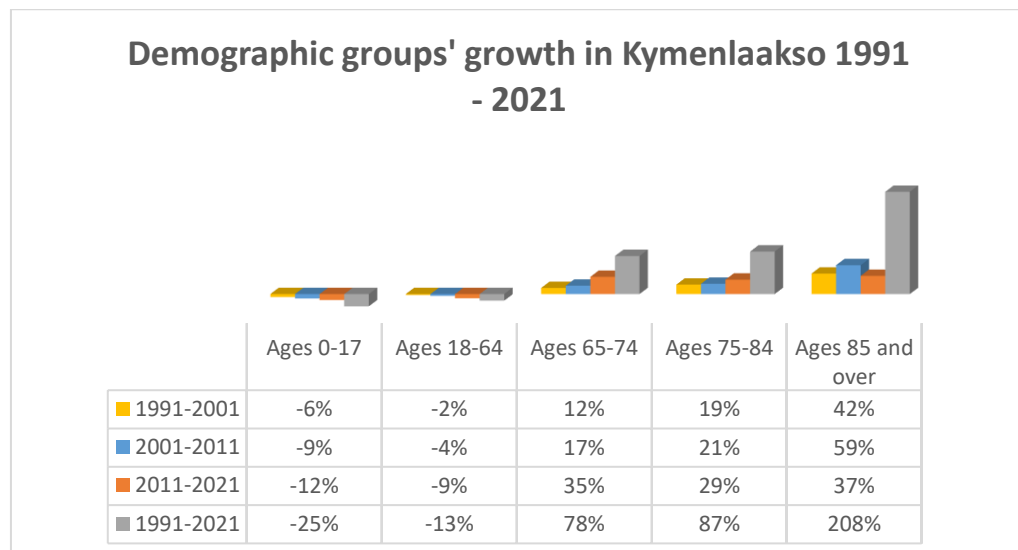


Figure 4. Demographic groups' growth in Kymenlaakso 1991-2021. (Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare website – Result table n.d.f-i)

Figure 5 illustrates that the situation in the South Savo region is more similar to the Kymenlaakso region than the nationwide numbers since the population aged 75-84 shows a 100%-growth between 1991 and 2021.

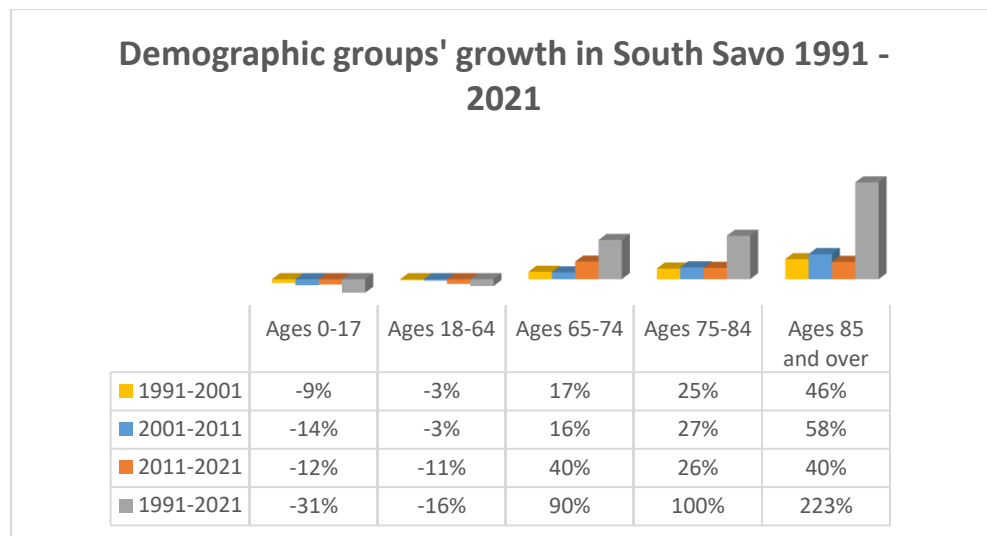


Figure 5. Demographic groups' growth in Finland 1991-2021. (Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare website – Result table n.d.f-i)

A more worrisome phenomenon is evidenced regarding the population 85 and over where the national figure is a 155%-growth, with 208% in Kymenlaakso and 223% in South Savo.

2.2 Who and where are the healthcare customers?

STM's quality recommendation report (2020, 12) states that one percent of the population 75 or over needs specific medical long-term care and that traditional long-term institutional care has been reduced systematically, currently consisting of sheltered housing with 24-hour assistance. *Appendix Table 2* of the same report (Table 1 in this document) displays an alarming increase by 53% in the numbers of people aged 75 or over receiving support for informal care during the year between 2001 and 2018. A similar worrisome increase of 3.5-fold refers to customers aged 75 or over in sheltered housing with 24-hour assistance. On an opposite trend, the number of those aged 75 or over in elderly homes or long-term institutional care in healthcare centers has plummeted from 8% to 1.1%, meaning a reduction in the need of resources, both financial and human.

Appendix Table 2. Information on the coverage of regular services for elderly people, % of the population of a similar age between 2001 and 2018.					
	2001	2008	2013	2017	2018
Those aged 75 or over living at home	89.6	89.3	90.3	91.1	91.3
Those aged 80 or over living at home	84.0	84.5	86.0	87.1	87.4
Those aged 85 or over living at home	75.9	76.6	79.5	81.2	81.4

People aged 75 or over receiving support for informal care during the year	3.2	4.1	4.6	4.8	4.9
Persons cared for through informal care aged over 80 during the year	-	-	5.5	6.0	6.0
People aged 85 or over receiving support for informal care during the year	5.6	5.9	6.5	6.9	7.1
Customers aged 75 years or over who regularly received home care on 30 November	11.8	11.0	11.9	11.3	11.0
Customers aged 80 years or over who regularly received home care on 30 November	16.4	15.2	16.6	15.9	15.5
Customers aged 85 years or over who regularly received home care on 30 November	20.9	20.2	22.1	21.8	21.6
Customers aged 75 or over in sheltered housing with 24-hour assistance on 31 December	2.2	4.6	6.5	7.5	7.6
Customers aged 80 or over in sheltered housing with 24-hour assistance on 31 December	3.4	6.6	9.3	10.9	11.0
Customers aged 85 or over in sheltered housing with 24-hour assistance on 31 December	4.8	9.8	13.6	15.9	16.3
Those aged 75 or over in elderly homes or long-term institutional care in health centres on 31 December	8.0	5.9	3.1	1.3	1.1
Those aged 80 or over in elderly homes or long-term institutional care in health centres on 31 December	12.4	8.7	4.5	1.8	1.5
Those aged 85 or over in elderly homes or long-term institutional care in health centres on 31 December	19.1	13.3	6.6	2.7	2.2
Number of family care homes for elderly people on 31 December, number of services paid for by the municipality	39	31	76	239	224
Elderly people in family care on 31 December, number of services paid for by the municipality	70	64	126	729	1155
Care days for elderly people in family care during the year, number of services paid for by the municipality	25837	23232	40752	96422	119573

Table 1. Information on the coverage of regular services for elderly people, % of the population of a similar age between 2001 and 2018. Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare, statistical and indicator bank Sotkanet.fi 2005-2019.

Concerning the populational increase per region, STM's report (2020, 15) explains that there is some heterogeneity regarding the need for assistance within the population as it shows that people with little education, those who do physical labor and earners of lower income constitute a greater share of the group of people who present problems with functional capacity as well as the elderly.

In the single-household context of the 75 or over population (which constituted 57% between 2013-2018 decreasing to approximately 50% in 2020), numbers have been changing showing an increase of 36% in the perception of "feeling at least good" in this demographic group, the feeling of loneliness decreased by

30% and organizational involvement increased by 20%. However, still ten percent of the group studied felt that they have not received enough help.

Considering that the report also states that 75% of the 75 and over population do not need regular services, but only 25% of the members of the 85 and over do not need them (meaning that 75% *do* need regular services), it is natural to infer that there is an exponential leap from one group to another, and considering that this is the group that has been growing the most in the last thirty years, appropriate measures must be contemplated and implemented to supply the growing demand. Hence the recent initiative from the government to address the issue and the consequent conversion of the *recommendation* status of quality standards in services for the elderly into *legislation*.

2.3 New legislation to guarantee an age-friendly Finland

The new HE 4/2020 vp law that regulates the minimum number of staff members was passed on 26 June 2020 and confirmed by the President of the Republic on 9 July 2020 and more detailed information about the new standards was sent to the municipalities via municipal information. The new legislation states that the ideal number of staff members per customer is 0.7, upgrading the initial number of 0.5 from October 2020.

The legislation refers only to personnel who do direct work with customers and the appropriation of the number of employees per customer is being gradually increased and is intended to be concluded by 1 April 2023. Additionally, among the key themes listed in the Description Sheet of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health (2020, 3) is *ensuring skilled personnel who thrive in their work*. Therefore, the legislation also states that the use of the RAI evaluation system is mandatory. According to the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare website (2022a) “the RAI assessment system is a standardized instrument for collecting information and making observations and is intended for:

- Assessing the clients’ service need

- Creating a care, rehabilitation and service plan for older or disabled persons

The RAI assessment system consists of several assessment instruments designed for different purposes and target groups.”

2.4 Profile of immigrants residing in Finland (UTH survey, 2014)

It is possible to verify in Figure 6 below that approximately 8.5% of the population in Finland as of 2021 was composed by residents with foreign background (country of birth either Finland or a foreign one).

Population by origin, country of birth and language 2021

Population 31.12.2021: **5 548 241**

Finnish background 5 078 608		Foreign background 469 633	
Country of birth Finland 5 024 514	Country of birth foreign country 54 094	Country of birth Finland 81 437	Country of birth foreign country 388 196
Language domestic* 5 015 458 other 9 056	Language domestic* 47 507 other 6 587	Language domestic* 14 789 other 66 648	Language domestic* 12 445 other 375 751

* Domestic languages = Finnish, Swedish, Sami

Figure 6. Population by origin, country of birth and language 2021. (Statistics Finland, n.d.a)

The number of residents with foreign background has grown almost tenfold since the 1990s as shown in Figure 7. Such growth suggests that Finland has developed a more open attitude towards immigration in recent years and is willing to internationalize and promote diversity which is a facilitator factor for the implementation of the new Talent Boost program which focuses on the attraction and retention of skilled foreign workforce and academics to Finland.

Foreign citizens, persons with foreign backgr., foreign-language speakers and persons born abroad 1990-2021

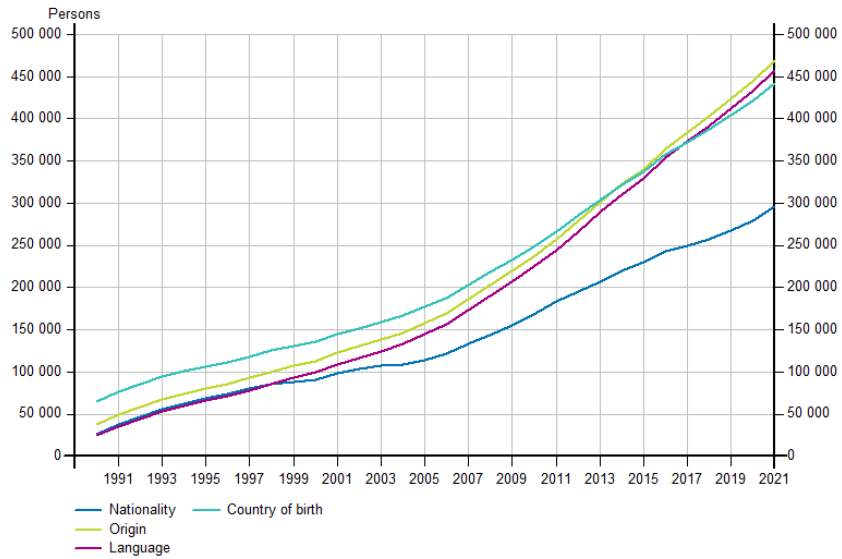


Figure 7. Foreign citizens, persons with foreign background, foreign-language speakers and persons born abroad 1990-2021. (Statistics Finland n.d.a)

Figure 8 brings the summary of the UTH survey with figures regarding 2014 showing that family reasons corresponded to 54% of the immigrant population, being the main reason for 66% of women and 42% men. When work and study contexts are analyzed, it is possible to notice that men surpass women in these criteria, being double of women when studies are observed.

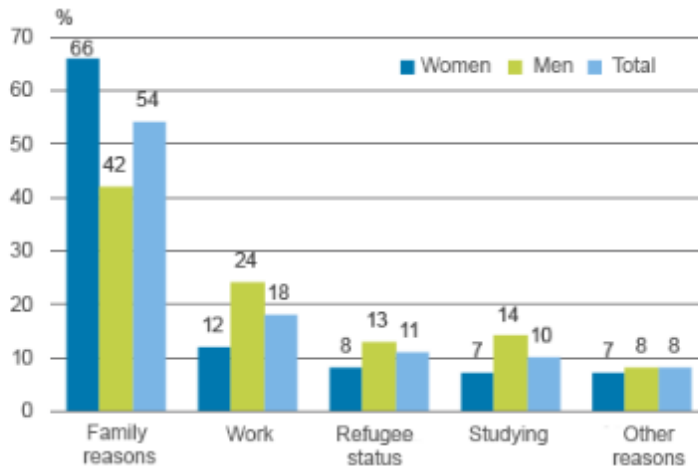


Figure 8. Main reason for immigration among population aged 15 to 64 with foreign background born abroad by gender in 2014, (%). (Statistics Finland n.d.b)

Interestingly, work as the main reason for immigration among population aged 15 to 64 with among the EU/EFTA in 2014 represented 157% more than among the third-country citizen population, whereas the study justification in the latter

population exceeded the first population numbers by 130%, as demonstrated in Table 2.

	Total 2014	UTH	Finnish citizen 2014	UTH	EU/EFTA country citizen 2014	UTH	Third- country citizen 2014	UTH	Residence permits granted in 2013 Migri
Family reasons	54		67		47		49		33
Work	17		7		36		14		26
Refugee status	11		13		0		15		9
Studies	10		4		7		16		28
Other reason	8		8		9		6		3
Total	100		100		100		100		100

Table 2. Main reason for immigration (own report) among population aged 15 to 64 with foreign background born abroad by citizenship in 2014 (UTH), (%) and residence permits granted by Migri in 2013. (Statistics Finland website n.d.b)

Table 3 brings data from the Finnish National Agency for Education's website (n.d.) showing the most popular countries where foreign students came from for periods superior to three months in 2021 where Healthcare and Well-being corresponded to 12% in the universities of applied sciences and 4% in universities. It is worth noting that the coronavirus pandemic and the Brexit phenomenon might have contributed to the reduction of mobility in general in the period of 2020-2021.

Students coming to Finland in 2021			
Germany	1497	Czech Republic	189
France	1141	China	170
Spain	693	Portugal	100
Italy	416	Hungary	98
Netherlands	378	Poland	95
Belgium	328	United Kingdom	94
Austria	240	Switzerland	91
Russia	231	Japan	82

Table 3. The most common countries of destination and origin for mobility periods over 3 months 2021. (Finnish National Agency for Education website n.d.)

Finally, and most importantly, the level of education of immigrants between 25 and 54 residing in Finland in 2014 could be considered favorable as 82% of the immigrant population held at least upper secondary or tertiary educational level

as shown in Figure 9. Figures only referring to tertiary education (40%) are very close to the average among Finnish natives (42%) (Statistics Finland 2022b).

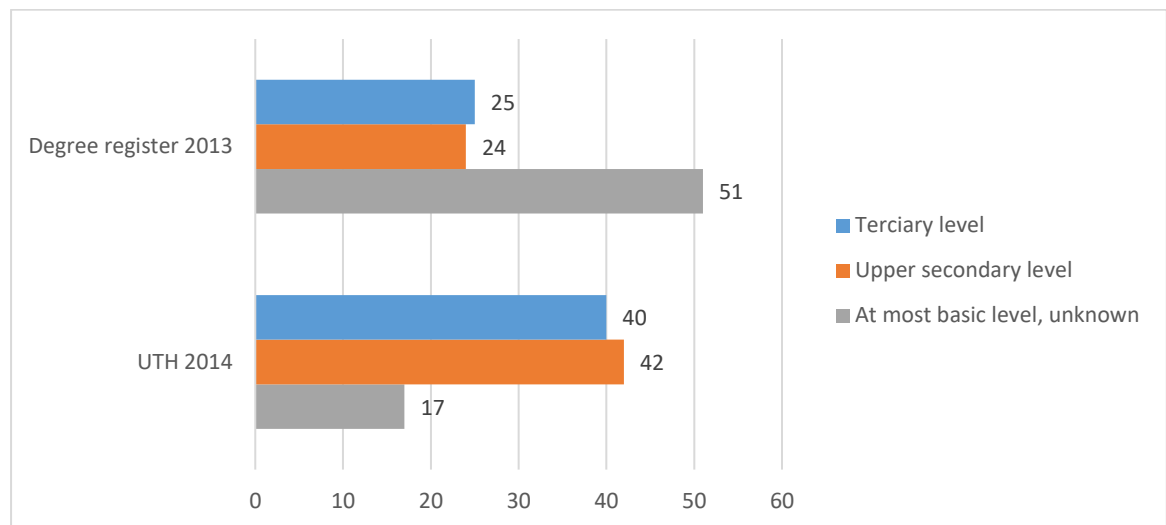


Figure 9. UTH survey and the Register of Completed Education and Degrees. (Statistics Finland n.d.b)

However, the same figure demonstrates that there is a discrepancy between the results presented by the UTH report in 2014 and the degree register in 2013 which is indicative that some immigrants may not have registered their education status in the Finnish public office. Additionally, when the official 2014 numbers in the Register of Completed Education and Degrees are used as reference, there is substantial room for improvement regarding the basic level of education. These numbers indicate that there is an opportunity for adult vocational education for residents with immigrant background so that not only their employability is enhanced in Finland, but also that they can contribute to reducing the deficit in workforce that currently threatens the country.

Interestingly, the percentage of people with a tertiary level of education was higher (69%) in the group with immigrant background than those with Finnish background when both groups have parents with tertiary education as well, which is an indicator of an equivalent potential of foreigners in the educational and future labor contexts.

Table 4 brings detailed and updated data on the level of education in the graph designed with statistics collected from the Vipunen website (n.d.) to illustrate the educational scenario in Finland. As the website does not present information separated by nationality, the data shows information separated by mother-tongue in three different groups: Finnish, Swedish and other languages. Also, “missing data” figures have been purged from the total number for a more accurate analysis. The highlighted percentages in yellow represent impressive figures in the community that does not have Finnish or Swedish as their mother-tongue, suggesting great potential of foreign talents in Finland.

Education	Finnish speakers %	Swedish speakers %	Other languages %
General upper secondary education	87.6 %	6.2 %	6.2 %
Vocational upper secondary education and training	91.5 %	4.4 %	4.1 %
Further qualification	91.1 %	3.2 %	5.7 %
Specialist qualification	93.9 %	3.6 %	2.4 %
Post-secondary non-higher vocational education	92.3 %	5.8 %	1.9 %
Professional tertiary education	88.5 %	7.4 %	3.9 %
Polytechnic bachelor's degree	91.3 %	4.3 %	4.4 %
University bachelor's degree	79.7 %	9.4 %	10.9 %
Higher polytechnic degree (Master)	91.4 %	2.5 %	5.9 %
Higher university degree (Master)	86.0 %	6.6 %	7.4 %
Professional specialization in medicine, veterinary and dentistry	86.7 %	3.9 %	8.8 %
Licentiate's degree	75.7 %	5.7 %	17.8 %
Doctoral or equivalent level	83.4 %	5.8 %	10.5 %
No degree after elementary education or degree unknown	80.8 %	4.9 %	14.4 %

Table 4. Educational structure of the population over 15 years of age according to mother tongue and municipality of residence. Vipunen website – Education Statistics Finland (n.d.).

The UTH survey (2014) also identified that the level of education of parents is indicative of the level of education of their children and that those with tertiary education have higher employment rates than those with basic education. Lack of Finnish language skills were identified as one of the reasons for students with immigrant background interrupting their studies at an earlier age than students with Finnish background. However, the same survey showed that 75% of

respondents with immigrant background affirmed that they had at least an average level of Finnish or Swedish language skills.

When employment figures are observed, there is little difference between the employment levels between men from Finnish background (73.8%) and men from immigrant background (71.2%). Women, on the other hand, differ on a 73.5% (Finnish women) – 56.1% (immigrant) ratio, usually connected to early family formation circumstances. The reason for immigration is another contributing factor for employability as it was verified that the percentage of those who immigrated to Finland on a work-related basis was naturally higher than those immigrants with refugee status, who usually hold lower education levels and language skills and, at times, mental wellbeing or work capacity issues. The survey also demonstrated that employment rates have a direct correlation to the length of time living in Finland as the longer an immigrant lives in Finland, the greater is their employment rate.

Figure 10 summarizes the UTH survey (2014) numbers regarding the correlation between level of education and employment rate separate by immigrant and Finnish backgrounds, where employees with foreign background constituted 6% of all employed people between 15 and 64 in Finland. When entrepreneurship is observed, immigrants and Finnish people represented similar percentages, but in different fields of activity. Immigrants as employees in the same age group were employed in similar fields as those with Finnish background.

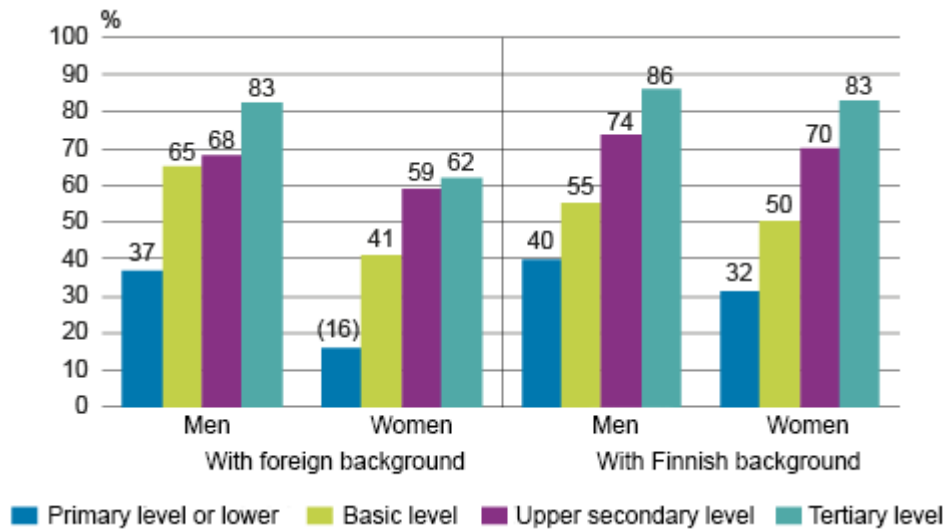


Figure 10. Employment rate by level of education, gender and origin, population aged 20 to 64 in 2014, %. (UTH survey summary 2014).

However, expert occupations were more often held by employees with Finnish background whereas fixed-term, part-time jobs and shift work were occupied more often by employees with immigrant background as well as under-employment positions, especially those with tertiary level of education.

Table 5 demonstrates the most common industries for employed persons with foreign background in 2017. It is possible to observe that almost 50% of the employees with immigrant background are allocated in the service industry performing cleaning jobs or holding positions in the restaurant industry, not specifying which types of activities are performed by the immigrant community.

Most common industries for employed persons with foreign background in 2017			
Industry	Employed persons with foreign background, number	Share of persons working in the industry of employed persons with foreign background, %	Share of persons with foreign background of persons working in the industry, %
8121 General cleaning of buildings	11,328	7.7	26.90
5610 Restaurants and mobile food service activities	10,696	7.3	22.30
7820 Temporary employment agency activities	8,437	5.7	14.30
4120 Construction of residential and non-residential buildings	7,257	4.9	12.50
8542 Tertiary education	5,366	3.6	13.10
Other industries	104,003	70.7	5.00
Total	147,087	100	6.30

Table 5. Most common industry for persons with foreign background was general cleaning of buildings in 2017. (Official Statistics of Finland (OSF) 2019).

Such figures motivated the conductors of the survey to question if or how much Finnish working life has been benefiting from the existing competence capacity of highly educated immigrants in the country. Also, differences regarding support and treatment of employees with immigrant background at the workplace were identified by the group belonging to Middle Eastern and African backgrounds.

2.5 Healthcare services currently offered and new ones to be offered

The article published on 9 December 2021 on the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health website presents the new services that will be included in the current portfolio of services offered to the elderly population from 1 January 2023, namely home care (including home medical care customized to the customers' needs), support services as a separate service, and security assistance service as an innovation which includes security equipment, alarms 24/7, assessment of the need for the service and the consequent security assistance when needed. The idea is to provide diverse and flexible solutions to individual cases.

Essential elements of the reform are the availability of the services *around the clock*, including nights, home visits planning regulations and employment of technology in the delivery of home care services. Additionally, and most importantly, the reform focuses on dealing with the shortage of labor in the healthcare sector and guaranteeing the qualification of home care workforce, as well as their monitoring. However, no change will be applied to the home service to families with children.

The innovations exceed the services by englobing the types of housing to be offered according to the new legislation. Apart from maintaining the current housing options, such as temporary and supported housing, community and 24-hour service housing will be added to the context, whereas long-term institutional care for elderly people will cease to exist by 2027.

2.6 Healthcare education improvements and new programs

Finland has various options of 3.5-year nursing programs in universities of applied sciences spread throughout the country, from north (Lapland) to south (Helsinki) and east (Kotka) to west (Vaasa) which offer high-quality, tuition-free studies for Finnish and other EU/EEA citizens.

Knowing the challenges Finland faces ahead, programs aimed at students with immigrant background started being offered by some universities of applied sciences from 2021 on, namely Metropolia UAS (Helsinki) and Tampere UAS as an effort to address the serious shortage of nursing professionals in the country according to the article by Adam Smith published on the Helsinki Times website (2021). The South-Eastern Finland University of Applied Sciences (XAMK, n.d.b) started its new bachelor's degree program in Nursing in the autumn of 2022 in Kotka. Additionally, Laurea University of Applied Sciences offers a two-year tuition-free top-up education in Vantaa for foreign students who already have some educational background and experience in nursing abroad.

All programs are primarily taught in English, which makes education in Finland accessible to foreign students who are fluent in English, with mandatory lessons

of the Finnish language. The migration of the teaching of all the subjects in the nursing program to the Finnish language starts gradually to take place on average from the second or third term considering that a minimum B1 level of language skills in Finnish is legally required to acquire the license to practice nursing in Finland as a registered nurse. However, nursing assistant positions require a lower level of Finnish language (A2.2). The A0-C2 language reference levels follow the global scale of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR n.d.).

Program tuitions vary from €5,000 to €11,000 per academic year for non-EU/EEA students with scholarship possibilities available. Scholarship systems and eligibility can be based on credits concluded, language skills certification or academic results depending on the university of applied sciences' own criteria. The percentage of discount and the procedures to be followed when applying for a scholarship also follow each institution's standards, mostly ranging fifty percent of the tuition.

Although there are various options and locations to earn a bachelor's degree in nursing in Finland, an article by Laura Kangas published on YLE's website (2022) presents statistics from the Board of Education (2022) – Figure 11 – showing that starting positions regularly remain vacant for the family nurses and basic first-aid training.

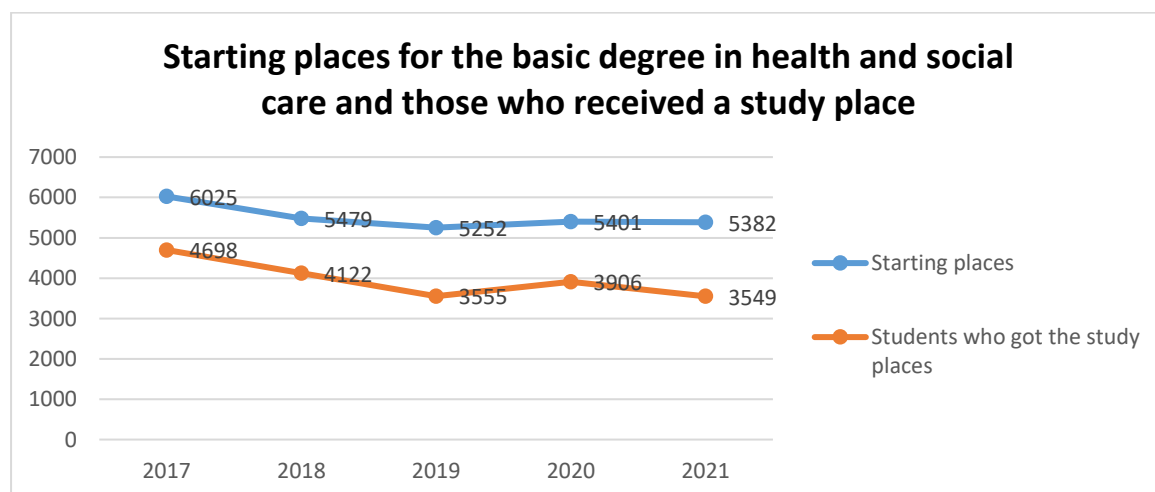


Figure 11. Starting places for the basic degree in health and social care and those who received a study place. (Graphic by education administration information service Vipunen/YLE n.d.)

It is estimated that this decrease may have been enhanced by the reduction in the demographic group added to the fact that the recent pandemic situation might have exposed some of the challenges of the career making it less attractive to Finish students, according to the same article.

The positive news the article brings is that the number of nurses and other nursing students starting their studies in universities of applied sciences has remained stable in the recent years.

2.7 Healthcare as a career in Finland

The current critical need for nursing professionals favors the employability of those who have finished their academic education in nursing and can choose different career paths, such as working in hospitals, healthcare centers, nursing homes, home hospitals, rehabilitation centers, both in the private and public sectors. Kanga's article in YLE (2022) foresees the need of 200,000 new professionals in the social and health sectors by 2040, including not only nurses and nursing assistants but other professionals who work in the social security sector as well. The article also states that the ageing of the population will demand 50,000 additional care workers by the same time.

The deficit of professionals is also the leading factor in the improvement of compensation that has been happening throughout Finland as Kirsi Karppinen's article published on YLE's website on 20 July 2022 states. The concept of compensation betterment may englobe salary increase of already hired professionals and €500 tips for finding new employees, larger payment for summer work, overtime, and evening, night and extra shifts.

However, in the same YLE article (2022), Juha Honkakoski, the representative of the trade union for health and social care professionals in Finland *Tehy ry*, highlights the importance of the creation of a wage program for nurses as well as an improvement of working conditions. The Palkkadata website (n.d.) shows that a nursing position gross salary may vary €2,370 to €3,221, ranking 427th in the job position salary ranking in Finland which may be perceived as an uninteresting

career, therefore explaining the reduction in applications by Finnish students to earn a degree in the field.

According to Karppinen's article (2022), the coronavirus pandemic has had a significant impact on the current workers satisfaction regarding a career in the healthcare sector, and a recent *Tehy ry's* member survey showed that almost all respondents expressed the willingness to change career, principally young professionals.

Additionally, Sanna Laiho, the Senior Lecturer and International Coordinator for the degree at Tampere University of Applied Sciences explains in Smith's article published in the Helsinki Times on 10 August 2021 on the new nursing degree programs in Finland that approximately 30% of qualified nurses contemplate moving abroad after concluding their studies in Finland. One of the reasons raised is the language barrier of those who are not native Finnish speakers and are not able to express themselves in the working language. Therefore, Laiho reinforces the importance of fluency in the Finnish language as course-related work placements will take place in a Finnish-speaking environment.

According to Teemu Muhonen *et al.*'s article (2022) published in Helsingin Sanomat on 3 October 2022, an agreement between Finnish labor unions and employers was signed on that day and stipulated a gradual salary increase (accruing to 11% increase in five years) additionally to the needed salary harmonization totaling a 17.3% final increase. Such increase means that the current €2,625 average salary will be increased to €3,117 by 2027. A €600 bonus per nurse is to be paid to those nurses who cared for COVID-19 patients as a one-time payment. In addition to a pay raise and bonus, betterment of work conditions, such as meal breaks to ensure well-being at work have been added to the agreement. However, experts speculate that the agreement may not have a direct or immediate impact on the increase of Finnish students seeking education in the nursing field.

2.8 Foreigners as an alternative to improve healthcare delivery

Smith's Helsinki Times article (2021) also mentions the predicted deficit of 30,000 nursing professionals in the next 10 years which may be worsened by the retirement of 13,000 professionals who are currently active and the improbability of fulfilling the growing demand of professionals with native-born employees.

With the new scenario of an ageing population, an increase in the portfolio and quality of services offered to the elderly population, the downward number of both professionals and students in the healthcare sector, alternative solutions are paramount for reaching the goals established by the recent reform envisioned by the Finnish government and desired by all stakeholders involved.

In the face of such accruing challenges, a national program aimed at attracting and retaining international talents was developed and launched by the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment in partnership with Business Finland when the Talent Boost Cookbook Finland 2.0 (2020) was published as part of the Talent Boost program of the Government of Finland. The publication is intended to offer guidelines for those who are interested in the internationalization of the talent scene in Finland and those who already work with foreign talents in a way to fulfil the current deficit in the labor market and promote economic growth in Finland.

However, the data collected during the interviews with key informants revealed that little to no information is known by this category, therefore greater general awareness seem to be needed with regard to the program, its goals and practices.

2.8.1 Filipino registered nurses in Finland – benchmark lessons

Since Filipino nurses have been mentioned by various interviewees during the data collection phase, some factors in their context seemed worth investigating in more depth and a brief mention in this study.

It was evidenced by the information shared by interviewees that Filipino registered nurses, among other Asian nationalities, have been a preferred target audience to be recruited to fulfil the deficit of healthcare professionals in the

country. When asked, a human resources recruiter from a Finnish recruiting company that operates also internationally explained that the Philippines has their policies of overseas employment of Filipino professionals embedded in their legislation and monitored by the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration office (POEA) which, according to the interviewee, facilitates the assurance of ethical practices during the recruitment process.

Additionally, the fact that Filipinos usually speak English as a second language is an advantage in the process of the internationalization of the workforce and makes this target group an attractive demographics around the world. A recent article published by Hannah Kost on CBC News (2022) informs the signing of a *memorandum* of understanding between the Alberta government and the Philippines with the scope of the latter to encourage Filipino nurses to emigrate to Alberta (CA) and, in return, the Canadian province is responsible to provide educational and licensing assistance as well as financial one. In the article, the premier of the Canadian province also reinforces the Filipino high level of nursing skills as well as their humanistic approach while offering health care services, a remark also shared by two of the interviewees in this study.

Another aspect of the Filipino international professional mobility is briefly presented in a CNN Philippines's online article (2020) by Portia Ladrado explaining that the stagnant economy in the 1970s was the starting point of the now usual practice of the sending of unemployed young men abroad and a subsequent elaboration of a "system that regulates and supports labor outflows".

However, when looking in more depth into the matter, it is essential to address some ethical issues in the process as most of the Filipino registered nurses who come to work in Finland have been doing tasks significantly below their education and professional capacity. According to one interviewee who is a representative of one Finnish labor union, many Filipino registered nurses who come to Finland - some of them with years of experience - have been working as *hoiva-avustaja* (nursing assistants) due to the lack of fluency in the Finnish language, which is considered a waste of the migrants' education.

“[...] migrant nurses, they have their degree, they have work for 10 years in some other country as a nurse. Then, they come to Finland and they are not supported in their language skills, so they go and work as a practical nurse or care assistant because they are afraid of working as a nurse because they have so poor language abilities and that's a waste of their education, [...] but then these migrant nurses, they end up working as a healthcare assistant, which means it's mainly cleaning or something; it's not at all care work or then they study a little bit and they can work as a practical nurse”. – Healthcare labor union representative

The Filipino workers recruited by the Finnish recruitment company already mentioned in this study arrive in Finland after they have passed five modules of Finnish language studies abroad which would, on average, correspond to an A2.2 (basic user) level of language acquired in a period of time of approximately five months. Therefore, as it will be presented in more detail later in this study, fluency in the Finnish language is a determining factor in the employment relationship of foreign workers in Finland in general. Thus, great commitment by the employers and employees in the achievement of the adequate level of Finnish language fluency by the foreign professional is one way to prevent underemployment of current foreign healthcare workforce who come to Finland and a waste of human resources capacity. In addition, such finding serves as a relevant benchmark experience for the current foreign students and the educational institutions in a way that the fluency in the local language occupies a central position in the educational experience of foreign students in Finland.

3 WORKING IN FINLAND

This chapter presents some aspects of the employment of foreign workforce in Finland, namely the responsibilities of employers and employees as well as efforts being made by the Finnish government to facilitate processes and reduce bureaucracy related to the employment of foreign workforce by Finnish companies. The Talent Boost program and the possibilities for Finnish language learning as contributive elements to the employability of foreign workforce are also contemplated in this chapter.

3.1 Employing foreigners in Finland

Legislation for employment of foreigners in Finland are strict and it is the employers' responsibility to ensure that the employee is legally allowed to work in the country, according to the Finnish Immigration Service website (n.d).

Among the obligations of the employer are:

- Ensure the foreign employee has the right to reside in Finland
- Ensure the foreign employee has the right to work in Finland
- Keep information related to the foreign employee at the workplace available for inspection when needed
- Ensure the foreign employee has the required certificates for work when applied to the position

The frequently asked questions (FAQ n.d.) section on the International House Helsinki website complements the information on the employers' obligations by stating that information referring to the main terms and conditions of employment must be immediately sent to the Employment and Economic Development Office (TE Office), independently of the type of residence permit the employee holds.

The Finnish Immigration Service website (n.d.) states that it is important to highlight that the right to reside in Finland does not automatically issue the right to work in the country and the information related to permission (or not) to work in Finland can be verified in the foreign employee's residence card with the details of types of work and number of hours allowed, via certificate of a pending application for an extended permit, a certificate for seasonal work or a certificate for asylum seekers' right to work. Not complying with the legislation might mean that a crime or an offence is being committed and administrative fines that range from €1,000 to €30,000 might be applied to the employer and is paid to the Finnish Immigration Service. At times, the cost of sending the foreign employee back to their country of origin can be attributed to the employer. Residence permit applications, on the other hand, are always and exclusively made by the

applicants (or legal representatives), not being possible to be made by the employer.

The Finnish Immigration Service (n.d.) complements the information saying that, when considering foreign workers from other EU countries, it is important to mention that, even though EU citizens have the right to live and work in Finland, their residence permits do not have an expiration date, application process is simpler and cheaper (€54) than that of a third-country citizen, they are also obliged to legalize their stay in Finland in the Finnish Immigration Service via the application for a residence permit if the stay is longer than three months.

3.2 Improving in processing times

As part of the national program to internationalize the job market in Finland, between January and March 2021 work-based first residence permits were approved in half the usual time if compared to 2020 as the article on the Finnish Immigration Service website published on 10 May 2021 states. Entrepreneurs and researchers have been issued residence permits in two weeks or under and all work-related residence permits have been issued in an average time of 37 days as opposed to the 70 days in the past.

The same article states that residence permits based on work are a second step in the process of accepting a foreigner to Finland as it is first necessary that The Employment and Economic Development Office offers a partial decision stating if the employment is temporary or permanent in addition to understanding of the availability of workforce in the job market. Only then, the Finnish Immigration Service offers its decision. It is adamant that applicants for a work permit and a residence permit have an employment offer from an employer in Finland.

Finally, the article explains that, for accelerating the processing time to under thirty days, the Finnish Immigration Service is focusing on increasing automatic processing of applications and prioritizing employees' and students' residence permits. A fast-track service is planned to reduce even more the processing times for specialists and entrepreneurs as well as their family members. However,

foreign students are not contemplated by the fast-track service. An additional measure for making the residence permit processing easier for the applicant is the possibility of reduced fees if the application for the residence permit is done electronically.

3.3 The role of employers

The increase in the general need for workforce and challenge in fulfilling this demand in Finland has already been demonstrated as being great, especially in the healthcare sector, more specifically in elderly care. Many fronts have been mobilizing and joining forces to elaborate new programs and innovative solutions. However, one front is pivotal in the process: employers. Like the government and educational institutions, companies have been requested to reconsider their recruitment and operational practices and their resistance towards diversifying their workforce so that they can also contribute to the efforts to fight the current labor shortage in the country by hiring employees with immigrant backgrounds.

YLE NEWS (2021b) published an article on 8 November 2021 bringing the results of a survey made in 500 private and public companies commissioned by the largest recruitment agency in Finland, Barona Oy. The survey showed that 40% of Finnish companies still refrain from hiring foreign talents due to their own lack of skills in English. Although inexperience in hiring a talent from abroad is also cited in the survey as a barrier for smaller companies to recruit foreigners, the international recruitment director at Barona, Elina Koskela, explains that it is possible to receive assistance throughout the process.

Linda Lindeman, chief specialist and team leader at the Finnish Ministry of Employment and Economy complements in the same article that there are additional issues that must be addressed other than fluency in English when considering smaller companies, such as the lack of network to find foreign skilled workers, the informal interaction among employees who have limited language proximity and, naturally, the unspoken discrimination of an employee with an immigrant background.

On 4 September 2021, YLE NEWS (2021a) published another article where the requirement of a fluent or proficient level of Finnish language by almost 50% of the companies searching for employees was mentioned as an impediment for hiring foreign workforce. The data was a result of a survey commissioned by the Kotona Suomessa project in 2020 and reinforced by another survey commissioned by Finland's Chamber of Commerce which evidenced that 75% companies in Finland suffer from workforce shortage.

Through his interviews of 31 international students in Finland, Alho (2020) concluded that other factors that impede the hiring of foreign employees are the uncertainty of cultural adaptation, receiving country's bureaucracy, limited or inexistence of institutional assistance referring to residence permits, and he reinforces the concept that graduates who are not fluent in the Finnish language as less likely to find a job in Finland. One positive aspect of Alho's article is that international students who had earned a degree in sectors that presented labor shortage, such as nurses in the healthcare sector had accessed job market more easily.

Unfortunately, issues regarding companies' will to hire employees with immigrant background seem to be found in other Nordic neighboring countries as well. In his analysis of the Swedish work environment, Diedrich *et al.* (2022) mention that companies fear the possibility of higher training costs, communication challenges, culture clash are some of the other aspects considered by companies when hiring foreign personnel, particularly in smaller companies' context. Many companies in Sweden estimate that communication barriers and culture clash could lead to potential disruption of company normality and lower work performance when hiring foreign employees, as Risberg & Romani (2021) complement the data.

Although there is a general understanding of how a resistant attitude from companies towards employees can hinder the employability of foreign talents, Cheng (2022, 4) highlights in his master's thesis report that few empirical studies on pre-recruitment phase have been conducted in Finland so far. Cheng (2022,

3) also mentions that factors such as ethnicity, educational background, language skills and local work experience as individual characteristics that make the hiring of employees with immigrant background more difficult. The features of the employers such as international activities, type of industry and size are also cited as reasons for companies sometimes preferring employees with Finnish background.

3.4 The role of employees with immigrant background

Alho (2020) also states in his study that efficient job search strategies are essential for the success rate of foreign students' employability and that networking in Finland is extremely important as "employers most often apply informal ways of recruiting" (Alho 2020, 5) and many job opportunities are in the "hidden" job market.

According to Alho's article (2020) foreign job seekers benefit from creating connections with locals via volunteering for associations and NGOs, strengthening ties started in traineeships and hobbies as well as participating in networking and business events, which means having a proactive attitude regarding job searching. It is indisputable that the face-to-face interaction with prospective employers is an additional tool to a successful job-hunting endeavor. Additionally, referrals from locals can be used as an advantage in the foreign talent's process of finding a job.

3.5 Possibilities for Finnish language learning

The relevance of immigrants' fluency in the local language in their employability has been evidenced by various authors in the Nordic countries, namely in Finland (Alho, 2020) and Sweden (Diedrich *et al.*, 2011; Risberg & Romani, 2021). As Diedrich *et al.* evidenced in their report, "language proficiency in Swedish was increasingly used to indicate 'Swedishness'", therefore indicative that employees with foreign background are prone to adjust to the norms and disrupt the workplace normality the least possible, guaranteeing that performance will not be compromised.

The new nursing programs in universities of applied sciences, e.g., Xamk, Metropolia UAS and Tampere UAS bring Finnish language learning throughout their terms during their 3.5-programs as the concept is to transition from lessons in English to lessons in Finnish regarding nursing content. For instance, Xamk's program includes ninety-minute Finnish language courses twice a week as a mandatory subject in their nursing program with additional forty-five-minute optional conversational/fluency sessions. In total, Xamk's language tuition corresponds to 30 ECTS (European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System).

Different educational institutions that offer Finnish language tuition to students with foreign background in Finland outside the university environment, namely Galimatias Oy and Omnia koulutus Oy, informed that the average estimated number of hours for highly educated individuals to achieve a B1 level (intermediate) of fluency in the local language starting from an A0 level (beginner) varies from 720 to 1050 academic hours when considering general language, not instrumental language used for specific professional purposes. It is important to emphasize that no learning process is the same and the duration and results may vary once many factors must be considered, such as students' previous education, context where the students are currently inserted in, teaching methods used, pace of the tuition and personal learning strategies.

In addition to the mandatory lessons from the university of applied sciences programs, there are 468 course offers to learn the Finnish language available on the Finnishcourses.fi website. Courses are available in face to face and online modes varying from basic to advanced levels offered by language schools. Some courses are free of charge and others require the payment of a fee that may range from €10 (Omnia, Espoo Adult Education Centre, Finnish A1 for stay-at-home parents) to €2,650 (Gimara Oy, Basics – Finnish for professionals 60 days). There are Finnish language course offers for specific purposes such as Medical Finnish (basics € 613.80 and professional, €1,357.80) which can be useful for enhancing nursing students' proficiency in the language, albeit costly.

Language cafés where participants can practice the Finnish language are also available free of charge around Finland. Language cafés are offered by libraries, churches, NGOs and some municipalities, both face to face and online, and they are usually conducted by volunteers who do not necessarily have teaching background or formal education, which may not be an issue as the concept focuses on practicing the language in an informal and sociable fashion and not to have a lesson with grammar and structure.

3.6 Boosting Talents in Finland - Talent Boost overview and mindset

As stated on the website of the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment of Finland (n.d.b), the economic dependency ratio, employment rate and sustainability gap will be impacted in case the country does not find alternatives to fulfil the workforce demand. As previously evidenced in this study, the population pyramid has been shifting and its basis has been reducing its size each year with the decrease in the number of residents between the ages of 18-64, generally considered the core of the productive share of society.

The website describes the Talent Boost program as “a cross-administrative programme of Prime Minister Sanna Marin’s Government designed to boost immigration of senior specialists, students and researchers”. The concept involves the attraction and retention of foreign specialists in the sectors that suffer from skilled labor shortage and special attention will be devoted to the immigration and integration of foreign students and researchers in Finland as well as their families.

The employment of immigrants already living in Finland is also contemplated in the program. The program is a continuation of the previous ones launched by Prime Minister Juha Sipilä in 2017 and Prime Minister Antti Rinne in 2019. It also aims at the 75% employment rate target of the current government and the creation of a more competitive Finland once it is intended to foment a more innovative and international working environment. Figure 12 summarizes the concept in a straightforward representation.

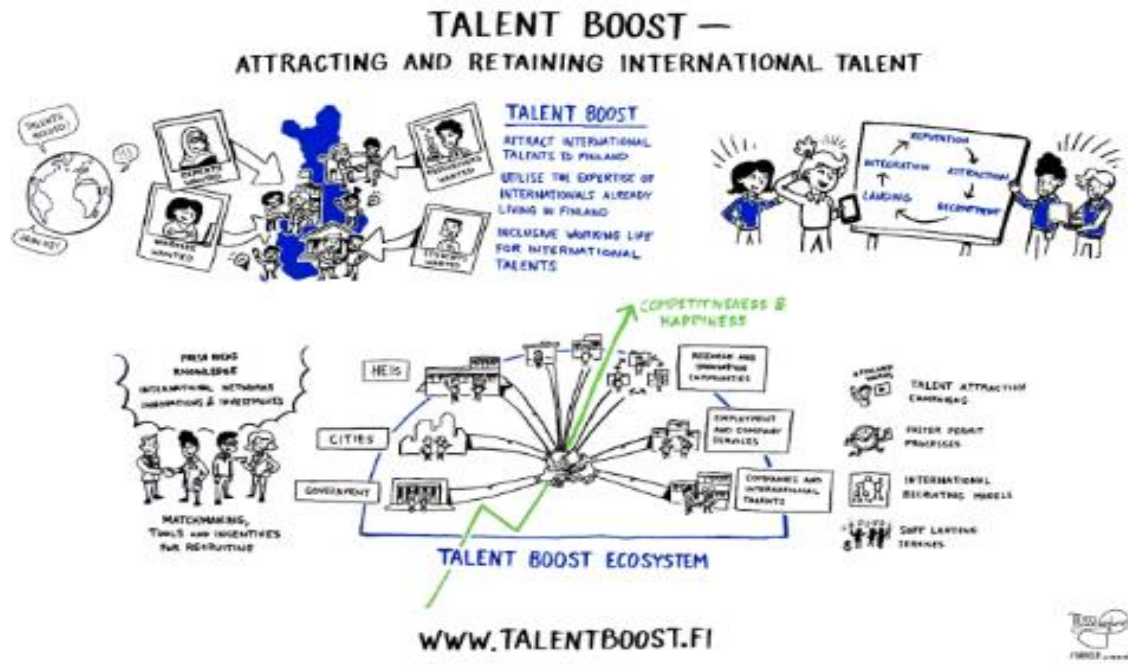


Figure 12. Talent Boost – Attracting and retaining international talent. Talent Boost website (n.d.)

The Talent Boost program is a concept developed by various actors in society, namely Centres for Economic Development, Transport and the Environment (ELY Centres), Employment and Economic Development Offices (TE offices), the Finnish Immigration Service, Business Finland, higher education institutions and cities being coordinated by the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment and Ministry of Education and Culture.

Chambers of commerce, entrepreneur organizations, companies, higher education institutions, research institutes, international specialists and additional stakeholders are involved in the discussions on how to attract foreign talents and benefit from their competencies with Business Finland in the forefront of the coordination of various business services. Talent hubs oversee the implementation of the program on a regional level.

The project granted a one-million grant to promote the program in cities and proposed a two-million discretionary government grant in 2021 being initially scheduled to run until 30 April 2022, later extended until December 2024.

According to the official website of the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment of Finland – Talent Boost Programme (n.d.), access to the grants is

given to municipalities with at least 15,000 foreign language speaking residents and those municipalities that are granted the right to the funds are expected to cover 30% of the total cost of the projects. The additional 70% of the costs are covered by the funds granted by the government.

Figure 13 brings additional information on the concept by presenting the Talent Boost's main measures separated in three different packages that correspond to subsequent phases of the program.

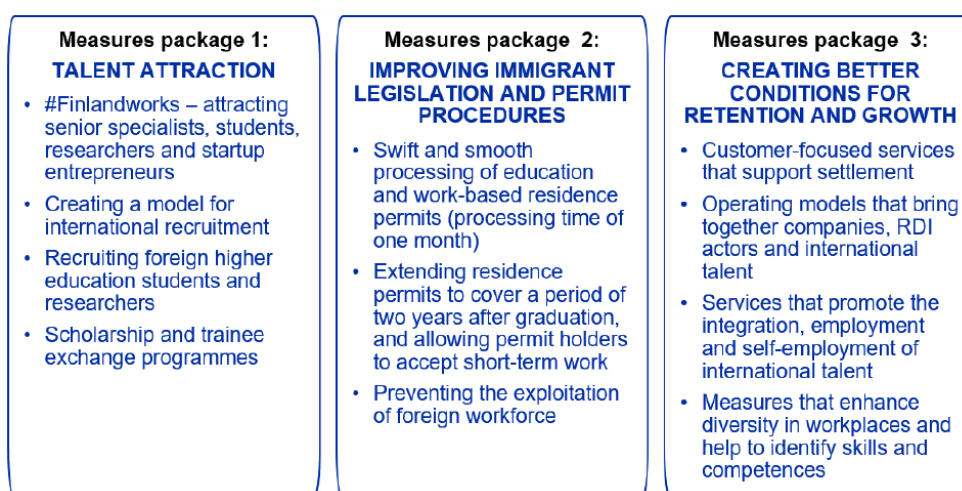


Figure 13. The Talent Boost Programme (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment of Finland n.d.)

Amid the measures the program proposes there are changes in the processing of residence permits for applications referring to work or studies, the creation of measures to attract and retain foreign talents and their families in addition to improvement in their employability in Finland and creation of a more receptive and diverse work environment. Creating standards for international recruitment and preventing exploitation of foreign labor are included in the program which also aspires to attract international investments through the support of the internationalization of companies and R&D initiatives.

According to information available on the Finnish Immigration Services website (2022), as of 15 April 2022, the rules for residence permit applications have been changed to simplify and improve the process. The changes imply the extinction of the need to extend the residence permit annually and students and researchers

are now granted a residence permit valid for the entire duration of their studies. Additionally, the granting of a continuous resident permit is an advantage as it makes it easier for international students to apply for a permanent residence permit. The continuous residence permit also applies to students' family members.

Among the improvements, an increase from 25 to 30 hours per week has been introduced for work and, most importantly, the possibility to apply for a two-year residence permit to look for work after the international student concludes their studies. However, foreign students will continue to have to make proof of their financial capacity to cover their stay in Finland during their studies and foreign students are not eligible for financial aid by the Social Insurance Institution of Finland (Kela).

All the changes aim to make coming to Finland to study and later settling in the country more attractive by facilitating immigration burdens.

4 XAMK AND TALENT BOOST AS THE COMMISSIONER COMPANY

South-Eastern Finland University of Applied Sciences (Xamk) is a higher educational institution that operates in four campuses in the South Savo and Kymenlaakso regions of Finland since 2017 after the merger of the Mikkeli and Kymenlaakso Universities of Applied Sciences. The university of applied sciences operates in Kotka, Kouvola, Mikkeli and Savonlinna employing over 900 employees among teachers, RDI personnel and other groups and educating over 11,000 in forty-eight bachelor's degree and thirty-two master's degrees.

The operations of South-Eastern Finland University of Applied Sciences (Xamk) include three fields of education and four support service and administrative departments. Xamk provides education in the fields of Technology, Health and Wellbeing, and Business and Culture, each belonging and being managed by a Director of School which are sub-divided into departments under the respective Directors of Education. Heads of Units control support services, RDI and services

and administration as individual units. Expenditure in research and development in 2021 is informed as €30.7 million in 2021 with €18.8 as external RDI funding. In the same year (2021), Xamk presented a €85 million turnover.

Xamk's educational programs are related to various fields, i.e., Engineering and Forestry, Health Care, Rehabilitation and Sports, Business, Safety and Security, Game Programming and ICT, Design and Restoration, Marine Technology and Logistics, Social Services and Youth Education, and Tourism and Hospitality Management. According to Xamk's website (n.d.a), 53% of their graduates from South Savo are employed against a 58% employment rate of graduates from Kymenlaakso. Among the student community, Xamk currently educates 464 foreign students from 65 different countries in addition to having fifty-nine international research- and development projects. The university of applied sciences also cooperates with 300 international partners and educated 27,276 students at the Open University of Applied Sciences (OUAS) in 2021 spread in 750 OUAS courses.

With expressive numbers regarding international activities, Xamk's vision for 2030 is presented in their website (n.d.a) as "Xamk grows and develops, attracting students and expertise to the region and creating new entrepreneurship. We make responsible choices". Some of Xamk's objectives for 2025 are to create new jobs and expertise in the areas it operates and influence the demographic development positively by, among other initiatives, increasing the number of new businesses and improve the volume of education export substantially.

With a student community composed by a significant number of foreign individuals and a strategy to grow this number consistently in the coming years, in March 2022 Xamk's International Services, which operates under the Education Services management, incorporated the Talent Boost program into its operations with the main focus on the retention of foreign graduates in Finland. Xamk's Talent Boost team is currently composed by two project researchers who are located in different campuses: one in Kotka and one in Mikkeli, but who serve

all the four campuses equally according to each campus's specificities and demands. Xamk's Talent Boost team arranges work-related activities such as networking/career events as well as informal language acquisition and socialization projects. According to its team members (the author included), Xamk's Talent Boost team currently encounters challenges regarding local employers' adherence to projects as well as insufficient attendance of foreign students in some of the activities organized. The former issue is estimated to be a reflex of unawareness of the advantages of hiring foreign talents whereas the latter, a possible consequence of two years of COVID pandemic where new means of interactivity have arisen, including remote ones.

5 RESULTS

After all the interviews conducted with the thirteen interviewees have been transcribed and thoroughly coded, the 338 different topics mentioned during the conversations were compared and cross-checked to identify similarities and discrepancies and finally grouped into five themes: language, healthcare industry, role of universities of applied sciences, culture and general remarks, all of which will be analyzed separately in more depth in the following items.

5.1 Key findings collected from the interviews with key informants

Through the analysis of the content collected via the thirteen interviews, five major themes have been identified: language, healthcare industry, the role of universities of applied sciences, culture and general remarks, the latter englobing topics that are relevant but insufficient within themselves to constitute one separate sub-topic each. The themes are presented in this part of the study in the order of relevance each subject represents in the total equation of the employability of non-Finnish speaking foreign professionals and future professionals (currently students) in the healthcare sector in Finland. The order was established according to the frequency topics were mentioned during the interviews with the key informants or the emphasis the interviewee attributed to them.

With 324 mentions of the word *language* and 215 mentions of *Finnish* in the context of *Finnish language* in the thirteen interviews held, the fluency in the most used local language, Finnish, is arguably the number one factor mentioned by the interviewees that favors or hinders the employment of foreign workforce in Finland as well as the type of work the nursing professional will have access to and advancement possibilities in the career. In second place, but not less important, the majority of interviewees appointed healthcare employers' openness (or lack thereof of), both in the public and private sectors, towards foreign workforce and how prepared they are (or are not) to employ such workforce and how these two factors exercise great influence in the success or failure of the employment of foreign workforce.

Subsequently, a significant number of interviewees mentioned the responsibility universities of applied sciences bear in ensuring that the new foreign professionals who acquire their Nursing degree in Finland leave the academic environment with the appropriate language skills required in the safe execution of their daily tasks is presented.

The impact of culture is also presented by many interviewees as a complement of the holistic experience of all stakeholders involved in the healthcare context: foreign employees, local peers, employers, patients, *etc.* The chapter is completed with general remarks made by interviewees on various sub-topics that are understood as relevant to the discussion but could not be included in the previous sub-items.

As the basis of this study lies in individual interviews, direct quotes from the interviewees will be often used to illustrate the topics presented in the next sub-items. The intention is also to maintain the authenticity of the concepts and points of view present in the interviewees' choices of words.

5.1.1 The role of language in the employability of foreign talents

During the thirteen interviews conducted with the key informants, fluency in the Finnish language was undoubtedly the most cited factor positively responsible for

the employability of foreign workforce in the healthcare context all around Finland as some of the quotes below exemplify:

“You really need a quite good skills with the language because you can’t work unless you can read, write and talk in Finnish because all the documents are in Finnish, and they need to be fluent [in] Finnish because the patients have also [the] right to see those stories.” – University of applied sciences Nursing teacher

“Although in the hospitals you might find patients that are more capable of speaking, let’s say semi-fluent English, the actual problems are more severe and more acute, and then again, there’s less room for mistakes.” – University of applied sciences Nursing teacher

“In nursing works you have to understand orders and you have to understand what to do and you have to understand medicine and medicine names and doses, how much you give medicine to your patients or customers. Those are quite important things for us of course. [...] and the reason is safety. Patients’ safety.” – Private healthcare sector employer, home care and elderly care

The three direct quotes above are some of the many mentions of the importance of the fluency in the Finnish language in the safe delivery of health care to Finnish-speaking patients. Eleven of the thirteen interviewees classified fluency in the language as the most important factor in the employability of foreign workforce as it directly affects the relationships and effective communication with patients, colleagues and managers. Some of the interviewees emphasize that the language production by the foreign workforce does not have to be perfect in structure or grammar, but accurate in content. Additionally, some of the interviewees complemented the concept by clarifying that the gravity of the ailment influences the level of fluency required: the more serious the infirmity, the more efficient the communication must be.

When considering Finnish language in the healthcare environment, some interviewees highlighted that both general language and instrumental language (language used for specific purposes, in this case, medical and nursing terminology) must be learned. Language courses were mentioned by many interviewees as the primary source of knowledge and fluency for foreign

workforce. Some interviewees mentioned that language fluency can and should also be acquired at work through regular interactions with colleagues and patients but as a secondary tool, although with similar importance as formal language tuition. However, it was pointed by three interviewees that the “learning on the job” alternative should be well-thought since the nursing peers are not language professionals and are often already burdened with the nursing work overload. Also, these interviewees added that “learning on the job” concept must happen only after the foreign workforce already have basic understanding of the target language, never recommended as a possibility along with the initial work practices.

One aspect of the language used in the work setting which interviewees were questioned about was the standardization of some commands as prompts in a way to facilitate the completion of tasks by foreign workers. The data collected during the interviews showed that some commands already exist and are used in some contexts in the healthcare sector, but its range is limited since some of the official documentation require subjective writing. No mention of supporting technology to be used as a tool to facilitate or improve communication among actors in any sphere in the healthcare sector was identified in the interviews.

Some interviewees claimed that inexistent or low level of language skills eventually become an extra workload for the local nurses (Finnish speakers) as some of the essential duties, such as writing reports, must be done exclusively in Finnish as they are official documents and must contain patients’ correct and complete information.

“They [local nurses] are not professional teachers of Finnish language, the colleagues. They do not have the time and they do not have the skills to do that.” – Healthcare labor union representative

A qualified mentor specifically assigned to manage language learning during the execution of the tasks is suggested by interviewees as an optimal solution for the language challenges faced by the foreign newcomers in the initial stages of the work practice. The labor representative complements the thought by stating that

the language capability while executing nursing tasks is the employers' responsibility:

"Our legislation says that it's the employer who is responsible that the workers have adequate language skills, [...] nowhere it's defined what this adequate is. [...] a good employer takes care that the language, Finnish language skills are improving all the time." – Healthcare labor union representative

Additionally, it is recommended by some of the interviewees that language tuition is provided cost-free by the employer during working hours as language skills are seen as a tool that contributes to the realization of the tasks and nursing professionals already have long, tiresome working days performing their regular tasks making it inviable to require additional time devoted to work-related activities. Another inconvenience presented by one interviewee was that, in case the foreign worker is not fluent enough in the local language, a local peer might be needed full-time, and the current healthcare context cannot fit this practice in their daily routine due to the already existing lack of local workforce.

Another aspect of the negative impact of the low fluency in the local language mentioned in some interviews is the types of jobs and tasks assigned to foreign workforce, as previously mentioned in this study when addressing the Filipino current employment situation in many healthcare institutions in Finland. As an employer from the private sector informs:

"... they [foreign workforce] are going first in elderly care and that's why? Because their speaking skills isn't [aren't] so well [good] enough in Finnish language, so they can't work alone in home care because they have to work alone in our customers' home and that's bit of difficult." – Private healthcare employer

A foreign nursing assistant student reinforces the concept stating that:

"After graduation from education facilities in Finland, many well-educated immigrants struggle in finding jobs that suit their education because most of the workplaces require fluent Finnish language skills. [...] If my language skills is [are] better, I want to go and study saairanhoitaja (registered nursing)." – Foreign nursing assistant student in vocational school

An additional source of fluency mentioned by interviewees is the use of the target language in daily, informal social interactions. According to some of the opinions shared during the interviews, the language learners' attitude towards the language has great relevance in the success in acquiring the fluency needed. According to many interviewees, taking additional lessons and using Finnish in every opportunity they can are some of the possibilities to improve their language fluency. It is almost a consensus among interviewees that socialization with locals (Finnish speakers) helps fluency. One interviewee says:

"I think the contact with native speakers and if they would go and participate in the society more actively, I think that would back their Finnish language skills nicely." – Public healthcare sector employer

The interviewee added that such suggestion, however, may encounter some challenges once the introvert nature of Finnish society can be an impediment when the foreign individuals attempt to be more active and start an interaction in the local language. This opinion was shared by other key informants during their interviews as well.

When the use of English in the work settings is discussed, a controversy arises among answers: some interviewees believe that the English language should be avoided once it hinders the progress of the acquisition of the local language while other respondents are confident that it could and should be used as a bridge in the initial stages of the practice of the foreign workforce as a transition resource. All respondents assumed that the foreign workforce have a minimum intermediary level of fluency in English.

Those interviewees who recommend the avoidance of the English language base their beliefs on the fact that all documentation is done in Finnish, many patients, especially elders, are not fluent in English or comfortable with the delivery of the health care in a language other than their native one and that the more colleagues speak in English, the less the foreign colleagues learn Finnish. Also, there is the general understanding among the interviewees who advocate in favor of the use of Finnish language in the workplace that Finnish people do not like to

speak English at work once they fear their fluency is not perfect and speaking English is understood as an extra effort by the local workers. The need to speak English at work causes additional stress and fatigue to local workers, as one interviewee who is an employer from the public sector states:

“Our care workers find them [foreign workforce] really scary, that you have to talk some other language than Finnish.” – Public healthcare sector employer

Another argument presented by the interviewees who claimed that Finnish should be the main (if not the only) language to be used in the healthcare environment is that the requirement of English at the workplace could reduce the number of mentors who could assist foreign workers at the beginning of the practice. Finally, some advocates of Finnish-speaking-only work environments stated that insufficient fluency of English language skills by either side may cause disruption or misunderstanding that may offer risks to patients.

On a contrary current of thought, interviewees who support the use of English as a transition language explained that Finnish is a famously complex language to learn and supporting daily activities on a common language that is understood by both interlocutors, albeit none of them being a native speaker of English in most cases, may be beneficial to guarantee the assertiveness of the communication and careful execution of the daily tasks. Most interviewees stated that Finnish people’s general level of fluency in English is good enough or pretty good and that additional measures to improve their fluency may not be needed or even possible considering the impossibility to add more hours or tasks to their working days. One interviewee stated that, in the same way that foreign workforce can improve their fluency in Finnish by *just being bold and speaking*, Finnish people can improve their fluency in English. According to them, it is a matter of attitude towards challenges and a will to make things work.

Two of the interviewees mentioned the fact that younger generations seem to be more comfortable using English on a daily basis which would make the interactions between this generation and foreign workers who are not fluent in Finnish more viable in the future. Another important piece of information offered

by one interviewee is that some parts of Finland are becoming more international every year which has been slowly changing the general demographics of the country. One example is the City of Espoo as published on their web page (n.d.) informing that the municipality gained 3,986 new foreign-language residents in 2021 representing a 91.9% growth in this demographic group in one year. This interviewee, who is involved in the healthcare management in this area, suggested that not only some of the patients may be speakers of English, but also that they may prefer to be offered health care in English which would naturally increase the employability of some non-speaking healthcare workers.

5.1.2 The healthcare industry recruitment and management of foreign talents

When analyzing the preparedness of the healthcare sector, it is practically a consensus among interviewees that neither are apt to hire and manage foreign workforce, including a significant lack of commitment from the employers. When asked for a clarification on what *prepared* means, interviewees mentioned the still present prejudice against foreign candidates through the avoidance of those with names that resemble a foreign background, the inexistence of qualified personnel specifically assigned to assist the foreign workforce at the initial stages of the work practices and the difficulty foreign workforce endure to integrate the environment since local workforce tend to be restricted to themselves, for example, during lunch breaks, to name a few examples.

If the two actors in the sector, public and private employers, are compared to each other with regard to foreign workforce hiring and management, it seems that the private sector is slightly more prepared, according to many interviewees. One interviewee suggested that the public sector standards and job requirements might be too strict, especially when dealing with fluency in the local language. Two interviewees reinforced the idea that it is mainly the employers' responsibility to find ways to fulfil the needed workforce to provide the qualified health care to the general population, making other stakeholders who have been contributing to the solution complementary actors, not the directly responsible ones. Some interviewees even stated that employers seem not to understand the seriousness

and urgency of the matter considering the evident current lack of workforce in the nursing field. According to interviewees, other factors that seem to be ignored by employers in the healthcare sector are the future challenges of an ongoing ageing population and changes in the legislation that increase even more the need for nursing professionals. The interviewee who mentioned that the number of foreign residents, both nursing workforce and other types of circumstances, is growing highlighted that this is a fact that cannot be ignored and that such new residents might be in either side of the equation as a health care provider or user.

Another possibility considered by two interviewees was that employers had been going through a very stressful moment due to the long-lasting threat of a general strike or massive resigning from the nursing professionals in the pursuit of salary increase and better working conditions making the arrangements for the employment of foreign workforce a secondary subject to be addressed later in the process. It was also suggested by these two interviewees that there might have been great expectations from employers that the finalization of the negotiations could improve the nursing context in general and promote the increase in the number of Finnish students pursuing a career in nursing, therefore reducing the need for foreign workforce. The supposition that betterment in the nursing environment could *so/ve* the lack of workforce by filling the position with locals was discarded by many of the interviewees who are confident that, even with the increase of Finnish workers in the field, foreign workforce is still needed considering the outstanding number of professionals required in the coming years.

When considering the employers' possibilities to find solutions, one interviewee from a foreign background who is currently studying to become an assistant nurse suggested that employers could collaborate more or more efficiently with the Employment Services Office (*TE-toimisto palvelut* in Finnish) and universities of applied sciences so that finding a job after graduation is not a discouraging struggle from the foreign workforce's side. Another interviewee complemented the concept stating that:

“... I think sometimes the employers don't know, maybe are they're not so aware of all the potential resource we have already in the universities.” – Private healthcare sector employer.

One interviewee who is part of the university of applied sciences faculty stated that, although there are considerable challenges, there is great effort from many fronts to address the issue and they are confident that measures as being taken to move to the right direction. One positive aspect of the employability of foreign workforce is that one representative of the public sector who participated in the research as a key informant clearly stated that they are open to and interested in hiring foreign nurses and that they are looking for best practices to do so, albeit being in the initial stages of the process.

Effective leadership was mentioned by two interviewees as a defining factor in the success of the employment of foreign workforce. According to many interviewees, employers must understand that the employment of foreign workforce is a reality and that their attitude towards the matter must improve. As one interviewee who is an employer in the private sector explains:

“We have to change our attitude and be more welcoming people [...], that's the thing they have to know because they [employers] are the one who need help [is] not the people. [...], because international professionals, they can always go to other places, more abroad, because now [...] it's globally [...] workforce are globally needed. So yes, I would just tell the thing [...] we need them, they don't need us”. – Private healthcare sector employer

According to many interviewees, such improvements would require, among many measures, openness towards hiring foreign workforce, transparent communication of and in the new context, the provision of specialized mentors to assist the foreign workforce not only with language issues, but also with local work practices and culture preventing the work overloading of local nurses who are not equipped with the necessary tools to manage the adjustment process and providing the improvement of Finnish language skills during working hours. As one interviewee from the public sector stated:

“The nurse leader is in [a] really important role to support and warmly welcome those foreign care workers in the work community.” – Public healthcare sector employer

The creation of a more welcoming environment is seen by some interviewees as a significant part of the employers’ responsibilities so that the foreign workforce decide that Finland is a favorable country to settle in. As one interviewee suggested as the ideal attitude and speech from employers:

“Hey, we are going to have nurses with different background. They have different culture. Let’s accept them. Let’s help them to understand better this Finnish culture and maybe we will learn from them how to do differently the work in this field”. – Healthcare labor union representative

Another interviewee was more incisive when stating what should be done to make the insertion of the foreign workforce in the healthcare environment effective, in case they possessed total authority on the matter:

“I would say to the bosses below me ‘make this work’. [...] If there is [are] some issues, we just fix those issues and we, I would just say that ‘now we do this’... there in the healthcare sector, they are in so many bad issues, so it needs totally strong leadership.” – University of applied sciences Nursing teacher

Benchmarking with other countries where the lack of nursing workforce is also a challenge was suggested by one of the interviewees:

“If it’s like possible to see what other people do in other countries, like compare what good things they have done already that if there are any research or guidelines or some good ways they have already tested or tried that we could implement in here Finland. So, co-working also abroad.” – University of applied sciences Nursing teacher

The previous suggestion was complemented by the thought that, if not with other countries in the healthcare context, with other industries that employ foreign workforce in Finland. Local employers who have expertise in the process are potential informers of different challenges when managing an environment with mixed backgrounds and possible measures to mitigate risks and optimize results.

Additional suggestions were made by some of the interviewees such as the existence of one peer support community where experiences are shared to improve the foreign workforce experience in Finland:

“[...] some open discussion about the experiences in some kind of peer support.” – Public healthcare sector employer

The idea was complemented in a different moment by another interviewee from a foreign background who is currently studying to become an assistant nurse and suggested:

“[...] If nurses from different companies come to the study place and they can share their experience from different places and different companies.” – Foreign nursing assistant student in vocational school

The suggestion offered by the two interviewees shows the need for good cooperation between the industry and the educational institutions which are the subject of the next sub-topic.

5.1.3 Role of universities of applied sciences

As stated by one interviewee, universities of applied sciences are historically key actors in offering updated solutions to current market and social needs and, according to many of the interviewees, the role of the applied sciences in the internationalization of the workforce in Finland is of major relevance. As one interviewee states:

“The universities of applied sciences are in a way more effective actors when it comes to the change of what professionals the nation needs.” – Private healthcare sector employer

However, one of the Finnish healthcare labor unions clearly stated that they are not in favor of Nursing degree programs taught in English by some universities of applied sciences in Finland, and that they are in favor of Nursing degree programs taught both in English and Finnish as long as the foreign students are

qualified language-wise to practice nursing tasks effectively in Finnish by the end of their studies. The rationale behind this position, according to the interviewee who is a representative of such labor union, is that programs taught exclusively in English do not prepare the foreign students to work in Finland when language is considered. The interviewee added that, once the recently graduated foreign individuals may not find a work placement in Finland, there is a great possibility that they then migrate to other countries where language demands are more suitable to their capacities. The interviewee also said that the situation can be even worse: when registered nurses who acquired their degree in Finland who are not fluent in the local language can be limited to job positions inferior to their education, such as practical nurses or nursing assistants. Additionally, the interviewee stated that programs taught in a mixed-language setting may not provide the language fluency needed and the same emigration situation as the previous case presented may happen to the foreign students in such programs once the demand of healthcare workforce, as already evidenced, is a global issue. Also, it was stated by the same interviewee that, in case such nursing programs continue to be offered to foreign students, due to the risk of emigration they represent, they should happen exclusively on a paid-tuition basis, never utilizing tax resources to sponsor their operations.

One interviewee who is a faculty member of a nursing program reinforces that national guidelines which thoroughly design the process of having students from foreign backgrounds in the universities of applied sciences were essential:

“We need national guidelines for this and it's a huge thing and it's very important thing that needs to be focused on and we have the international nursing crisis right now going on in the whole world.” – University of applied sciences Nursing teacher

According to this interviewee, such guidelines would address the establishing of a proper career path in order to guarantee that the foreign students progress in their studies effectively avoiding academic evasion along the way. The same interviewee suggested that the designing of the suggested guidelines would be a joined effort of leading stakeholders such as the universities of applied sciences, employers, nursing workforce representatives and government. The idea is to

address the matter from beginning to end and ensure that the foreign nursing students finish their program fully prepared to be inserted in the job market on the same level as Finnish students and decide to stay in Finland, instead of moving to other countries, such as Canada, USA or UK, where the language issue is not an impediment for employment.

It was mentioned by some interviewees that understanding what an *adequate* level of Finnish language skills is and ensuring that such level is reached by foreign students by the time they conclude their studies is essential and the provision of such studies is mostly laid on the educational institutions by some interviewees. Language courses as a formal approach to acquire the language knowledge and fluency needed for the safe execution of the tasks in the nursing environment are seen by many interviewees as vital and primarily as the educational institutions' responsibility. Language fluency acquired outside the educational context, such as language learned in the practical settings, is understood by some interviewees as an *additional source*, although of great importance as well and should happen only after the foreign students have acquired basic Finnish language skills. Three interviewees stated that strict language exams and standards for practice approval must be the core focus of educational institutions. The duration, type and level of nursing education provided to foreign students must be identical to the education offered to Finnish students, as some interviewees emphasized. One interviewee emphasized the direct correlation between Finnish language fluency and employability of foreign workforce:

"It's good that you are getting the Finnish you need in the examination so that you can start straight away to work as a native Finnish language native worker." – Private healthcare sector employer

According to an interviewee who is a faculty member at a university of applied sciences in Finland, effective communication between the educational institutions – in this case, universities of applied sciences – and the providers of nursing practices is indispensable to ensure that the necessary knowledge regarding nursing practices is achieved by the foreign students. The concept was added by

other interviewees' opinions when they claimed that the educational institutions are also expected to provide the relevant cultural awareness, both professional and social and find innovative ways to do the practice so that the foreign students and workforce adjust and are genuinely integrated to the nursing environment.

Some interviewees believe that cooperation with employers in both public and private sectors should be strengthened and is seen as an effective means to favor the employability of foreign workforce, starting from assisting the foreign student to find practice placements during their studies which may, in a subsequent phase, become a concrete work opportunity. The interviewees understand that such cooperation could promote benchmarking opportunities for foreign students with Finnish nurses and foreign nurses who are currently employed in the healthcare sector in Finland. Benchmarking regarding local work practices, cultural differences challenges, learning opportunities, according to one interviewee, could enhance the adjustment of foreign students and workforce to the new healthcare environment they will be or already are inserted in, reducing possible future clashes and crises.

Another contribution some interviewees mentioned that universities of applied sciences are expected to offer is the creation of awareness about the foreign workforce scenario and promotion of education of the local workforce and community in general regarding the foreign community that now integrates the shared environment highlighting the advantages that can arise from their effective insertion to the Finnish society.

5.1.4 The impact of culture in the successful settlement of foreign talents

When addressing cultural differences that may arise in a context where foreign students and workforce are inserted in the Finnish context, the data collected from the interviews show that again lack of language can represent a barrier in the integration and adaptation process. However, many interviewees stated that the language limitations are certainly not the only issue to be addressed. The data show that there still is little awareness regarding cultural differences and some interviewees speculate that in very few occasions such differences as

perceived as an advantage. Courses that promote greater cultural awareness have been mentioned by some of the interviewees as relevant to reduce the potential stress that may arise from the current unawareness present within some parts of Finnish society.

Some interviewees expressed their belief that challenges seem to start to arise when some specificities of the Finnish culture become evident to the foreign individual, such as introspectiveness and great attention to privacy, making socialization between locals and foreigners limited. Two interviewees mentioned that foreign individuals who have demonstrated interest in establishing connections with their Finnish co-workers have faced frustration once most Finnish individuals are keen on preserving their professional and personal lives apart, independently on the nationality of their peers. Both interviewees added that Finnish people's general discomfort when speaking a language other than their mother tongue is sometimes extended to their private lives as well which commonly can be mistaken as unsociability. Additionally, it was mentioned that the elderly community is more used to *a certain cultural way of doing things*, with healthcare practices included. It is important to mention that, besides the introspectiveness cited above, Finns are perceived by the foreign workforce interviewed in this study as helpful individuals in general.

Fortunately, even though differences in work practices required adjustments from the foreign workforce at times, interviewees who mentioned the topic stated that such adjustments have occurred naturally, only requiring the proper acknowledgement of the disparity in practices and efficient training so that the desired standards were met. Again, some interviewees emphasized that such cultural monitoring and training as an adaptation path is understood as part of the duties of a specific professional who is qualified to perform such task, preferably with a cultural challenge assessment performed prior to the inclusion of the foreign workforce to the workplace. It was also mentioned during some interviews that Finnish workers can and should benefit more from some of the different practices foreign workforce bring to the healthcare context.

According to the data collected, even though some parts of Finland have been becoming more multicultural in recent years, the country has been monocultural for a long period of time making Finnish people in general uncomfortable with unknown situations. However, no serious cultural clashes have been identified by any of the interviewees who participated in this study. It is not to say that the insertion of foreigners in the Finnish context has not encountered objections. Matters such as obstacles referring to female nurses performing male patients' washing, the resistance of a male nurse following orders given by a female supervisor and the self-confidence (or lack thereof) of some female nurses depending on their backgrounds have been identified when data were collected. Fortunately, the two first issues listed in this paragraph seemed to have been managed with no greater effort or conflict.

Two interviewees expressed their hope in easier interactions ahead once younger generations seem to be more comfortable navigating more multicultural environments and situations. One explanation offered by the interviewees for such *phenomenon* may be that many youngsters are more confident using English in addition to having travelled and experienced other cultures from a first-hand experience. As suggestions offered by some interviewees to promote better integration of foreign students to the Finnish cultural and societal environment were the creation of study groups among fellow students composed by representatives of both cultures, local and foreign. One interviewee mentioned that an advantage of such arrangement would be that students usually have similar interests and lifestyles which would create some sort of natural proximity between the parts.

One healthcare employer from the private sector and the representative of the healthcare labor union who participated in this study suggested that the development of a favorable environment where foreign nationals feel welcome is essential to create a sense of belonging. According to them, such sense of belonging may facilitate their integration into society and may lead to the decision of settling in Finland after they graduate. In that sense, as published on the Finnish Government website (2022a), the Integration Act which deals with official

integration programs was amended in October 2022 so that programs which focus on offering various activities that promote wellbeing and integration are extended to foreigners in general, including skilled workers, their spouses and children. As the healthcare labor union representative informed during the interview, an alternative to official integration programs is the possibility of the foreign workforce to participate in activities organized by some labor unions independently on the foreigners possessing a labor union's membership. However, the interviewee stated that such initiatives do not exempt employers from their responsibility to create favorable environments for their foreign workforce. Instead, they are seen as an addition to the whole context. As one interviewee expressed their view:

"I find it really important that the work community is warmly welcoming you." – Private healthcare sector employer

When addressing cultural issues, this study could not disregard the mention of prejudice by some of the interviewees. Mentions regarding employers' preconceptions regarding workforce from a foreign background and their language skills by assuming foreigners have limited language performance by default, prejudice against pre-skills and professionalism and other skills in general. As previously mentioned, interviewees believe that cultural awareness is of extreme relevance to address challenges regarding prejudice due to plain ignorance of actual contexts. As a positive insight on the matter, one of the interviewees shared their experience in the field by saying that:

"There are a lot of Finnish racists also in the healthcare system, you know, both workers and patient, but there are a lot of Finnish people who have lots of respect for the migrant and nurses who struggled their way to work with a lot of difficulties and a lot of effort, who wanted to learn Finnish language. [...] there are always those who complain and who are racists, so they exist in the healthcare sector. But in the huge majority, said that they, you know, they enrich the work workplace and they really respected them, and they were also happy, you know, to learn with them." – Healthcare labor union representative

One of the aspects mentioned by an interviewee is the shift in the profile of immigrants involved in the process of attraction and retention of foreign talents

compared to the previous ones who were primarily accepted to Finland as possessors of a refugee status. Such immigrants were usually perceived by part of the population as an *onus* or financial burden to taxpayers with little interaction with locals due to different reasons, one of them, lack of language and limited previous education. The interviewee highlighted that the new profile of foreign individuals who are englobed in the Talent Boost program is expected to be composed by active members of society who contribute to the creation of a more vital Finland ready to face greater challenges and provide quality healthcare services to its population. The interviewee added that once they integrate to the work environment and society, such foreign individuals constitute a *bonus* to the country.

5.1.5 General remarks relevant to the employability of foreign talents

In this sub-topic, some insights that have been collected through the interviews will be briefly mentioned and commented on as they did not fit under any of the specific themes analyzed in the previous sub-topics.

The first piece of data mentioned during the interviews that seems relevant to add to this study is the need of a comprehensive assessment of the reasons why foreign workforce or recently graduated students have left or leave Finland in order to identify the points of improvement to be addressed so that such emigration is reduced or, if possible, eliminated. As suggested by one of the interviewees:

“I've always said to the employers and the different project that when people go back, when they don't stay there, we should always study what is the reason. Is it us? Is it something that we did wrong? [...] maybe we didn't give them enough possibility to study Finnish language, we didn't integrate them well enough, they have problems, maybe with the housing they couldn't bring their families here that is one really huge difficulty in Finland [...], to bring your family here or was it something at the workplace, poor management, occupational health and safety, maybe something. What was wrong? What did we do wrong in a sense that they didn't want to stay here?” – Healthcare labor union representative

The same interviewee complemented that it is also the government's role to contribute so that when some foreign workforce would like to settle in Finland, Finland should ease the process, for example, when demanding a certain amount of income (€2,600 net) as a pre-condition to allow the foreign workforce to bring their families to the country. According to the interviewee, such net income is not viable considering the current salary policies practiced in the healthcare industry, especially if the foreign workforce is assigned a job that is below their professional qualification which would imply salaries under their earning capability.

Some of the data gathered in this study questioned the existence of public initiatives to promote internationalization in Finland as transient projects sponsored by EU resources instead of established policies organized and funded by the Finnish government. According to one interviewee, the short-term aspect of the projects may hinder the achievement of long-term goals such as the restructuring of the healthcare employment environment. However, the interviewee stated that the implementation of such improvement in the following months may currently feature more as an aspiration than a reality once the recent urgency in the management of the COVID-19 pandemic for over two years aggravated by the energy crisis resulting from the Russian invasion of Ukraine utilized a substantial part of the national financial reserves.

Concerns regarding the impacts on immigration practices as a consequence of the current war in Ukraine were mentioned during the data collection period. All the interviewees who expressed such concern did it with great uncertainty about the future trends both in an immigration favorability sense and policy changes, especially when important elections are scheduled to occur in the spring of 2022 in Finland in a context of a nationalist wave in the political scenario in other parts of Europe and the world as well.

6 DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

With the most relevant findings compiled and analyzed in the previous chapter, the implications and applicability of this study are presented in the following sub-topics. This chapter finalizes the study when the conclusions and recommendations that try to contribute to the employability of non-Finnish speaking foreign healthcare students in Finland are offered as a result of the data analysis and knowledge acquired along the process.

It was possible to identify through the objective data collected in this study that Finland is already aware of the real threat the lack of qualified healthcare workers poses to the future of its population's wellbeing with an ongoing ageing population in addition to new legal requirements regarding improvements in the provision of health care. The country has collected relevant data and started the process of joining forces with experts and key actors in the field investing a great number of resources, both material and immaterial ones, to find viable solutions to the issue. The creation of the Talent Boost program and the Talent Boost Cookbook Finland 2.0 (2020) as a national initiative acting on regional and municipal levels aiming to attract and retain foreign students and workforce as a response to the decrease in the number of Finnish students in the field and the soon retirement of professionals currently active demonstrated to be not only sensible, but also astute. Changes in immigration procedures in addition to the creation of new Nursing degree programs in English and Finnish that accommodate foreign students focused on enhancing Finland's attractiveness as a country to immigrate to as a healthcare professional or student complement the intensification of the internationalization efforts.

However, the data collected via interviews in this study coincide with data shared by the Finnish recruitment company Barona Oy in YLE NEWS (2021b) where the lack of the company's English language skills creates a barrier for the employment of foreign workforce in 40% of the cases. Barona Oy's information is complemented by data collected in this study that claim that healthcare employers do not seem to be taking active measures to adjust their practices or adequately prepare the local workforce to accommodate the foreign workforce.

Similar to Dietrich *et al.*'s (2022) statement that employers in Sweden fear training costs, communication barrier, cultural clash, among other challenges when hiring foreign workforce, data collected in this study also showed that employers in the healthcare sector in Finland also attempt to avoid having to alter their routines and common practices. Additional information gathered in this study shows that a reasonable number of employers in Finland who hire foreign healthcare workforce outsource the burden of training and managing challenges foreign workforce may bring to the work environment to professionals who are not qualified or equipped to find the necessary solutions, such as local nurses or head nurses. By doing so, data from interviews suggest that employers overwhelm local healthcare workforce with responsibilities outside the scope of their professional duties causing generalized frustration and rejection to the employment of foreign workforce in general by local healthcare peers. Additionally, data showed that by not taking the necessary measures to accommodate foreign workforce, such as supporting language tuition at the workplace, employers contribute to the disruption of the company normality which can result in lower work performance when hiring foreign workforce, an aspect also described by Risberg & Romani (2021) regarding the Swedish context.

The data collected during this study suggest that healthcare employers' expectations when hiring foreign workforce in Finland are unrealistic considering the current scenario. Data indicate that many healthcare employers expect the foreign healthcare workforce to be fully developed and prepared professionals who are able to perform the healthcare tasks on the same level and the same way local healthcare professionals would so that little to no disruption would occur in the workplace. In this sense, fluency in the local language (Finnish) is one of the main aspects considered.

One of the challenges regarding the companies' work practices is the demand of fluency in the Finnish language as a pre-requisite for the employment of professionals in the healthcare sector and it is unnegotiable as the safety of patients is of utmost importance. Fluency requirements are meant to ensure effective communication with colleagues and the official documentation writing in

the local language. However, data collected in this study show that the understanding of *adequate level of Finnish language* is still unclear and such requirements at times hinder the employability of those foreign professionals who experience difficulties in achieving the necessary fluency at an early stage of their experience in Finland. Lack of fluency in the Finnish language is identified by some experts in the field interviewed in this study as one of the main challenges regarding foreign students' skills and a plausible reason for foreign students who acquired their degree in Finland to migrate to other countries, representing a great loss for Finland.

In case foreign students and professionals do not reach the desired level of proficiency in the language by the end of their studies in Finland, data suggested two routes may open in front of them: leave Finland to a country that uses English as the language in their healthcare work environment or take less qualified jobs in the field that require lower level of fluency in Finnish, which also means lower income. Both routes were mentioned by some interviewees as a failure in the process of education of the foreign individuals who come to Finland with the intention to settle as a skilled worker in the healthcare industry. The acquisition of the fluency in the Finnish language is generally perceived as a collective responsibility involving the educational institutions, the employers, the foreign students and workforce and the Finnish society, with emphasis in the two first actors.

Adversity in adaptation to the local culture, social integration and the acquisition of a sense of belonging due to the intrinsic characteristics of the Finnish culture and society may be an additional factor contributing to the departure of foreign healthcare students and professionals. Although some effort to promote the best integration of foreign individuals have been made by authorities in various fronts, such as multicultural centers with integration activities for spouses and children spread around the country, data from the interviews suggest that a lack of cultural awareness is still present in the Finnish society and should be addressed by the government and educational institutions as well as the mitigation of prejudice of any kind. Data suggest that all stakeholders in the process of attraction and

retention of foreign talents to Finland must embrace the change and do their corresponding share of responsibility, including the foreign talents.

6.1 Applicability of the study

It is possible to affirm that the goal of this research has been fulfilled once the data collected and analyzed provided relevant knowledge to answer the main question *How to improve the employability of non-Finnish speaking foreign students in healthcare industry in South Savo and Kymenlaakso regions*. The study evidenced that the fundamental elements of the process are the acquisition of fluency in the Finnish language by foreign students and the need for employers to embrace the internationalization concept by adjusting their practices to accommodate the new reality in a way that all stakeholders benefit from the process in the end.

When addressing the three sub-questions, the study evidenced that the main challenges involving the foreign students' skills are the acquisition of the language and difficulty in integration to the Finnish work and general societies due to poor language, Finnish customary introversion and resistance to speak a language other than their own. Proactiveness in searching for integration and the attempt to speak the local language are expected from the foreign individuals by locals, transferring most of the adaptation burden to the former. Companies' expectations towards foreign workers' language skills seem to be unrealistic as the fluency in the Finnish language is gradual and usually presents some delay making the hiring of foreign workers unfeasible at early stages of their work practice. Data collected in this study show that employers must leave their spectator position and be more proactive in the process by hiring more foreign workforce and adjusting their daily work practices to facilitate the adjustment of the newcomer. Offering language tuition during working hours and introducing in the workplace specialized professionals capable of managing language, cultural and work practices matters is perceived as ideal to create an adequate environment for adaptation from both sides, local and foreign.

It is important to highlight that this study aimed to look for answers that could contribute to the development of projects conducted by the Talent Boost team pertaining to the South-Eastern Finland University of Applied Sciences (Xamk). Although Xamk's Talent Boost team does not have managerial power over language tuition and the Nursing degree *curricula*, it does have access to the professionals directly involved in the designing and management of the Nursing degree program. Such access facilitates the exercise of positive influence and collaboration between the Talent Boost team and the Nursing faculty at Xamk in elaborating successful initiatives for the retention of foreign talents.

From the knowledge the data collected in this study, it is possible to infer that more Finnish language input and immersion is needed so that the foreign students prepare themselves to be inserted in the Finnish work context the best way and as soon as possible. Considering Xamk's Talent Boost team is not an educational institution by default, it is recommended that the team complements its portfolio of activities focusing on alternative ways to help enhancing foreign workers' knowledge in the local language, namely finding local actors in South Savo and Kymenlaakso regions that already have additional ongoing language acquisition projects (preferably free-of-charge) and either promote these opportunities or invite the projects to be conducted in the university of applied sciences premises on a regular basis. The scarce availability of time and the holistic experience of the foreign students must be considered when establishing partnerships and developing projects once the foreign experience englobes another set of issues that burden their context, such as managing bureaucracy regarding their foreign status in addition to navigating the intricate new ways of the Finnish lifestyle.

Another piece of information this study gathered that might be relevant to Xamk's Talent Boost team when selecting the fronts to be addressed is the foreign workforce need for a more effective access to employers, as stated by Alho (2020) who also mentions the hidden opportunities in the job market. This piece of data shows an opportunity for Xamk's Talent Boost to develop a project where employers from both public and private sectors and foreign students from Xamk's

new Nursing program in English and Finnish are gathered to introduce their contexts to each other as well as their wants and needs so that a transparent and open discussion regarding possibilities and solutions to be implemented together takes place. As a result of such discussions, the identification of tasks, roles and responsibilities should be performed leading to a mutual agreement of the execution of such tasks as a path to future employment of foreign students. The first phase of discussions could be towards the public healthcare sector in Kymenlaakso once the representative interviewed in this study demonstrated interest in having more applications by foreign nurses.

The data collected also demonstrated that cultural awareness and social integration are subjects that should indeed be addressed actively, therefore Xamk's Talent Boost should consider projects and activities that promote foreign students' cultures and backgrounds so that the local community, starting from but not reduced to the academic environment, feels gradually more comfortable with the differences contained in the new context. Activities that favor the interaction between foreign and local students, preferably in an informal setting and a playful manner, could be the scope of some of Xamk's Talent Boost future activities. Such activities could be held either in the university's premises or in public spaces, the latter providing greater visibility of the activities by the general audience.

6.2 Evaluation of the study

This study was started by a thorough presentation and analysis of the healthcare scenario in Finland, including current challenges, new initiatives proposed by the public and private sectors as well as future trends and demands which coordinate measures to be conceived and applied at the present time. The subject is timely and of great relevance to the Finnish context as it affects every resident who uses healthcare services in the country, especially the elderly who require special care.

As one of the interviewees informed, the healthcare sector presents its own specificities and challenges, being the high level of bureaucracy and resistance to

change as well as deficiency in leadership serious barriers to improvement. This study attempted to present such challenges in a clear and straightforward manner so that the solutions to be proposed effectively promote betterment of the practices in the field, making the employability of foreign workforce a usual and positive reality.

The selection of a mixed-method, primarily qualitative supported by some quantitative elements, demonstrated to be effective in the sense that it enabled a more bilateral approach of objective and subjective support for the data collection and evaluation. Objective data collected from official and reliable sources offered precise information that was used to delineate the path the study should pursue. Subjective data gathered through the interviewing of key informants who are experts in different areas in the field provided first-hand, accurate, updated and diverse insights which, in most cases, complemented each other. On one occasion only the point of view was conflicting: the use of English in the workplace as a transition or supporting language.

Special attention was devoted to the avoidance of biased interpretation of the data or during the conduction of the individual interviews with the scope to prevent the author's own foreign background and preconceptions to contaminate the purity of the information. Specificities of each interviewee's professional background, job position, nationality and geographical location were also weighed when interpreting data so that the relativity of the perspective was added to the process of reaching conclusions.

The choice of an interpretive epistemology with an inductive approach focused on finding a subjective stance in the development of a constructivist understanding which, by default, is not definitive or absolute being open to further investigations and analyses.

6.2.1 Quality of the research

As Oliver (2021, 96) states confidence in the data collected and the conclusions reached are essential elements of any qualitative or quantitative research. In

order to ensure the accuracy of the data, validity and reliability measures must be used.

As individual interviews are composed by a great element of subjectiveness, one way to ensure the validity of the information being offered in this study was the elaboration of open-ended questions which were delivered to the interviewees in a manner void of passion or intonation in addition to a minimum of commenting from the interviewer's part. Comments were limited to the confirmation of the information offered, especially in cases when lack of fluency in English seemed to pose a threat to the accuracy of what was being said.

The reliability of the information collected was ensured by the detailed transcription of each interview. Additionally, the process of coding and grouping these codes into themes due to their reiteration facilitated the verification and validation of what was being informed via comparison, complementation and cross-checking of the data. Finally, the diversity of the key informants' profiles, albeit composed by a smaller sample, reassures both the validity and reliability of this study due to the convergence identified in the data collected from different sources.

This study compiled relevant information regarding the context of the foreign students and workers in the healthcare environment in Finland as well as common practices utilized by employers which provided a more holistic understanding on the matter instead of the individual meaning of each part.

6.3 Recommendations for future consideration

A lot was said about the importance of fluency in the Finnish language in the success of foreign workers' employment in Finland as well as the role of employers in promoting a friendlier and better prepared environment to accommodate the foreign workforce as well as the need of measures that will promote the successful integration of local and foreign individuals.

This study identified two topics that could be subject of additional investigation in the future:

- a) the development and use of technology to assist with language barriers in the healthcare setting
- b) the profile of Finnish society in the mid- and long-term future after internationalization becomes a wide-spread practice in Finland

The first topic opens possibilities for practical solutions to be implemented in the short-term whereas the second topic poses a question regarding what portfolio of languages and needs Finland will hold in the generations to come.

New technologies addressing language issues are available on a regular basis these days, many of them free of charge. However, few of them may be directed to specific instrumental language that fulfils needs of different professional categories. Finland being a world-famous hub for technological innovation, it seems that the development of tools to build this very needed bridge between languages is within an arm's reach. A *consortium* composed and funded by all the educational institutions involved in the education of non-Finnish speaking nurses with foreign background and the government could enable the development of such tool.

Also, a cross-field study for a distant future estimation of the new demographics of Finland as a result of the internationalization process currently being implemented in the country could be conducted as a basis to develop long-term policy and social planning. By doing so, Finland could avoid falling in a vicious cycle of going through the same hardships repeatedly in the future.

Finally, one insight this study can offer Xamk's Talent Boost team is that the tracking of foreign students' participation in its activities during the Nursing degree program at Xamk and the subsequent tracking of students' career paths as *alumni* may be of great relevance. The idea is an attempt to verify the existence (or not) of a correlation between students' proactiveness and

participation in activities Talent Boost offers them during their degree studies and the increase (or not) in their employability potential, functioning as a measurement of the effectiveness of activities designed by Xamk's Talent Boost team. Such tracking should be implemented at early stages of the foreign students' degree program and preferably fully record students' participation in activities from the beginning of their studies until their graduation. This study suggests that the tracking program would continue for two additional years after graduation via Xamk's *alumni* online portal where students commit to input and update all data regarding their job search activities as well as the beginning of their careers as employed healthcare professionals. Data to be input to the *alumni* portal by healthcare *alumni* would also include challenges faced by them regarding Finnish language fluency, cultural adaptation and social integration. Analysis of the data input in Xamk's *alumni* portal can also provide Xamk's Talent Boost team with greater understanding of foreign students' job search strategies and career paths which can contribute to the elaboration of more relevant and suitable activities in the future.

However, for the information collected during this process to be consistent, students' adherence and commitment to the tracking program is essential. Therefore, it is imperative that Xamk's Talent Boost elaborates a compelling marketing strategy with efficient and transparent communication that promotes students' participation in the program. The tracking of foreign students' participation in the activities designed by Xamk's Talent Boost team during their studies as well as their career paths for two years along the Nursing degree program.

7 CONCLUSIONS

This study focused on identifying ways to enhance the employability of non-Finnish speaking foreign healthcare students in the South Savo and Kymenaakso regions in Finland. Foreign healthcare students' possible challenges finding a job in Finland regarding their skills as well as companies' current practices and expectations were the primary topics investigated in this study. The context of

currently employed foreign healthcare workforce who came to Finland already as holders of a nursing degree was observed as benchmarking as nursing degree programs that focus on foreign students who are not native speakers of Finnish have not yet reached their end, therefore not having launched recently graduated nurses to the Finnish market yet.

Understanding the current healthcare scenario in Finland was defined as the starting point, bringing relevant information regarding the challenges faced in the country considering Finnish demographics (ageing population), recent legislation changes involving the provision of health care as well as data referring to nursing as a career and studies in Finland. Further investigation observed the initiatives that aim to supply the unfulfilled demand for healthcare workers, such as the launching of the Talent Boost program with focus on the attraction and retention of foreign healthcare skilled workers and students in Finland as well as improvements in immigration regulations and processes.

Data collected in this study presented various insights, being the fluency in the local language the number one factor to favor or hinder the employability of foreign workforce in Finland. Such data coincide with what Alho (2020), Dietrich *et al.* (2011) and Risberg & Romani (2021) have stated in their previous studies about the Finnish and Swedish contexts. Additionally, employers' general lack of commitment, reluctance or unpreparedness in making adjustments in their environment to accommodate the new profile of workers were three key aspects that hinder the employability of foreign workforce identified during the interviews conducted in this study. Data collected showed that employers' expectations regarding foreign healthcare workforce's fluency in the Finnish language is unrealistic and that it is also expected that employers contribute to the improvement of the foreign workforce's language fluency by providing free language tuition during working hours. However, data suggests that many healthcare employers lay the responsibility of language acquisition either on the foreign individuals themselves or the university of applied sciences who, according to them, are responsible to adequately prepare to the Finnish job market all the students who get their nursing degrees in Finland.

The main contribution this study may offer to answering this study's research question is that the development of a method, approach or system that expedites the acquisition of fluency in the Finnish language is of great need, with focus on instrumental language, meaning "language used to fulfil a need" (in this context healthcare-related language). Finland is arguably a technological hub and an educational role model worldwide, therefore finding innovative solutions that will facilitate the Finnish language learning seems easily achievable in case appropriate human and financial resources are devoted to the matter.

As this research used a reduced sample of key informants who are experts in their fields, this study brought some insights on the current scenario, challenges and possibilities when discussing the employability of foreign healthcare workforce in Finland. It is not possible to define this research as a comprehensive study on the matter with definitive solutions and further investigation can and should be conducted, preferably on an ongoing basis, to understand the development of all the recent initiatives implemented by actors in the field, including government, healthcare employers and work community, foreign students and society in general with focus on promoting the internationalization of healthcare in Finland.

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Appendix 1. Questions for the individual interviews

1. How prepared is the public/private sector to hire and manage foreign workforce to provide healthcare services to the elderly community in your region? What is missing?
2. What are some of the challenges local workforce face when working with non-Finnish speakers? Are there any specific challenges there?
3. By observing foreign workforce who are reasonably fluent in Finnish and are currently employed in the healthcare sector in your region, what have they done to reach their language fluency?
4. In your experience, what is the actual minimum level of Finnish language required to safely practice nursing in Finland?
5. Has any serious threat of work inefficiency been identified because of foreign workforce's lack of language fluency?
6. Has any impact already been identified after the recent changes in legislation regarding immigration to Finland have been implemented? If so, can you name one or a few?
7. In your view, what is the role of educational institutions (UASs) in enhancing successful outcomes regarding employability of foreign talents in the healthcare sector in Finland?
8. Do you know of any Talent Boost initiatives (in general, not only Xamk's)? (How have they contributed to the employability of international workforce in the healthcare sector in Finland?)
9. If you had total authority on the matter, what would you do to improve employability of international workforce in the healthcare sector in your region?
10. Do you know of any initiative to improve local workforce's level of English in the healthcare sector in your region as well as public services?

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