



Karelia University of Applied Sciences
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North Karelia in Development

Analyzing Regional Progress

Case Study: ELY-Centre

Saúl Hernández Morales

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Tikkarinne 9
80200 JOENSUU
+358 13 260 600 (switchboard)

Author
Saúl Hernández Morales

Title
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Abstract
This paper discusses the past historical context of some of North Karelian society's most relevant issues and how these give clear guidelines for authorities regarding where to focus their attention and establishing a positive trend for future projects to follow and execute based on the results of this thesis.

The integration of migrant populations has always been a topic of long discussion in Finland, especially in North Karelia. This makes addressing the topic in a productive manner where everyone participates actively a bit harder. That is why different organizations from different working areas have come together under the lead of ELY-Centre to get hands-on work.

Different specialists in the field have participated and still participate in different efforts that aim at dealing with the situation caused by the aging population and the struggles of integrating international talent into the local communities. ELY-Centre is leading one of the largest projects, which is one of the most ambitious to dramatically face topical problems in North Karelia.

A survey serves to analyze how well the organizations have worked together and how they can possibly work together better in the future.

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1 Introduction

The integration of migrant populations has long been a focal point in the discourse surrounding societal issues in Finland, particularly in the region of North Karelia (ELY-Centre, 2024., Talent Hub. 2024). Addressing this topic effectively requires active participation from all stakeholders, a challenge compounded by the region's unique historical context. These efforts involve experts collaborating to confront the ramifications of an aging population and enhance the integration of international talent into local communities (Kotorov, Krasylnykova, Demel, & Blaschke 2023a, 37-50).

The significance of addressing integration and societal challenges in North Karelia extends far beyond its immediate borders. By fostering collaboration among diverse stakeholders and leveraging the expertise of specialists, these endeavors not only address immediate needs but also lay the groundwork for sustainable, equitable development in North Karelia and beyond. As such, this thesis seeks to not only analyze past efforts but also show pathways for future action, highlighting the pivotal role of regional initiatives in shaping the trajectory of societal progress (Kotorov, Krasylnykova, Demel, & Blaschke 2023b, 68-76).

In this thesis, the main focus of work is a collaboration project with ELY-Centre (ELY-Keskus in Finnish) and many other parties to compile and analyze data about North Karelia and its historical position within Finland. This is accomplished by considering a number of key parameters that will help to determine the severity of the issue and how to best deal with it. Several stakeholders are participating in this project led by ELY-Centre.

The purpose of this thesis is to provide valuable insight into the planning participants of the WiNK project and how their collaboration has helped ELY-Centre to properly construct a project that both meets the common desired objectives of all the stakeholders of this project. The purpose also includes delivering important knowledge to the all the organizations I the author worked with (but especially to ELY-Centre) precisely about cooperation between

organizations and governmental institutions that are currently aiming to address essential topics and subjects for North Karelia.

The content in this paper presented develops addressing the planned methods to be used for the creation and application of the survey in the interviews, as well as ethical considerations for them, passing later to the historical context of why the WiNK project makes sense even from earlier times and how the premise for it was built over time. A proper and detailed explanation of the project's contents and characteristics is also necessary for this. One should take care not to miss the relevant complementary projects that already exist or are going to be in North Karelia.

Some of the last elements of this thesis use and base off of the compulsory information that is needed for the creation of the survey and the sample. The implementation of the survey and the compilation of its results lastly gives way to bring about a concise conclusion of all the acquired data through interviews and research. This helps to provide with key recommendations for both ELY-Centre and future interested parties in embarking in a similar campaign.

The WiNK Project in which everyone collaborated applies special importance to further developing the skills and know-how of the specialists and actors currently in key roles regarding immigrant integration into Finnish society and educational services as a whole.

By firstly providing a clear structure and informing of the utilized methods for data gathering the topic will begin to take shape in light of the intended analysis. Later, a few necessary considerations will be made to clarify the contents here. This will be addressed throughout this paper.

A pivotal element for this analysis will be the theoretical research and development of the initial arguments. This is key to give way for the second part of the thesis, which consists of the practical side of the discussed topic. This is namely surveying and sampling individuals who have participated in WiNK and who hold significant opinions and importance for the completion of the project. These individuals also have vital knowledge and experience needed to

accurately depict the main economical and demographical issues currently in force in North Karelia and adjacent areas, and how to efficiently deal with such subjects. For this a clear contextual depiction of the matter at hand is also essential to better understand the need for the project, the methods used in the planning, and the plan of action in case of its subsequent funding.

To better understand the situation of North Karelia and to provide a clearer premise for the WiNK project to exist, a section for a more detailed explanation of the issues that have historically been found in the region and the ones that are still relevant today will be created as part of the structural literature.

The surveying and sampling aspects of this thesis will mainly focus on the responsible experts in charge of providing their expertise for the planning of the project and their direct collaboration with ELY-Centre. It is then essential to mention that the exact number of total direct participants and other parties that are related in some way is bigger than that of the number of people that were interviewed. This will be addressed later in more detail in the sampling section of this thesis.

The construction of the conclusion is based primarily on a compilation of the data acquired throughout the entire process of this thesis. This is an analysis that makes a more productive understanding of the opinions and conversations had throughout the process with different relevant specialists on the subjects talked about. It is also based on key recommendations for future projects that address the topic of regional development in North Karelia (or any other similar region) while paying significant attention to the current development of the area and available forecasts for its future from other sources and the opinions of the specialists of this project.

1.1 Background

As ELY-Centre and other organizations around the region became increasingly aware of the lack of performance in the education sector, they started to gather

a team to make a plan to finally collaborate with other stakeholders in North Karelia. At stake was quality education for immigrants and the international talent that is already in the region as well as for those arriving in the future. Centered in improving language and professional education for international individuals, the general plan is to boost the education, mainly in language, which in turn would help foreign workers in finding jobs in a seamless way. This could serve to motivate them to stay in the region and with that, improve the general performance of North Karelia.

Although many efforts have been made in the past, for ELY-Centre and other organizations is clear that there is still a lot of work to do in terms of providing better and more impactful education plans. North Karelia is still struggling with both the attraction and retention of population. In part, an effort from these parties is trying to address a section of a much bigger issue. Step-by-step they believe they can make gains for the well-being of North Karelia.

Many of these parties (as will be discussed later) have their own projects concerning the same topics. They have structured the planned collaboration so that they run in parallel to the WiNK Project. They complement each other, both directly and indirectly as the objectives of all the plans that are talked about in this thesis are many times the same, interchangeable or are related to the general efforts to a smaller degree.

It is significant to understand the true state of the relationship (and how to improve it) between government agencies, such as the ELY-Centre in this case. This is also true of the companies/organizations that supply educational and recruitment services in the region because a direct improvement within the already established interaction and collaboration between them explicitly means that all involved parties benefit in several ways, each according to the nature of their participation in the relationship and their field. It also means a direct improvement in the possibilities available for the international community living in North Karelia and how well-prepared they can be to participate in society.

While ELY-Centre is at this point used to collaborating with other government agencies, working with private entities does not happen as well as it could. So necessarily, these types of projects are also a great learning grounds for all those involved to gain important experience that could be used for future projects. The exact way to gain this knowledge is evaluating the happenings of the planning process for the project they have all participated in. This is why ELY-Centre (in collaboration with this thesis project) has prepared a survey that best obtains the opinion and feedback of the specialists in charge of the planning from each participating organization.

1.2 Objectives and Scope

The scope follows a very simple and straightforward path: to discover what is the organic perception of collaborators and associated participants regarding the planning and implementation of the WiNK Project and the perceived impact those opinions have on the performance of service providers as well as their effect in possible changes for now and in the future.

The creation of a survey and its subsequent application makes it necessary to lay out the structure of such a tool in a way that is understandable to the reader, as well as clearly define the limitations and ethical implications to make sure to stay within specifications at all times.

The establishment of contextual information is also necessary to understand what the need for a project like WiNK and the scope is. The project itself aims to tackle the issues it has identified and those the organizations have created and proposed a call-for-action plan. To achieve this, it is necessary to keep handy a couple of objectives to meet along the way. This will aid in better digesting the compilation of concepts and data here presented (Kloos 2021, 447-454; Marouf, Kotorov, Aslam, Krasylnykova & Pezer 2023, 403-412). The objectives are laid down as follows:

- To create an initial context about the background of such a project

- To answer the vital question of: Why is this project needed and what does it do?
- The preparation of necessary data to be available if the project gets financed
- The synthesis of all acquired data, theoretical and practical (survey) data
- A compilation of the found facts and the final thoughts about the findings.

2 Research Methodology

The research methodology will be the foundation to establish the core structure of what will be the guiding aspects of the survey and the interviews in a way that supports and later helps to understand the mixture between theoretical concepts and practical application.

These sections of the research are very important, as they help to maintain a set direction of efforts and provide us with the necessary guidelines to be able to produce quality work that stays within the desired parameters of production.

2.1 Knowledge Base Standards

In terms of applied methodology, here will be put to use a mixture and balance of both quantitative and qualitative research to complement each of the necessary aspects that take part in this analysis.

As previously mentioned, the first step is to establish a theoretical background that will serve as a base structure for the creation of a survey that will sample the opinion of interested Finnish customers and their experiences as customers of ELY-Centre.

After this, a necessary analysis of the compiled data will be made for further examination and understanding.

Qualitative

This type of research method focuses on collecting data that is presented, i.e., as observations and open-ended processes, where the main objectives are abstract concepts and representations of such. This being the case, the use of this method here pays attention to explanation, contextualization, and preparation of terms and concepts relevant to the research that could lack interpretation or otherwise may be ambiguous when developing certain bits of speech. (Bandari. 2023.)

Quantitative

As opposed to qualitative research, quantitative research takes care of brute numbers, statistical data, and anything else that can be quantified. This is an important element that couples with the survey because when applying quantitative research, the information that we receive through the survey is numerical, and the quantified section of it (as we will see later) does not offer open-ended questions. Having a quantitative approach for this side of the analysis becomes vital to better obtain the data. (Pritha Bandari 2023.)

2.2 Ethical Considerations and Parameters for the Survey

Given that the purpose of the survey is to collect data from the interviewees regarding their opinions on the organization's processes and their general impact on customers, certain types of information are required from them to achieve the set goals. This, however, does not include the collection of personal data of any kind, and the questions asked to the interviewees are not made in any way that their answers could be linked to any individual after the completion of the survey. The inclusion of personal data from the interviewees is, therefore, unnecessary and irrelevant to the survey in terms of this thesis.

The targeted audience for the survey is clients who have participated during the implementation of the project "WiNK" which has been under the responsibility of ELY-Centre. As well as any other party that the organization deems ideal to be surveyed. Every participant may decide to remain anonymous for the remainder

of the survey and for the purposes of this thesis; however, a minimum of a title is needed to be mentioned to justify the inclusion of certain opinions from individuals.

A disclaimer (Appendix 1) will be shown to the participants of the survey before proceeding with it to let them know all the relevant information regarding the data to be collected, the importance of their collaboration, and the final goals of the survey.

3 North Karelia – Premise for Project Development

As of 2024, the year when the WiNK is expected to be approved, certain aspects pertaining to the regional development on several fronts are rather apparent for many experts in the area. Such is the case for ELY-Centre as head of the aforementioned project that aims to offer solutions and create opportunities where they have been previously lacking or not appropriately structured.

To begin to understand the root cause for some of the planned solutions is needed to create an adequate amount of context that allows one to understand the actual need for constructing such solutions, as otherwise it may appear as if efforts are being applied unreasonably. The truth is that, for many, the reality explained described here in this section, is one that they are living right now in North Karelia, because it becomes more and more difficult to simply avoid the effects that the economic struggles and underdevelopment have brought about.

For the purpose of the WiNK Project and of this thesis at the same time, the following sections will focus mainly on the exact reasons upon which the foundations of the project were laid. This will attempt to address with precision the reasons why creating projects that highlight the lacking elements of an economy is needed.

3.1 Initial Argument

Historically, the region of North Karelia has struggled on several fronts: economical (Statistics Finland 2012; Lehtonen & Tykkyläinen 2011, 52-54), welfare and healthcare (Puska, Vartiainen, Laatikainen, Jousilahti & Paavola, 2009, 127-135), urban development (Lehtonen & Tykkyläinen 2011, 55-58). Added to this formula is a new matter called Talent Retention and Population Attraction (Education Statistics Finland 2021).

The aging population factor throughout Finland is a phenomenon that impacts all regions in various ways. Particularly, the lack of a work force means the aggravation of an existing economic recession that later also impacts other major aspects of the nation's community. The integration of immigrant individuals to the Finnish society begins to look like a compulsory task for all stakeholders in the country. This case has a special focus on North Karelia, as a means of facing an ever-growing issue in this country. (Łobodzińska 2011, 45-49.)

The lack in many of these areas has led to important fluctuations in the population throughout the years, with the "escape of talent" being one of the most recent and concerning topics for the region. Where an important amount of the population migrates to other areas, only a fraction of it remains within North Karelia. It is estimated that in 2022, about 4,589 people departed from Joensuu (the regional capital of North Karelia) and moved to another municipality. Of that number only around 1,600 people remained within North Karelia, most notably in Kontiolahti, a neighboring town only 30 minutes away from Joensuu. The rest of them spread out throughout the country with special preferences for bigger cities in Finland like Helsinki, Tampere and Kuopio. (Tilastokeskus 2022.)

It is also necessary to address several aspects that have an impact on the performance of the region, such as nationwide events like generalized strikes in different sectors. This was the case of healthcare (Tehy 2022) as well as many other sectors, to which could be added the bus driver strike affecting Joensuu

and many other cities around the country. (Joensuun seudun joukkoliikenne 2024.)

3.2 Lack of Economic Development

North Karelia has had several economic fluctuations and struggles throughout time, as the region has been economically dependent on its natural resources with little to no innovation in other sectors (Yuloskov, Bahrami, Mazzara, Imbugwa, Ndukwe & Kotorov 2023). This, paired with situations such as poor infrastructure for further development in other cities and towns besides Joensuu has led to uneven foundations for urban and economic development across the region. This issue that has been on record since the early 2000s and is even likely to have existed before that time. (Lehtonen & Tykkyläinen 2011, 52–54.)

Economic recession in the country in general adds to the poor performance of the region while yet adding the recent impact of the coronavirus pandemic of 2020, which is still felt in the economy. The clearest sign of this is the rising number of companies going bankrupt nationwide. This number saw a 41% increase in the year 2023 compared to the previous year. (Kämppi 2023.)

Previous studies also show a growing trend of recession in the previous decade. This has been seen largely in the displacement of workers from production facilities. While the same study shows an optimistic side about how the workers were eventually reemployed in other companies: while the region suffers from a degree of decay, it still has been able to sustain the losses. However, as these types of cases increasingly repeat, it also diminishes the ability of the region's economy to stay up on their own means. (Jolkkonen & Koistinen 2015, 86-88.)

Urban infrastructure also poses one of the main issues for connectivity of the region with the rest of the country. Most of the railroad was laid down in the 19th century and has since received little changes in the general layout, i.e., from Eastern Finland westwards. (Rusanen & Antikainen 2009, 10-12.)

Difficulties faced by the already incoming immigration presumes that the attractiveness of the area does not perform sufficiently well to maintain the actual influx of immigrant populations. This is especially true for migrants from Russia, as in North Karelia they form one of the biggest sectors of the immigrant population in the region, and one of the nationalities that are more likely to be influenced into migrating to Finland given the proximity of Russia to the country. (Pöllänen & Davydova-Minguet 2017, 2-3).

3.3 Lack of Talent Retention

A study posted by Education Statistics Finland shows that beginning from 2009, university graduates from the University of Eastern Finland in North Karelia are migrating to other regions of Finland, where they may find better opportunities. This phenomenon, as it has been repeating on an ever-increasing trend, leaves the region of North Karelia with less population and without necessary professionals that are importantly needed to potentially increase the attractiveness and competitiveness of the region. (Education Statistics Finland 2021.)

In a conversation with a project manager for the project Talent Hub, the specialist describes how difficult it is for education providers to tackle the issue of talent retention. The main objective of universities and other education centers is to provide education of quality in their classrooms and to try to connect students with companies through updated study plans as well as training programs. However, the issue still falls on the hands of the companies within the region to make the decision whether or not they hire graduated students. (Sevonius-Male 2024.)

4 WiNK Project Background

4.1 Background Information

It is beyond important to comprehend the relevance and magnitude of the WiNK Project, as it holds great development potential for the region with historical difficulties in keeping talent. Most people after a time of studies or work, decide to leave to other major areas, mainly the capital region. For North Karelia, this is an issue that could have greater meaning in the future if left unattended.

Based on the aforementioned reasons, ELY-Centre (Elinkeino-.liikenne-. ja ympäristö) has already at this point been working extensively on a project that addresses exactly those concerns. It aims to do so with a team composed of experienced organizations in the region. These are at the same time conducting their own projects that are paired with the efforts of WiNK and thus contributing to the general efforts.

It is also important to mention that this effort began on a rather different note. The participant roster was bigger not long ago, and the implementation of the project was also meant to be larger. This changed, however, when the City of Joensuu decided to have its own take on the project and parted ways with the main source. This in turn took with them interested parties and resulted in a change in management. Nonetheless, the rest of this thesis and the survey only focuses on the project implemented by ELY-Centre and its associates. (Representative for ELY-Centre 2024.)

The designated participants for the project at the moment are ELY-Centre as head of the project, the University of Eastern Finland, Karelia University of Applied Sciences, North Karelia Education Consortium/Riveria, Kitee Evangelical Folk High School, and Lieksa Christian Folk High School.

On that note, the focus for the project and its participants is to grant international talent networks and aid them in acquiring the needed education to

gain employment. Lastly, the project aims to give them the tools to aid in their integration process.

4.2 Aim and focus of the Project

While the indirect beneficiaries of the project are forecasted to be the immigrant communities within the region of North Karelia, the actual official target of the project is all sorts of organizations and experts involved in tasks and activities revolving around immigrant education and integration, local organizations in the area of social welfare, recruitment, and employment, among many others.

The reason for this is that once all of these parties are optimally running, they will be able to better provide services to the immigrants living in the area and possibly attract more from other regions of Finland.

This project began becoming a need for the authorities of the region, as it the aging of the working population and those close to retirement started to be a more obvious cause of concern for the future of the labor market and economic development of the region in general. One of the chief proposals of this project is that international talent can be one aspect of the solution for this ever-closer problem. (WiNK Project. 2023)

4.3 Areas of Work

Although the main area of work where the participant organizations take place is Joensuu, it is necessary to remark that through the extensiveness of many of the organizations, chiefly Riveria and both Karelia UAS and UEF (University of Eastern Finland) the area of applied work goes beyond the capital city of the region.

Towns such as Heinävesi, Ilomantsi, Juuka, Kontiolahti, Nurmes, Outokumpu, Polvijärvi, Rääkylä, and Tohmajärvi are also included in the project's area of

effect. This helps to extend the processes of development and funding throughout the entire region.

In this point is good to clarify that although the WiNK project does take place in these locations, it is so specific about its aim and structure in the terms enclosed in the project application, which is about the enhancement of education in local communities. Clarification is needed just because the ELO project, which is a complementary project to WiNK's, emphasizes concrete actions and happenings taking place in these municipalities aimed at the attraction and retention of population; both immigrant and native.

Also, while the starting group of organizations and experts taking part in the Wink project is already set, the objective is to increase the reach that the project has, which means not only the organizations it could enclose in the future but also the end-users that will benefit from the results.

Experts of different areas are also important to include in the action plan because it is they who are the most in contact with the end-users and mainly for that reason it is vital to work closely with them, though, not exclusively with educational or recruitment institutions but also any other types of organizations that could be a gathering point for immigrants to attend, such as non-profitable organizations, private enterprises and government agencies.

4.4 Notable Remarks

This section is relevant to include in the end to mention few key facts of the project that would not be otherwise stressed enough within the normal discourse in the analysis or to provide a short preparation stage for some elements of the research.

- At the moment, most of the work is entirely in the planning phase. This means that ELY-Centre is still waiting for the approval of the project and its subsequent funding for the beginning of the project to set off. For this

reason, most of the information and documents about the structure and contents of the project have not yet been disclosed at the moment of writing this paper.

- While there are similar projects within North Karelia that address similar topics in similar ways, it is still essential to make specific differentiation from the contents and limits of this project. As will be explained in the following section, both ELO and Talent Hub are projects that run at the same time and are in certain ways very similar. However, the contents and objectives of both of the previously mentioned projects are different in nature.
- Both ELO and WiNK projects were born out of a greater idea for development in the region of North Karelia, which in fact had an even greater scope than it does at the moment of writing. However, this “greater reach” became an issue on itself for the original project due to its larger scale, as it presented a smaller possibility for funding while being so big. The original idea also attempted to include NGOs and private enterprises into the admixture for perhaps one of the biggest development projects in North Karelia in a long time.

5 Other Relevant Projects

As previously mentioned, there are few other projects running at the same time in the Eastern Finland region that include very relevant topics for contents of the WiNK project. This inclusion of other projects in the region also helps to emphasize how the issues of immigration and integration are crucial for North Karelia to deal with, since many organizations in many different fields and levels are having their take on the matter.

5.1 ELO Project

In its project application, ELO (*Elä ja osallistuu Pohjois-Karjalassa*, in English: Stay and Live in North Karelia) describes shortly that the premise for the project is to convince and attract people from both other areas of Finland but chiefly from abroad. This is an initiative that is born from recent facts that are currently true for the region, namely, the increase of the elderly population compared to that of working age. This, coupled with a drastic decrease in newborns in the whole region, leaves a feeling of uncertainty for the future that could be forecasted for many municipalities within North Karelia. (ELO Project Application 2024.)

The ELO project started as part of the WiNK project, because the initial vision for a project in North Karelia was originally bigger in extension. However, in an interview with Mari Nupponen, Advisor of Education and Well-Being for the Regional Council of North Karelia, it becomes clear that there is a certain threshold of possible funding for regional projects such as the one described here. (Nupponen 2024.)

What this meant for all the participants and collaborators of the project, is that the original scope appeared then to be too large to gain funding from the Co-Funding European Authority. For this reason, one of the two sections that were going to form the project had to split away. In other words, the collaboration of different educational entities responsible for the training of the responsible experts in the region, led by ELY-Centre. The ELO Project then, is supposed to help municipalities create packages of information for the residing internationals in the regions and plans to both attract and foment migration to the region, which is led by the City of Joensuu in a coordinated collaboration between the many municipalities of North Karelia.

It is important to mention in this section that while the ELO Project is completely out of the objectives of this thesis since it no longer takes part in the WiNK project, it still is an important bit of contextual information and worth of

mentioning to gain clarity on how big the initial scope of the project was, when they were still together.

5.2 Talent Hub

This project begins as an initiative to promote the importance of the student population in Eastern Finland and the impactful drive it has on the economy and general well-being of the region while providing them with the necessary materials that can help them to decide and stay in the region to both develop further their professional careers and build a life in Eastern Finland.

The lack of opportunities and services alike, the attractiveness in the area and difficulties to integrate are just some of the main issues experienced by migrant populations in Eastern Finland. As previously described in this paper, this case is particularly true for North Karelia. Some of those issues are part of the scope of this project to be especially addressed in the way that educational institutes can.

Talent retention and active employment are some of the most important objectives and key takeaways from this project that aims at building trust in students of both Finnish and international backgrounds and convince them to remain in the area and continue their professional careers. However, such plans are no easy tasks, particularly when it is clear that universities and other levels of education only have a degree of effective reach in the overall aspect of the population's life.

Talent Hub aims to assemble education providers of various levels to bring about the best capabilities from each other as they see how collaboration and the share of expertise is vital for the well-being of tasks like these.

This joint effort focuses on the employment and entrepreneurship of their students by best providing them with the correct guidance and resources to expand and improve their skill sets for the labor market. (Jeskanen 2024.)

To achieve these proposed goals, the specialists in charge of this project attempt to offer a wider arrange of services tailored specifically to students, so that after graduation, there are immediately obtainable options for their futures in the form of professional opportunities. These services are for example:

- Development of Alumni services for graduates so that they can continue to improve their professional competences even after graduating.
- Employment guidance to grant students opportunities for practical work experience while studying and a secure working position after they finish their studies.
- Entrepreneurship coaching and sparring to help students get the best out of their ideas and create opportunities for the business to grow out of it.

While certain aspects of Talent Hub do sound in ways very similar to those of the WiNK Project, it is vital to acknowledge that they are not joint and do not directly overlap. Unlike WiNK, Talent Hub has a more specific focus in the way it attends to the objectives at hand. (Sallinen 2024.)

Generally speaking, WiNK intends to maintain the population in a broader sense, and the means for this are the better training of local experts to provide better services to the population residing in North Karelia. Talent Hub aims at providing local opportunities in the form of employment and possible entrepreneurship for students in the area of Eastern Finland. It is true, however, that while the projects share some of the vision and the participants, and although they run parallel, they are not officially in cooperation. (Väisänen 2024.)

6 Surveying and Sampling

This section addresses the considerations taken into account to build the questions that are introduced in the survey and how they are relevant to the topic at hand, as well as, how the sample to apply the survey was created, why it was constructed like so and what possible implications it could have.

That being said it is also important to acknowledge that every single participant of the project also may have had a parallel project running along with WiNK in terms of the scope and its objectives. Still, every participant had different perspectives, opinions, and ideas in mind when thinking about tackling the same issues. This made their participation and collaboration with other parties within the project unique. For this reason, while the construction and application of the questions were the same for everyone interviewed, in all the cases it was necessary to adjust the formulation or the nature of the questions. This was the case with the coordinator previously working in the project on behalf of ELY-Centre. Some participants decided it was best to adjust the answer given to best exemplify how the situations experienced applied to them, as in the case of Mari Nupponen, Advisor of Education and Well-Being for the Regional Council of North Karelia.

It becomes necessary to mention that the survey was built in two modalities. One was quantitative and measured the satisfaction of each participant in the project in a numerical format. There was also a qualitative one. Here, participants were asked a series of open questions in which they were able to elaborate more on their answers concerning their experiences while planning the project. They were also able to mention other key factors and/or actions taken prior to the WiNK Project, as well as their possible actions in the future. All in all, a well-mixed set of questions that best helped the interviewees to explain their side of the story was included.

6.1 Survey Construction

The construction of the survey primarily takes into account the experiences and personal perspectives of the participant officials in the planification and construction of the project, their professional input in the project and what are some of the actions their organizations will take. This survey construction pays attention to both the needs of this thesis and the needs of ELY-Centre for the structure of these questions.

For ELY-Centre North-Karelia it is vital to always analyze all the available materials regarding project participation, especially when it is about a topic that has been of great importance and a challenge for North-Karelia to deal with. On that note, the structure and main idea of the questions in the survey are meant to be built in such a way that helps to gather the most relevant information about the experience of the participants and their opinions about the development of each aspect within the project.

Appendices 2 and 3 show both of the questionnaires presented to every participant of this part of the project. At the petition of ELY-Centre, the last three open-ended questions were added to give to the interviewees the opportunity to elaborate more on the exactly the feedback that they would wish to give to ELY-Centre regarding the planification and elaboration of the WiNK Project.

A separate survey was constructed based on the one I made to serve specifically the interests of ELY-Centre and expected to run with a broader audience than the one I targeted, namely the representative officials from every organization in the WiNK Project. However, the scope and content of that survey, while very similar, is different enough not to consider it appropriate for the objectives that this thesis keeps as limitations.

6.2 Sampling Structure

The construction of the sample is perhaps one of the easiest aspects of the entire project. ELY-Keskus launched an open call for all interested organizations and companies in North-Karelia to participate in the joint project.

With the changes made to the original structure of the project (after splitting into two parts) so did the core sampling structure of this survey for the WiNK project.

The sample concerns five different educational organizations widespread throughout the region. This means that the responsible official for each organization is more than one in some cases, so a special clarification for each

response in the survey will be made to ensure that the results are clear where different inputs apply.

Even though there were initially five organizations in the scope of the survey, two of them were omitted due to the lack of possibility for contacts or the inability to match schedules during the timeframe when the survey took place.

6.3 Application and Details

Each interview was agreed to personally with the responsible official linked to the management of the project, and the interviews were held either in person (when applicable) or online. No specific requirement impeded this duality of options, as the survey could be applied either way.

ELY-Centre ultimately has a final say in what kind of information it gathers from the official results of the survey. The centre has used the structure of this survey to separately send it to a larger number of possible participants. The contents of those efforts, however, remain exclusively for ELY-Centre, and the results of them were not considered for this analysis. Rather I used the data that I collected firsthand from the experts of the region. In this case this data gathered was used for the purposes of ELY-Centre.

7 Survey Implementation

The implementation was done through a series of interviews with at least one representative of Riveria, Karelia UAS, University of Eastern Finland and the Regional Council for North Karelia, as well as an ex-worker from ELY-Centre that actively participated in the planning process. At this point is necessary to mention again that not all the organizations and not all the representatives were interviewed due to lack of time and schedule mismatching.

During the interviews two questionnaires were used. The first was quantitative (Appendix 2), which under request of ELY-Centre was used to provide

numerical feedback to see if the opinion of the participants during the planning stage was positive and satisfactory under its lead.

The idea is that the magnitude of this project could be considered new for both ELY-Centre and the participants. They are trying to get as much relevant information as possible so as to see the positive and negative aspects of everyone's experience while actively participating in the project.

As well as the first part of the survey, the second questionnaire (Appendix 3) gave way for interviewees to elaborate to a greater extent their opinion and also the general aspects of their contributions to the project.

Luckily, many participants did in fact have the opportunity to openly disclose the activities they were involved in. Furthermore, with these types of questions, the participants had the chance to think back about the relevant happenings during the planning stages. Most of them elaborated their answers considerably and gave them a great deal of thought. They also provided an important map of actions they have planned as part of their individual responsibilities and that they are going to follow through with once the project moves onto the next stage.

7.1 Quantitative Compiling

This part of the survey and interviews was built exclusively for the gathering of feedback data that aimed at helping ELY-Centre to improve the way it collaborates with other entities in the future along with in what ways the development of new methods should be implemented.

As a reminder: interviewees were asked a total of eight questions in this section. The possible answers for them were on the scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being the worst or most unrelatable and 5 being the best or most agreeable.

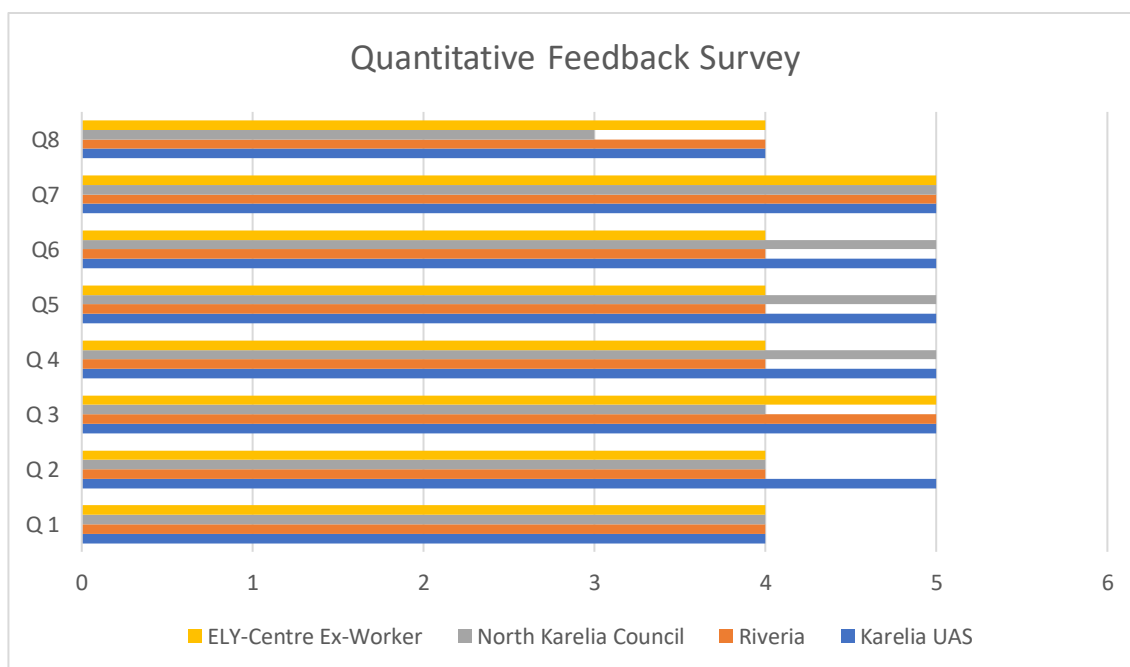


Figure 1. Compilation of the numerical answers given in the feedback interview

Each of the questions, from first to last, had the possibility of giving a numerical answer from 1 to 5, 5 being the best and 1 the worst according to each case. The asking of the questions was very straight forward and the participants had little to no lag in providing a prompt answer based off of their personal experience, some even wished to mention a few comments in regards of the topics each question addressed (see Appendix 1) . However, the comments made during the application of this specific side of the survey were not officially recorded, although the subjects were retaken in the second part of the survey.

The only major variation in the gathered answers was the one given by the representative of the Regional Council of North Karelia, Mari Nupponen. She mentioned she is not feeling very positive about the lasting effect of the project's results in general. This answer is especially understood from her side, given that the Regional Council is now part of the ELO Project, which had split from the original joint project by the municipalities. One of the reasons that her participations was requested for this survey was because she participated in the process of the main project from the very beginning and experienced the change in the project and its leadership.

As the data in general shows a very consistent pattern, the best remark about it is for ELY-Centre to know that the participants had very positive experiences and would be more than willing to embark on similar projects in the future.

Naturally, as quantitative research measures the hard numbers, the comments that the participants made were mostly recorded on the qualitative side of survey. Nonetheless, as they had the opportunity to elaborate on their answers, it became apparent that, although the experience was not perfect by any standard, they feel a partial responsibility to make sure that not only their side of the project is correctly completed but that everyone sees the planning to fruition.

7.2 Qualitative Compiling

The data acquired from the interviews with the help of the questionnaires and the participants, in this section specifically from the questionnaire of numerical format, it can be clearly determined that most of the answers are on the positive end of the spectrum. However, it must be noted as well that during the interview itself some interviewees declared some opinions to be understood that while the general perception of the experience is positive there are still a few things that in their opinion would require some attention to which to be given in future endeavors. This is namely how crucial for the entire planning process it is to correctly manage the meetings, the content discussed in them and their structures.

Many participants made clear that the degree of success felt in the planning of the project was mostly due to the number of meetings held, and that communication was constant and well-maintained. The appointing of a responsible official for each organization and the improvement of methods to share files and information across organizations are also something noted among the recommendations by the participants.

It is interesting to point out that the closer the communication channels are, both formally and informally, the better for the management of several collaborating

institutions. At first glance, this would seem like something obvious to point out, but maybe for some of the participants of this project it is not so because it is crucial to remember that these organizations were not previously used to collaborating on projects of this scale and with a broader scope. This is reason enough for some to believe that efforts in the past to collaborate in the region may not have been as successful, also considering that for a while collaboration as a whole was not considered an option by most. This may even still be true for some other organizations.

Nonetheless, the common experience lived by the participants gives a clear example that mostly good things occurred throughout the entire process. Although not perfect, they were good enough to point out positive forecasts for the future of the project and its results.

8 Conclusion

This thesis project aims to offer a slightly different perspective about the current situation in North Karelia regarding fluctuations in the population and economic stagnation, among others. The edification of the argument from scratch and the designation of past happenings as the cornerstones of the issues today is a proposal that is born out of becoming aware of certain aspects like international and migration affairs in Finland. As an immigrant, the author of this thesis has gone and is still going through the processes and experiences of what many projects now have the intention of improving.

The situation in North Karelia is today still very dire and requires a great deal of care. According to the conversations and interviews this issue was seen and identified long ago. The fact that in previous years many organizations, especially private enterprises, were able to survive without paying attention to the topic and being able to “leave it for later” is one reason why the region in general struggles.

In reality, part of the solution relies exactly on not laying the blame on any of the local actors that have today the means and resources of doing something about

the issue, but rather to activate the channels of collaboration and dialogue with several other interested parties. This includes migrants themselves and organizations of all types within the municipalities.

Past issues give a clearer picture of what is more relevant at the moment to deal with and how difficult it can be to achieve in terms of its history. Yet, with that in mind is possible to decipher the code to mobilize efforts that have real impact on the current state of the lack of talent retention and population in general while not being able to convince companies of the benefits of engaging in adapting to the new necessary methodology.

Projects in the area, such as WiNK, are perhaps a good indication of a changing trend for the future of not only North Karelia but even Eastern Finland as a whole. It is also necessary to remind everyone interested that these types of concerns are not dealt with by sticking to old processes and hoping that positive results eventually turn up. The idea of change in North Karelia, based on the results and opinions of some experts, is maybe at this point not the most ideal. However, as these projects grow and new ones come by, the easier it is to acknowledge the work getting done in favor of the local communities and how they are benefited by integrating a migrant workforce.

The addition of the surveys and interviews with experts only helps to yet again reinforce what has been talked about for decades. This is namely the lack of opportunities for migrant individuals and how it affects the general performance of the region. The more local actors and authorities resist to get hands on work about this, the harder it could get to deal with later.

Fortunately, a lot of good work is being done for the benefit of those who are looking for a better future and those who wish to stay in North Karelia.

8.1 Key notes

The rise of technological development in the region presents both opportunities and risks that need careful consideration (Shrestha, Megha, Chakraborty, Mazzara & Kotorov 2023, 576-585). On one hand, advancements in technology can streamline processes, attract talent, and stimulate economic growth (Kotorov, Krasylnykova, Pérez-Sanagustín, Mansilla & Broisin 2024, 21-36). For instance, the integration of smart infrastructure and digital platforms could enhance efficiency in various sectors, from healthcare to education (Krasylnykova 2023, 383-392). Additionally, investing in emerging technologies like artificial intelligence and renewable energy could position North Karelia as a hub for innovation, attracting both skilled workers and investors (Aslam 2023, 873–883).

However, this rapid technological advancement also brings forth challenges and risks. One concern is the potential displacement of traditional industries and jobs due to automation and digitalization (Blaschke, Demel & Kotorov 2021, 7-12). As these technologies evolve, there may be a widening skills gap, leading to unemployment or underemployment in certain sectors. Moreover, issues related to data privacy, cybersecurity, and the digital divide need to be addressed to ensure equitable access to opportunities and protect sensitive information. Failure to navigate these risks effectively could exacerbate existing socio-economic disparities and hinder inclusive growth in the region.

In light of these developments, it is imperative for policymakers, businesses, and communities to collaborate proactively in adapting to the changing technological landscape (Kotorov, Krasylnykova, Zhdanov, Mazzara, Aslam, Akhmetgaraeva, Naumcheva & Brown 2021, 1-11). Embracing innovation while addressing its associated risks through robust regulatory frameworks and investment in digital literacy and skills development can foster a sustainable and inclusive tech-driven economy in North Karelia.

8.2 Recommendations

Part of the effort of this thesis is to provide recommendations that take into consideration all the information acquired throughout the process of the survey and the interviews. For this reason, the following are some of the key points brought forward by some of the specialists themselves as a sign of interest in developing better practices for the future.

- Constant and structured meetings with all the necessary representatives are required to ensure that all the participating organizations are on the same page and everyone knows what is going on within the planning process of the project. This includes official managers of areas within the different organizations. It is vital to make sure that even the higher ups are on board and agreeing with the development of the conversation and ideas.
- Specific methodology for the share of data and files concerning the progress of the project. Many organizations have different sensitivity levels of security measures. This at times can be quite tedious to deal with in terms of sharing data with other members involved in planning, as not everyone will be part of the same organization.
- Development of the bigger ideas that can be found and at the same time covering the real needs existing in North Karelia. The fact that one single authority (like ESR+, Euroopan SosiaaliRahasto Plus. In English: European Social Funding Plus) cannot provide all the required funding to cover the needs of a project because of its size can be a problem. This has already been the case for WiNK, and several
- aspects of it had to be either cancelled or moved to a separate project. The possibility to fund a single project through different means should be evaluated.

8.3 Research and Analysis Limitations

In this case one of the main obstacles for the WiNK Project was its initial extension and how it attempted to cover several areas and fields at the same

time. This quickly became an issue for everyone involved, because many have agreed during the interviews that the bigger the scope the better attention all the concerns will receive. Nonetheless, it is also agreed that putting at risk the integrity of the project as a whole is not worth including an extra area of work. Instead, it was agreed to renounce efforts to include private enterprises and NGOs for the sake of what was then agreed as essential to cover in the focus of the project.

Limitations in general for most of the organizations are always related to funding, whether that would come from European funds, national programs or local initiatives. Meanwhile, many companies express their desires for an expanded plan of action. In reality they understand that when projects are not as concise as they can, they have a lesser chance of receiving funding.

In terms of research, the limitations are represented in trying to find space and time for gathering the participants of the project again. In the case of the survey presented in this thesis at least three organizations did not participate in it for a number of reasons, the main one being trying to find the right time for an interview of about 40 minutes.

The opportunities are then presented in those specific areas where the organizations have been incapable of progressing (both for lack of experience and funding). This is especially true since all the organizations agree that even though the projects in which they are involved are not as big as initially planned, they still faced many new situations where they felt they were not experienced enough to deal with the happenings correctly.

Collaboration and joining of common efforts are new concepts for some organizations and those are vital to discover so future projects can flourish. Acknowledging that together all of the interested stakeholders can achieve greater things is a small but essential part of the solution.

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Appendix 1 – Feedback Survey

Disclaimer

This present survey has for objectives the recollection of valuable data that can help ELY-Centre to better understand the current opinion of those participants of the WiNK project and the experience they have gone through in the process

The amount of data recollected with the questions will be keep in record only for the purposes of the thesis that this survey is attached to, that is to analyze the impact of the project on the associated participants and how can these type of projects be better in the future.

For the purposes previously mentioned, the questions are built in such way that the survey better reflects all of the necessary aspects past and current, relevant to the state of the project and that of the chosen scope.

Individual participants of this survey may choose to remain anonymous, however, it is still a requirement to clarify what organization they are a part of and to what degree they have collaborated in the WiNK project.

After the survey and the thesis are concluded the stored data recollected will not be kept anymore in any other specific place that is not the record for the thesis or the thesis itself. ELY-Centre may have a different policy for the storage of data, if the participants are interested in knowing more, please refer to the appropriate department within ELY-Centre to learn more about that.

For the extra benefit of the participants: Any other relevant question or doubt can be cleared and addressed wherever and whenever the survey takes place.

Interview Quantitative Questionnaire

1.- How has communication been between the different participants of the project so far?

1 **2** **3** **4** **5**

2.- How included has your organization felt during the multiple steps of planification in this project?

1 **2** **3** **4** **5**

3.-How fair is the amount of responsibility and support given perceived?

1 **2** **3** **4** **5**

4.-How well is this project going to cover the existing needs of your organization in terms of the topic that it addresses?

1 **2** **3** **4** **5**

5.-How capable is your organization feeling about achieving all the goals of the project?

1 **2** **3** **4** **5**

6.-How true is the following statement for your organization: There's more that could be done in terms of integration and work opportunities for international people, but with this project we'll have to conform for now.

1 **2** **3** **4** **5**

7.- How important is for the organization that this project comes to happen?

1 **2** **3** **4** **5**

8.-How positive is the organization feeling about the lasting effect of the results during and after this project?

1 **2** **3** **4** **5**

Interview Qualitative Questionnaire*

1.-What are the concrete actions that your organization will take to tackle the issue of loss of talent in the region?

2.-What is the difference between the actions taken in the past by your organization and the ones to be taken in this future project in terms of immigrant integration to the working and education sectors?

3.-What have been historically the most important obstacles to overcome to get to the desired outcome outlined in the project's objectives?

4.-Is there something else your organization would like to add as objectives for the project, or otherwise any other area where the project could develop to better address the subject?

5.-What will your organization do if the project is not financed?

6.-What actions can be taken by your organization to improve the attractiveness and competitiveness of the region?

7.-Where is North Karelia currently lacking to be an interesting and successful region in Finland?

***Note: For this part of the survey, the same disclaimer was used as in Appendix 1 because the use of the information is the same, however, the disclaimer officially belongs to the Quantitative Questionnaire. Both questionnaires were applied at the same time.**

8.-What are some of the major issues faced by local companies to be motivated to fully participate in the general effort of embracing international talent?

9.- If financing was not an issue, what else would and could your organization do to improve the integration and educational development of international people?

10.- What was good about the entire planning process?

11.- What was bad about it?

12.- If you could improve any element of it, what would it be?

13.- What is the aim of the Talent Hub project and what is the role of your organization in it?*

***Question asked only to those that are also taking part in that project**