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Lapland UAS to enhance local employers' international competence

Riikka Partanen, Master of Philosophy, Lecturer of Finnish language, Lapland University of Applied Sciences

Niall Mullins, Bachelor of Journalism, Independent Translator

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Introduction

As Finns are ageing and the birth rate is falling, the working age population must be increased to preserve Finnish society (Government programme for Finland's sustainable growth 2021). In public discussion of worker migration, the migrant workers themselves are often seen as the core of the issue; they either have to arrive in the country already possessing skills which are in demand in Finnish working life, or upon their arrival they have to actively want to upskill according to the needs of the Finnish job market. The idea in the government's programme is also to "streamline" the process of work- or education-based immigration and to "target" training specifically at immigrants. Finnish universities, including Lapland University of Applied Sciences, each year try to attract foreign students to their international training programmes in the hope that, upon completion of their studies, these highly educated professionals will stay and become a part of Finnish and Lappish working life and local community. However, according to the Centre for Statistics (2020) more university graduates are leaving Finland than are immigrating. Nevertheless, during the application stage most foreign students consider the possibility of finding employment in the country of study important (ks. EUROSTUDENT VII 2017).

Societal and local reception

Societal statements often exhibit a perspective that assumes immigrants actively want to respond to the needs of Finnish society and want to settle down and integrate in Finland. To enable this, and to realise the government's objectives, it would be important to consider how the societal and local reception in Finland could be intentionally improved. The National Board of Education has responded to the challenge with projects aimed at early childhood education, primary and secondary education (cf. eg. OSKU, KUPERA). There are also many projects and programs promoting cultural competence and the employment of foreigners in progress at Finnish universities (cf. eg. Kulttuuriosaaja, Integra). The aim is therefore to prepare and guide children, young people and future highly educated working life professionals to a pluralistic and multicultural working life. However, the missing piece could be Finns in working life, whose studies and professional development have not included study units aimed at language and cultural awareness. Could this be one of the reasons why even educated immigrants and international professionals who graduated from Lapland University of Applied Sciences, for example, have had a challenging time finding employment in Lapland or Finland in general? There are thousands of highly educated people with a foreign background in Finland who are unemployed or in unskilled jobs (Sustainable population development Finland 2020; CIMO 2014; 2016).

Could Lapland UAS alleviate labour shortages and the situation of workers and companies by taking responsibility for the international competence of Lapland's organisations and companies as in-service training? In this article, we describe what kind of in-service training that strengthens international competence could be offered by Lapland UAS to experts in various fields who are already in working life.

Background and purpose of international education

The international competence of Finnish companies and work communities varies. However, Finnish, and hopefully also Lappish, working life will continue to internationalise, and international competence will soon be required, regardless of sector. By providing companies with in-service training in international competence, they could be supported in receiving and engaging the international workforce as part of the company and its work community. Training could increase the willingness and courage of companies to employ international professionals

and ensure the longevity of the international workforce in the Lapland region. At the same time, it could promote equal treatment of international professionals and the readiness of companies to serve an ever-internationalising customer base.

The goal of the training aimed at supplementing international competence, independent of the field, would be to build a culturally sensitive and hospitable work environment for the participating organisation and to increase the language and cultural awareness of professionals. The training would be tailored to the needs of the organisation and could have its own themes meant for supervisors. The main purpose of in-service training would be to educate participants that internationalisation is a two-way process; in addition to the immigrant, Finns are also active players. In-service training would consist of three separate themes: 1) Values 2) Language and Cultural Awareness and 3) a Culturally Sensitive Work Environment.

International competence theme 1: Values

The values theme supports the harmonisation of different values, worldviews, and practices. It considers the relationship between the organisation's values and Finnish culture and values. The theme deals with Finnish society and culture through an international lens, focusing, for example, on social values and norms that differ from the perspective of another culture, such as the perception of sociality, Finnish speech style and gender equality. Participants are given the keys to perceive and understand cultural differences. In addition, the participants' own cultural orientation is clarified and a desire to increase cultural will is created.

International competence theme 2: Language and Cultural Awareness

The core of the Language and Cultural Awareness theme is multilingualism, professional language skills and verbal and nonverbal communication in the organisation. The goal of the theme is that the participant be willing and able to interact verbally and non-verbally with colleagues from different cultures. The theme presents organisational multilingualism as an opportunity and resource rather than a threat. The aim of the theme is to build a foundation for equal and respectful cultural encounters as well as a goal-setting and feedback culture in the organisation in question. The purpose is to prevent possible cultural challenges and to generate ideas on how the work community can support the development of a new international employee's Finnish language skills and support multilingualism in the work environment.

International competence theme 3: Culturally Sensitive Work Environment

The aim of the theme dealing with a culturally sensitive work environment is to develop work community skills from the perspective of one's own organisation and work community. At its heart are encounters with other people and the manifestations of hospitality. Hospitality includes the idea of self-initiative and an understanding of the impact of one's own activities on others and the work environment. It is important for participants to understand that they represent their organisation and should instill in themselves a desire to welcome a new employee. It should be reflected in their verbal and nonverbal behaviour as well as their attitude. In the work community, communication or non-communication has consequences for bilateral action. Immediate consideration for a new international employee is the first step in conscious and appropriate commitment to the workplace. The aim is to understand that in the international work community, the responsibility for the integration of all members of the work community is shared.

Conclusion

Will the in-service training package for international competence become a new socially significant sales product for Lapland University of Applied Sciences? By refining and developing the educational structure described in this article, Lapland UAS would have the opportunity to be at the forefront of building a new, socially influential and relevant in-service training offering that supports the reception of international labour. In order for Lapland and the whole of Finland to increase their traction and retention power and social receptivity towards international professionals, the idea of international competence and especially hospitality should be extended to all sectors of society. It is also possible to present international competence as part of a global understanding, which includes acting responsibly and effectively in multicultural organisations. It would be important to successfully brand in-service training in international competence so that Finnish and local companies understand its significance and necessity for Finnish working life.

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