

Interviews on experiences of international members of Tampere universities



**Marisa Honkanen &
International members of Tampere universities-working group**
Derek Ruez, Vesna Holubek, Mila Bujić, Zsuzsa Millei

CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Life in Finland	2
Career and working life	4
Creation of an equitable community and inclusive environment	8
Trade unions	10

INTRODUCTION

This report summarizes the results of interviews with international members of Tampere universities in Finland. There were 13 interviews conducted during May and June 2022. The interviews are a follow-up to [the survey conducted in 2021](#), and the purpose was to understand further the experiences of international members of the Tampere universities' community. The participants are international researchers, teachers, and staff members who expressed interest in participating in the interviews. Participating in the interviews was voluntary and not connected to participation in the survey. Some interviewees might have participated in the survey, but the interviews have not asked the participants to disclose this information because the survey and interview responses were not connected in the analysis. The interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analysed using a qualitative content analysis method.

The themes raised in the interviews complement the results of the survey and further illustrate the diversity of experiences of living and working in Finland. It is evident that there are important issues affecting universities in general, and some of these issues have additional effects on international members. For example, short fixed-term work contracts present additional challenges for people whose residence permits are issued according to their work contracts.

Overall, there are a number of shared experiences among the participants, but also significant differences. While these 13 interviews cannot fully represent the diverse experiences of international members of Tampere universities, this research can and does productively point toward common obstacles and persisting challenges that are important for the university community to address. This report outlines the results of the interviews, and our aim is soon to give more concrete recommendations and suggestions to Tampere universities based on the results of these interviews and the survey.

This report is organised into four sections, i.e. four main themes identified in the analysis of the interview data. The first section presents interviewees' experiences related to their life in Finland in general. The second section focuses on their career and working life, while their other experiences related to working in the university community are outlined in the third section. The fourth section discusses their experiences with trade unions.

LIFE IN FINLAND

Participants discussed a wide range of considerations and reasons to come to Finland. The reasons to come included marriage, job offers, or previous experiences in Finland. For some interviewees emigrating somewhere was the main intention, and the choice to come to Finland was secondary. They also discussed needing to take into account their partner's job search, the financial implications of moving, cultural fit, and job opportunities in English.

Overall, making a life in Finland can be a complex and multifaceted process. One interviewee described the importance of an individual effort to fit in, and many interviewees recognised that prior experience of living and working abroad helped in the adaptation process. Possible family ties, social relations, and interaction with supportive people eased the process of making a life in Finland, although there have also been some difficulties in building social relations with locals.

"I had a big shock about how antisocial Finns are and how hard it is to make friends here and how formalities to – simply invite somebody over since we have a slice of cake at home so that was a bit more difficult." Participant 11 (P11)

Furthermore, interviewees often came to Finland with their partners, and the experiences of their partners were often raised as a concern. Important challenges included a lack of social and professional networks and limited language knowledge, but there have also been positive experiences. For example, one participant discussed when a partner attended the Hidden Gems program organised by Tampere University to support the integration of family members.

Quite often interviewees were generally satisfied with their situation in Finland despite language-related considerations and challenges in understanding how different bureaucratic systems and processes work in Finland. Interviewees who expressed more negative experiences, such as discrimination or exclusion, shared these experiences in the context of the university, so these experiences will be discussed further in the next section.

Work-life balance and safety were especially appreciated in life in Finland, although issues with navigating unfamiliar or partially inaccessible processes were also raised. Sometimes issues regarding bureaucracy were occurring only at the beginning, but some systems or practices could continue to be unclear far longer. One interviewee noted that this lack of clarity can restrict the usage of services meant for internationals. Therefore, it would be necessary to specify and allocate appropriate services better.

"The process is so complicated, so unclear. First of all, we can't understand what are given to us, what are offered to us. And second of all, how we can make the best use of those services. – Those services should be used up better. It means that more communication and more targeted to the people with appropriate services. It's very scattered. We can't find them and [...] we rarely can benefit. So, it means that those resources [should] be allocated efficiently." P1

Besides understanding how processes work in Finland, there are also language-related issues. Participants perceived that it is possible to get by in Finland without any Finnish language skills and to take care of different practicalities in English. However, it can be difficult to know whether some public services are available in English or not. Occasionally there may also be situations where English service is supposed to be provided but the insufficient level of English language skills of the customer service employees might make the appointments challenging. Also, job-seeking challenges were experienced at the beginning due to language skills. Someone even changed their work sector to ease finding more job opportunities in English. There are widely varying perspectives and experiences on languages, especially within the universities which are explored in more detail in the next section.

CAREER AND WORKING LIFE

Regarding career and working life, interviewees discussed, for example, work practices and working conditions, their career progression, work induction, language and internationalisation policies, and the availability of support. For instance, interviewees have various thoughts on internationalisation within Tampere universities. The importance of defining what internationalisation means specifically for the university was often expressed.

Some aspects of the university structures and practices were particularly appreciated such as trust, autonomy, agency, and flexibility. Additionally, the support received from immediate colleagues is valued. At the same time, many participants emphasized how institutionalised support, such as the flexibility of language usage or support for equal working conditions, is lacking.

"I think the structures in general, there is often this case where it's believed all your colleagues will help you or so, and I think this is wrong. The structure of the institution is who has to make sure that it is taken care of, that the international [member] has the conditions to work in parallel conditions as the locals." P11

Although interviewees often received support from immediate colleagues, some noted that there is a lack of understanding of what support is needed, and delayed help might occur. Many interviewees also noted that they did not receive an appropriate induction for work.

Additionally, support for using English at work is limited, and it can be difficult to find university instructions and guidelines in English. This situation has led some interviewees to manage work without Finnish skills by themselves. Four interviewees described that they are regularly making their own effort to translate information from Finnish to English by themselves, and one interviewee even went through Finnish research data without any help. Some interviewees expressed this to be a burden for their work, but some people perceived it as "just a thing to do" as one interviewee explained.

"I found a way to work around this. I understand that I am a minority in a country of majority Finnish speakers, so I understand that I have to find workarounds for certain things. – I've managed to be okay without any kind of support. – I don't really complain, you know, it is what it is and until I learn Finnish, it's just normal. It's just how it is." P6

Generally, language skills play a huge role in the experiences of working life, and there are various perspectives to consider regarding languages. For example, two of the interviewees are working at the university in disciplines where Finnish language skills are a requirement to access these specific working fields.

"It's not only a good thing to know Finnish, but it's a must. Otherwise, you simply can't work or you will be very insufficient. You will be absolutely outsider. You won't be able to follow up on the events on the communication, simply. Once again, I said that it's not something, it's not a benefit, it's not a good thing, but it's a must. You have to speak Finnish. – when I joined the university, I already spoke Finnish and it had been my working language for almost four years. Although I'm not fluent in Finnish, I can say because it's still very new language for me, but I had a feeling that if I had not spoken Finnish, I would have never ever been able to join, first of [all] our university and second of all, to be part of it." P1

Language issues are multifaceted and thus include various perspectives to consider. Some of the interviewees are fluent or advanced in Finnish, and some of them experienced fewer language-related challenges. These interviewees expressed how the Finnish language eases many aspects of their lives and increases accessibility in many aspects. At the same time, all of them emphasised how important it is to note differing circumstances for learning.

"However, you know that there are so many other factors in people's lives, and also so many of the things depend on their status at the university, so that affects a lot their motivation. For example, as a full-time teacher and having a permanent contract, of course I would be motivated because I know that I have long-term relationships with this university. And I'm motivated in a way to learn the language. – 'Cause I know that probably I'll be here long. But those people who don't have the same situation as me, they are here on temporary contracts, they are here just thinking that they are here for a shorter time, they have short contracts, or they have two year of study time and so on." P2

Those interviewees whose Finnish language skills are advanced often started their learning as master's students or they have used Finnish in their previous work roles. It is significant to recognize that learning Finnish might not be easily accessible to a staff member. Results indicate that interviewees are generally willing to learn Finnish, but they face several challenges and restrictions in their learning. The challenges include for example limited access to Finnish courses, lack of resources, restricted possibilities to practice, and time limitations. One interviewee described their willingness to learn Finnish in relation to their workload and precarity of academic work.

"I mean it's absolutely clear that if I wanna stay here I have to learn Finnish and it's also clear that I have a 100 % job so, there is a bit of a mismatch then. And again, I have to say that my boss has been very explicit telling me I can put Finnish learning hours on my work plan. So, you know, she's very supportive but I mean, you know how academic work works. It's not you [are], like, checking in and out. There are things I need to get done and they don't get less just because my boss allowed me to study Finnish. So it's just really hard to find time for that." P7

Additionally, it seems that the university as a whole does not have a common stance toward policies related to work allocation and language learning, which is problematic in itself. For example, some interviewees are allowed to use working hours to learn Finnish and some are advised to use their free time for learning instead.

Most of the interviewees commented that a new language policy cannot include just abstract implementations, but it needs dedicated resources, time, support, and effort to be implemented which currently they did not see as occurring. There are polarized experiences on how language policies should be implemented, but common suggestions included having concrete and clear guidelines regarding what language is used in which situations and dedicating significant resources to these efforts. Multilingualism is a multifaceted issue that cannot be addressed only from one point of view. It clearly requires resources and, as some interviewees pointed out, a lot of dialogue and multilateral discussion.

"It's not only about foreign staff learning Finnish, but it's also about Finnish language staff, sometimes struggling with English also during the meetings, not everyone feels comfortable saying things in English, so there is also this side of the coin. So, it's a dilemma and I think we need a lot of dialogue and a lot of, somehow, togetherness. And communication, a lot of communication is needed so that first of all people get to know each other. So that they have this trust first of all and then they sort out the language barriers. This is my opinion. I think the human touch is always it, it comes the first and then the language." P2

Language issues are also connected to concerns about career progression. Many of the interviewees were concerned about the possibility to progress toward higher positions in their careers without being fluent in Finnish. One interviewee for example has faced comments about how it might be challenging to progress further without sufficient Finnish language skills:

"I guess the one thing that worries me a little bit, it comes back again to the languages, is how accessible and inclusive it will be for foreigners at higher levels of management. For example, it's been mentioned already a few times that maybe I'll be the next head of unit and then some say yeah, but she doesn't speak Finnish or you don't speak Finnish, you have to learn Finnish and so it could be that I also cannot advance if I, that's what I wanted. I may not want to, but when there is this upper ceiling for internationals 'cos of the language and because of the operating language still being Finnish. – So that does worry me a little bit that, not just for me, but for others in the community that – how inclusive are we really when it's already not that inclusive gender-wise." P5

As seen in the example above, the concern is not confined only to language skills but also gender is mentioned as playing a role in career progression. It is important to note that there are several intersecting factors that might challenge international members progressing further in their careers, such as gender, ethnicity, class, and disabilities. Furthermore, even with advanced language skills, it may be challenging to progress in their careers. For example, one interviewee discussed their own experience of career progression as follows:

"I have a feeling that maybe the career doesn't progress, as fast as it could, like I feel for example in my case I started doing a job that maybe I was overqualified for, but it was completely in Finnish, so I thought that okay for me, it's like my middle ground like maybe I'm overqualified, but then also you could think that it's not very challenging, but it's challenging for me because it's in Finnish. But then I was maybe thinking that, or I was more like looking at other colleagues that were Finnish that maybe started in similar place as me, but they are progressing so much faster than what I am, I felt, and I think that a lot of that was maybe due to language skills. Yes, because my Finnish is not perfect, but also maybe a little bit of, how to say it, like maybe I have to do, I felt as an international I have to do more work to prove myself." P10

Language-related issues can cause people to be excluded, face indirect discrimination and challenge their active role in participating in university life and decision-making, which is discussed further next.

CREATION OF AN EQUITABLE COMMUNITY AND INCLUSIVE ENVIRONMENT

The participants described various challenges regarding their participation in decision-making processes, developing policies, and their active participation in meetings. Language issues were recognized as the most restricting element. Many of the interviewees emphasized how they are excluded from participation simply because of their language skills or access to information.

"There's just these few things that are becoming awkward, mainly just because of language and it's the, awkw-awkward is the word I think, it's when we have to do group activities and then I always have to say I'm sorry, I don't speak Finnish and it's really embarrassing and awkward, that makes me not want to go to meetings or take part and things like that." P3

"I also found it really difficult for any international student or international member of the university to participate in the organization or the development of those international-oriented policies or surveys or committees -- I send them an email that was probably last year saying I would really like to participate because I bring that experience and I would like to bring and facilitate that. But it was, I mean the committee was, it's completely formed by only Finnish." P4

"Often it's said at the beginning that at the end we will have some part in English, but that, the meetings end without that part in English happening so most meetings at the faculty level are in Finnish and therefore they limit, they exclude a lot of people already that do not speak, even if you speak a bit of Finnish until you reach the level where you actually speak, that you actually speak good enough to understand what's in a professional meeting. It takes quite a long time and, and the truth is, who, who doesn't speak Finnish well in office is excluded from understanding what is happening, and then being asked to be in a meeting is just a waste of time. – I think whatever, it's the common need of a foreigner, it should be of the foreigners should be taken in, in consideration in creating structures that can support us to develop our work in similar conditions as the nationals. And of course, I know there is many other problems, but from my point of view this, the issue of the language, has been the biggest one. I think I would participate much more and feel compelled to participate more if I could understand what's the discussion is really [about]." P11

The results are revealing experiences of indirect discrimination, biases, difficulty in being aware of information, exclusion, a lack of diversity in decision-making, and a lack of a sense of belonging.

"I have this position in this European project which was funded by this externally grant, so I was not part of any project in the faculty, or I was not involved in any faculty teaching or I have never been involved in that, so I think I was very, kind of, excluded. So, it was just me and my project and the money that came with it. But I didn't have any type of relation besides my supervisor, so also because of that, I think it has been, or my main issue maybe it has been, that it has been quite secluded and quite lonely, so it has been very difficult to get to know people and be part of the community of researcher[s] [...] and feeling that okay, I have connection and I, my work is important or you know, it's valued and so forth, so I think that has been for me the main challenge." P9

"You can see that there are, there's a layer of wanting to be heard that is the core aspect of not being listened to, of not being acknowledged. That is probably the key thing that can come from my experience. I will graduate hopefully in two years or something, and who will know? – It should not be as meaningless to be part of Tampere university. – I mean it's really, it takes deep, it really goes into other aspects of, there's almost very limited sense of belonging and not just because of being based abroad, but because of the lack of outreach and engagement and relations between the university and the students." P4

"But then also I have had other experiences that are not very positive of people assuming certain things or thinking that maybe I'm not like a full worker that I'm maybe just helping the team or supporting in some things, but not really like seeing me as an equal, so I think I have had both positive and negative things, and one thing I've noticed is that when there are these little things like certain comment or it's not something that you can go and report, you know, that I, I was discriminated by this person on this day because they are just comments [...] they are not so big that you can complain and you can like, you know, tell someone. But those are things that anyway are affecting like the psychological well-being of people." P10

Some of the issues are easier to address than others, but it is necessary to strive for the creation of an equitable community and inclusive environment. The participants emphasised how important it is to add diversity and wider representations to decision-making processes at all levels. We need commitment and concrete actions to create a safe community for everyone. For instance, it is suggested to offer low threshold forums that could enable possibilities to share all kinds of experiences among the community members.

It is important to acknowledge the different circumstances and challenges that people face within the universities. As part of this, it is also important to remember that international members themselves have widely varying positions, experiences, and interests. For example, one interviewee is completing their doctoral research abroad and another interviewee is working at Tampere university as a research visitor and their specific experiences differ from other international members of the universities. In addition, the needs of international members of the administration and support staff are not often addressed by the university. Respectful, participatory, and inclusive practices are necessary to create an equitable and safe community for everyone.

TRADE UNIONS

Some interviewees have been receiving support from trade unions, for example during the unemployment period. However, there seems to be a lack of awareness of trade unions' services besides an unemployment fund, although even in relation to the earnings-related unemployment funds, there was some uncertainty. Many interviewees did not know about trade unions' existence at the beginning of their work with Tampere universities, and some are still lacking information. Moreover, conceptions of trade unions might differ in their country of origin which can affect their decision to join.

"I have no understanding what all the things they are doing there. The only thing what I know is that if I am unemployed at some point, they pay me some kind of some, some part of my salary or something like that, but I have no idea how can they help me." P1

"In my mind, the word trade union sounds like bad because so I guess that's subconsciously why I haven't explored it or why I haven't felt the need. But that's probably part of my to-do-list, things that I should [do]." P13

Other reasons for not being a member are the costs of membership fees or perceiving that one has no need for the trade union services or has difficulties reaching them. Providing clear information on the activities and services offered by trade unions might increase their attractiveness among the international members of Finnish universities.

"If I have more information, something, just I wanted to know a bit more and my contract is only one year left so like this clear information, clear guidance, how to apply and what's the advantages of, how much we have to pay for that and so that I can make a better decision." P8

Reasons for becoming a union member included receiving a recommendation from others to join, having access to working life support, and seeing the union membership as a matter of principle and worker's rights. There are difficulties in language usage, for example, some of the trade unions operate mainly in Finnish and there is not enough information in English. Therefore, it would be important that trade unions acknowledge international members better in their work.

"It would be good that there would be more accessibility for foreigners and maybe some feeling that we exist. [...] It's just everything in Finnish and if you don't get it, you can send us an email. Sure, they will answer you in English, but it's not really accessible." P10

It is important to note that the described experiences refer to different trade unions, and they should not be connected to any specific trade union itself.

Interviewees expressed their lack of knowledge of trade unions' scope, but they hope for more involvement from them. The most common suggestions are to receive direct contact and include trade unions in work induction so that people become more aware of them.

"I think it would be a good idea to make a kind of regular emailing or, anyway, if the trade union will be aware that someone arrives to the university for this or that time, it would be good at least to inform this person that there is a trade union here." P12

Furthermore, trade unions could assist in advancing the university's policies, and they could be involved in promoting inclusive practices. Other support interviewees are hoping to receive from trade unions include the following: networking support, early career support, surveys and investigations on locals' and internationals' salary gaps and career progression, and support putting university reforms into practice. Furthermore, interviewees hope they are acknowledged better in the unions. This could include both facilitating more diverse representation in positions of trust in the unions and more attention to the interests and aspirations of international members across their activities.

Copyright CC-BY-NC

**Tampere University Association of Researchers and Teachers
&
Tampere University chapter of The Finnish Union of University Professors
2022 Tampere**
