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## Culture Bumb to make students feel home in Lapland

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### Introduction

International mobility and degree programs enable students and staff members to acquire valuable competence and experience. Unfortunately, in reality, the international students often do not seem to be given the chance to actually get acquainted with local Finnish people, as they instead opt to interact and experience local sights with other non-native students in the end. This is, naturally, valuable as well, but does not serve the need to attract international talent to stay in Lapland as a region. Therefore, the Lapland University of Applied Sciences needs to take care of the availability of skilled employees and of creating environments that allow for inter-cultural interactions to be more accessible.

Moreover, COVID-19 has had effects - some long-lasting - on the students' wellbeing, and both the Finnish and international students have expressed the need to meet their peers face to face and socialize, also "unofficially". During spring 2021, Lapland UAS has started a new initiative called *Culture Bump* to promote and celebrate the integration of diverse cultures within the student body: the Culture Bump activities are planned by two UAS students - the so-called *Bump Mods* standing for "moderators" -, and are targeted to new and old Lapland UAS students, called *Bumpers*, on the initiative's official web pages. Being a "Bump Mod",

thus moderating and creating the experiences for others, is also a possibility for UAS students to carry out their practical training, which is a part of 3,5 year Tourism and International Business degree programs.

## Objectives and significance of Culture Bump activities

The main objective of the Culture Bump initiative is to make planners and participants from different countries and cultures interact with one another – with the added benefit and goal of learning more about others' costumes and broadening one's horizons. Culture Bump is meant to unite students who might be feeling lonely, to stimulate them into wanting to get back into face-to-face socialization practices, and even to help get important international or multicultural contacts for future careers and endeavours. The initiative and its diverse activities create a useful medium through which new students can get to know each other, older students and their study location better, also while providing opportunities to find new hobbies and learn from the experiences they are subjected to, or experiences told by their new-found friends and mentors.

The students taking part in these activities organized by the planners and moderators are thus tasked with joining events - both on large and small scale - with an open mind, a hunger for knowledge and an interest for other cultures and languages, but without the added pressure of having the activities be directly school-related. Moreover, despite English being the main language used during the activities and events, for both accessibility reasons and overall fairness, the “bumpers” are more than welcome to spark conversation or entertain others by talking or explaining little facts about and in their native language. After all, it is known that the saying goes “culture can shape your view of the world”, meaning that our culture and the language we speak more comfortably as people from different backgrounds, is directly related to how we see, interact with, and experience our surroundings.

It is also taking into account what above mentioned that the Culture Bump activities are planned and implemented, as social interaction in multicultural ways perfectly captures the essence and nowadays dire need of initiatives like the one written about in this article to become more used in international studying places and settings such as Lapland UAS.

## Marketing Culture Bump

When introducing a new initiative, creating branding and marketing practices specifically for the target audience is crucial, thus it was decided that a wide range of tools and channels would be used to get as much attention for Culture Bump as possible. The target group is approximately 18- to 35-year-old Lapland UAS students from a variety of cultural backgrounds and study fields.

To market Culture Bump events, common social media applications supposedly used by the target group were applied, e.g. Instagram, Discord and possibly Facebook, as well as common word-of-mouth practices were carried out on campus by the Bump Mods via flyers and other visual aids. Instagram was chosen as the primary online marketing platform, as it is where Lapland UAS students mostly tend to get their news for upcoming social events. The visual-based application seemed to be the most suitable channel for the marketing of Culture Bump, mainly because the events consist of multi-sensory experiences, which can be best shown through videos and photos and other striking imagery.

Moreover, following the theme of visual-based marketing, old-fashioned email newsletters and patches to be added to students' overalls or items of clothing were used to get people interested in the activities throughout the autumn semester. The patch would be given to those who attended a set number of events and it would specifically be used to spark conversation between students who see it on their peers, thus ensuring that more people would know about the events under the Culture Bump initiative.



PHOTO 1. Culture Bump patch, designed by the Bump Mods.

## Variety of Culture Bump Events

For students, especially those who are not local to Rovaniemi, it has been difficult to form bonds and make connections during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to a study on friendship development by Becker & Craig (2009), the most effective way to form casual and close friendships is to participate together in activities that one enjoys. Yet, events that would otherwise allow students to participate in said activities have largely been cancelled during the last year and a half, thus robbing people of crucial experiences and socialization. Therefore, in the interest of inclusivity and to promote cultural exchange among Finnish and international students, Culture Bump offers a variety of events hoping to cater to different preferences and bring out different cultural aspects. During the autumn semester in 2021, Culture Bump offered both online and live events, consisting of game-based activities, food-based ones and even culture and arts-based events.

### **Game based events**

The intention with game-based events was to create an environment which promotes laughter and easy conversations, allowing students to get to know each other on a different level than they would in school or through conventional small-talk. Board Games, with their many genres, allow students to interact with each other's cultural backgrounds and viewpoints rather than just discuss them in a formal manner. Participants might apply strategies, interpret images or approach problems in a way that seems unusual to others, which might open other player's eyes to "a different way of doing things". Games also offer a safe environment for mistakes or misunderstandings to occur without fear of judgement.

### **Food based events**

As far as food-based events go, "love goes through the stomach" is a popular cliché. When it comes to cultural exchange it does hold true: for most cultures food and eating are already social events and unlike history, social norms, or formal types of art it is interactive and easy to understand. As an example, there was an international food day where people from different cultures were invited as team leaders or "head chefs" for one course of a meal: the idea was that each course would be from a different country and that participants would create the meal together under the supervision of the team leader and celebrate both their culture via food and food accessibility in different countries.

### **Arts based events**

Through the Culture Bump events, there was a plan to promote artforms that are popular and easy to understand, but still convey a unique viewpoint. Most people enjoy music and many people have very particular opinions about what constitutes good music. Music allows people to experience a sense of belonging and kinship as they recognise themselves or their own emotions in songs. In order to explore music from other cultures, the Culture Bump events included trivia nights related to music, as well as culturally diverse background music at all our events.

### **Online Events**

Additionally, in the interest of inclusion and offering as varied events as possible, Culture Bump offered online game nights and movie nights. These types of events, held on online platforms, allow students who still feel nervous about socializing in person, or who generally prefer to socialize online, to feel included and understood, as the platform also enables them to make connections through their preferred channels.

### **Conclusion: Solidifying Culture Bump as a meaningful part of Lapland UAS student culture**

After the pilot autumn semester, the Culture Bump initiative is still in its infancy. The goal is that the Culture Bump initiative would continue in the following semesters and even spread to new campuses in the Lapland region, possibly as part of practical training or in some other means. Even when COVID-19 is no longer a challenge for live student events to take place, there will still be a need for long-lasting international initiatives that provide a culturally-sensitive environment with a common language, English. For the future, marketing and solidifying the brand-essence of the Culture Bump events will stay as the main challenge: as the initiative is not yet nested under any existing organizations, there is still a lack of recognition among students. This means that, in order for the events to gain recognition, it may be necessary to get buy-in from key figures in the respective study programs at Lapland UAS, such as tutors or social leaders.

Another challenge these events face is the current divide between Finnish and non-Finnish students. It is noted and experienced that common language is the key for everyone to express

themselves and feel they can voice their issues and opinions and fully participate in conversations and events. In Culture Bump, the participants - both Bumpers and Bump Mods, operate in a common language to try and make everyone feel welcome, no matter where they come from and what they study. This way it is possible for students to create lifelong friendships, establish international and regional contacts, and get to know their new home region, Lapland, better.

To face the aforementioned challenge, in the future Lapland UAS has to provide a decent budget to arrange irresistible Culture Bump events - so both Finnish and international students cannot wait to participate in the next event! Additionally, to make the international students feel at home in Lapland, Lapland UAS has also increased the number of Finnish language study units in international degree programs, allowing foreign students to improve their Finnish skills. Nevertheless, for this particular initiative to continue and gain recognition in the future, it may be necessary to focus on the English-speaking study programs while continuing to advertise events campus-wide.

## References

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