

Project Interlocality - Report of ITJ final assessment interviews

Conducted by Meggi Hedengren, Career Counsellor at Arcada University of Applied Sciences, in Helsinki, Finland.

Final assessment interviews with participants of the International Talent Journey as a part of project Interlocality were held April-June 2024, some in person and some online. Participants consisted of first-year engineering and international business students, hereafter shortened to MSE and IB students. All together 19 interviews were held with 12 IB students and 7 MSE students. The following report is an analysis of these interview responses.

The interview questions:

Q1: Before taking part in the ITJ, did you have a clear view of your career path and job-seeking skills? What kind of knowledge or expectations did you have of working in Finland?

Q2: Did you find the career skill self-assessment tool useful?

Q3: Which events and what themes have you found most useful?

Q4: What have you learned during ITJ? What concrete help or understanding have you gotten that has helped you forward in your career? In what areas do you notice improvement?

Q5: What would you have liked to learn more about during the ITJ program? How would you have liked to expand the career counselling?

Q6: Regarding language skills and cultural integration, what kind of career support do you think would be useful?

Q7: Regarding career counselling as part of studies: Do you think career guidance should be a mandatory or voluntary part of studies? Which themes should be mandatory and which voluntary?

Q8: On a scale of 1-5, how important do you think (information on) the following themes are within career guidance?

- Competence mapping
- Job search platforms and approaches
- Job application skills
- Interview skills
- Internships and trainee programs
- Entrepreneurship
- Networking and career-related events
- Finnish labour market knowledge
- Finnish work culture and integration

Q9: Regarding future endeavours, are you clear on where you are heading from here in your career? Do you feel you have the skills and tools needed to succeed?

Q10: Any other feedback?

Q1: Before taking part in the ITJ, did you have a clear view of your career path and job-seeking skills? What kind of knowledge or expectations did you have of working in Finland?

The responses reveal a spectrum of initial perceptions and preparedness among students regarding their career prospects before starting their studies abroad and participating in the International Talent Journey project. In general, there seems to have been an awareness of possible challenges when moving to Finland, but even when doing their best to prepare, these efforts often fell short due to unexpected challenges, such as language barriers and entering the local job market.

The IB students consisted of individuals with diverse professional backgrounds, including banking, shipping logistics, and recruitment, highlighting diverse career transitions. The IB students generally had a clearer career path in their home countries but faced significant challenges in transferring their skills to the Finnish job market.

MSE students exhibited a basic understanding of their career path and the job market before arrival, though they seemed to have lacked specific tools to enhance employability, such as access to practice with certain equipment or having a portfolio of their work. The primary barrier noted was language proficiency, alongside a need for practical tools and strategies to enhance job search effectiveness.

Initial Adaptation Efforts

Both IB and MSE students anticipated difficulties in finding a job in Finland, primarily due to language barriers and the challenging job market. The responses indicate a recognition that securing employment in Finland would be harder compared to their home countries. Several students, especially from IB, highlighted a discrepancy between their expectations and the actual difficulties encountered in the Finnish job market. For instance, students with substantial work experience in their home countries were surprised by the rejections they faced despite their qualifications. Some students had already before moving started adapting by acquiring additional skills, like bartending, to increase their initial employability in Finland.

Many students had conducted preliminary research about the Finnish job market and understood the importance of language proficiency before their arrival. However, the two integration languages and the differences in their use in Finnish society seem to have caused confusion. These particularities between Swedish and Finnish and the complex language requirements of the job market seem to have taken many by surprise. There seems to be a lack of understanding of why international students are required to learn both Finnish and Swedish, and there are ranging opinions on whether this is seen as useful for entering the local job market. There is uncertainty regarding which language international students should focus on regarding integration and finding their place within the local job market.

Preparedness and Adjustment

Students' efforts to research and plan before arrival show proactive behaviour, yet these efforts often fell short due to the stark reality of the local job market conditions. The emotional journey, marked by initial optimism followed by frustration upon encountering the job market realities, was a common thread. This highlights the need for better pre-arrival counselling and realistic job market assessments, as well as a readiness for both emotional and practical adjustments.

Participants did express a lack of specific tools and practical knowledge needed to navigate the job market in Finland and were therefore appreciative of the support from participation in the ITJ upon arrival. Both groups found the introduction weeks useful in bridging their initial knowledge gaps, suggesting that these orientations are crucial for better integration, career planning and job search strategies.

Based on these interviews, it can be concluded that enhancing language proficiency, providing detailed insights into the local job market, and equipping students with practical tools can significantly improve their career preparedness and integration into the Finnish job market.

Q2: Did you find the career skill self-assessment tool useful?

The consensus among students in both programs was generally positive regarding the career skill self-assessment tool (MOOC, The Career Skills Massive Open Online Course).

Most students found the tool useful for gaining insight into their skills and identifying areas for improvement. It helped students understand where they stand and what they need to work on, such as approaching people and networking. Some students felt that the tool was particularly beneficial for those with less work experience, as it provided a new perspective on their skills and highlighted specific areas for development. For some students, especially those with more experience, the tool confirmed their existing beliefs but did not provide much new information. A few students mentioned that while the tool gave a good overview of different skill sets, it lacked depth in specifying focused skills and detailed guidance for their particular fields of study. There were suggestions for more detailed and specific feedback on the skills needed for their line of studies. Some students indicated that the questions could be more in-depth and tailored to provide more actionable advice.

Q3: Which events and what themes within ITJ have you found most useful?

Q4: What have you learned during ITJ? What concrete help or understanding have you gotten that has helped you forward in your career? In what areas do you notice improvement?

Combined analysis of responses to questions 3-4.

The insights from these responses underscore the importance of a comprehensive and adaptable approach to career guidance for international students. Emphasising practical skills development, networking opportunities, cultural integration, and personalised career support are seen as valuable and can significantly enhance the career prospects and overall experience of international students. The key themes identified from the responses to Q3-4 highlight the importance of practical skills workshops, networking opportunities, and specific career-related events.

Guest Lecturers, Workshops and Networking Events:

IB Students especially highlighted the value of having attended guest lecturers at the career centre, as well as specific courses or programs like Ethical and Sustainable Development and practical workshops on CV and LinkedIn were considered particularly useful. The social aspects of networking events and working with national students were greatly appreciated. Networking with alumni and entrepreneurs for example, during the final ITJ get-together, was considered inspiring and provided concrete insight into job opportunities and strategies. Regarding networking, events like My Future Work and student union events were mentioned frequently, although there was a desire for more inclusion of international students.

Engineering students more often mentioned having benefited from events like the Technology Fair (Teknologia-23, external event), My Future Work (internal recruitment and networking event), as well as LinkedIn and portfolio workshops. Among these students, the importance of exposure to companies and industry knowledge was emphasised, and events that connected them to employing companies were noted as especially valuable.

Practical Skills Development:

Among both MSE and IB students' practical skills workshops, including those on technological and practical skills, CV writing, and LinkedIn optimisation, were highly valued. For improvements in job search skills, there were no major differences between IB and MSE students. Both groups identified significant improvement in CV writing and LinkedIn use, having gained insights into recruitment processes and the importance of detailed job applications. They also recognised an enhanced understanding of the job search process and the local job portals and understanding the Finnish job market.

Cultural and Social Integration:

Participation in the International Talent Journey has provided the international students with an increased understanding of Finnish culture and social mannerisms, which helped them settle in, socialise and feel less isolated. Only a few students stated having taken part in student union events, but the ones who did stated that participation in student unions and social events provided a sense of community and social support. Many experienced working with other international students as beneficial for their integration and sense of belonging, providing the opportunity to make friends. One common insight was a wish for more contact with the local and national students. It was noted that local students do not have the same need to make new social contacts and might be hesitant with the possible language barriers with international students, which made the interviewed internationals feel like the efforts to make contact were one-sided. It was pointed out that increasing formal opportunities for cooperation between nationals and internationals would help them connect more effortlessly, for example during shared coursework and assignments.

Sources of support:

It seems that the combination of coursework, career support in the form of recruitment-related events as well as personal dialogue has given international students the needed basis for job search skills in Finland. From their teachers and lecturers, the participants mentioned having received practical help with job applications, including finding internships and understanding the needs of the current job market. The career centre's support was experienced through workshops and events, such as job fairs and invited speakers. These events were considered crucial sources of support and instrumental in connecting with potential employers and building a network. Many students also mentioned that they benefited greatly from individual guidance regarding job search strategies, naming both teachers and career counsellors as a source of support. It seems that the students who have felt the most support, have done so through a combination of getting general information in the form of open events, as well as individual sessions for dialogue and personal advice.

Q5: What would you have liked to learn more about during the ITJ program? How would you have liked to expand the career counselling?

The feedback from the ITJ participants highlights several areas for improvement across various dimensions of studies and integration efforts. Below I list eight common themes of needs that came to light during the interviews, as well as suggestions for resolution of these needs.

1. Need for More Company Participation

- Current Issue: Limited presence of relevant companies at job fairs and networking events.
- Resolution: Increase outreach to a broader range of companies within the business and engineering fields to participate in job fairs and networking events. Establish partnerships with these companies to provide students with more opportunities to engage directly with potential employers. Create practices for collaboration between universities and companies to create more internship placements, including unpaid opportunities for students to gain practical experience.

2. More Alumni Speakers

- Current Issue: Insufficient alumni engagement, particularly those with international backgrounds.
- Resolution: Create an alumni speaker series where international alumni can share their career journeys and advice on securing jobs. This can also include Q&A sessions and networking opportunities.

3. Enhanced Career Counselling Regarding Different Industries

- Current Issue: Need for more personalised career advice and detailed information about industries and work fields.

- Resolution: Develop specialised career counselling sessions tailored to different majors and fields. Provide detailed information about various industries, potential career paths, and required skills. Incorporate more personalised advising to help students identify suitable career options based on their interests and strengths.

4. Early and Practical Language Training

- Current Issue: Lack of early Finnish language training and practical use in work-life scenarios.
- Resolution: Introduce Finnish language courses from the first year with a focus on practical, work-related language skills. Offer workshops and informal language practice sessions, such as language exchange programs with local students.

5. Insight into Recruitment Practices:

- Current issue: Lack of understanding of the recruitment process from the employer's perspective.
- Resolution: Organise workshops and seminars where employers explain their recruitment processes, including application tips and interview preparation. Include mock interviews and resume review sessions to help students improve their job application skills.

6. More Hands-On Learning

- Current Issue: Excessive focus on theory with insufficient practical training.
- Resolution: Increase the number of practical workshops and hands-on training sessions. For example, engineering students can benefit from visits to industrial sites and relevant companies to see the practical application of their studies. Business students could benefit from getting to practice skills needed in the future, such as giving presentations, working with the most commonly used computer programs or practising social interactions in a culturally blended environment.

7. Enhanced Local Interaction:

- Current Issue: Limited opportunities for teamwork and networking with local students.
- Resolution: Facilitate more collaborative projects and social events that bring together international and local students. This can help build networks and improve cultural integration.

8. Soft Skills Development Workshops

- Current Issue: Need for more opportunities to develop soft skills like presentation and networking.
- Resolution: Offer regular workshops on soft skills, including public speaking, presentation techniques, and personal branding. Encourage participation in events where students can practice these skills in a real-world context.

Q6: Regarding language skills and cultural integration, what kind of career support do you think would be useful?

Although many of the ITJ participants have been content with the support they have received so far, some students in both engineering and business programs highlighted several key issues regarding language skills and integration support within their academic and professional journey. These issues include the timing and practicality of language training, opportunities for real-world practice, and the need for better cultural and workplace integration.

The most significant concern is the need for Finnish language instruction to begin earlier in their studies. Students emphasised the importance of practical language usage rather than just focusing on academic proficiency. They seek courses that provide real-world applications, such as mock interviews and everyday interactions, to better prepare them for the Finnish job market. Students need targeted language skills relevant to job applications and

interviews. Workshops on writing CVs, cover letters, and job applications in Finnish, along with mock interview sessions, would help build their confidence and proficiency in professional settings.

Understanding Finnish workplace culture and the language used in professional settings is another area where students need more support. Workshops on workplace culture, communication styles, and professional etiquette, along with visits to local offices and companies, would help students observe and practice language skills in real-world contexts.

Students expressed a desire for more opportunities to practice spoken Finnish and Swedish and emphasised the importance of integrating language learning with both their academic and social experiences. Incorporating language practice into interdisciplinary projects and group work and promoting social integration through cultural exchange events and joint activities, would enhance their overall experience and proficiency. They suggested organising regular language practice events, including conversation clubs and language exchange programs. Pairing international students with local students as "language buddies" was also recommended to facilitate regular practice and cultural exchange.

There is a strong demand for more networking events with local students, alumni, and professionals to improve language skills and foster better integration. Hosting regular networking events and inviting international alumni to share their career paths and integration tips could provide valuable real-life language practice and professional connections.

Q7: Regarding career counselling as part of studies: Do you think career guidance should be a mandatory or voluntary part of studies? Which themes should be mandatory and which voluntary?

The question of whether career guidance should be a mandatory or voluntary part of studies elicited a range of opinions from international students in both MSE and IB programs. Opinions did not differ much between the two study programs. Overall consensus leans towards a hybrid model where career counselling includes both mandatory and voluntary components. Essential skills and knowledge should be mandatory, particularly for international students who may lack familiarity with the local job market and cultural norms. Other aspects can remain voluntary to allow flexibility and cater to individual needs and schedules.

Voluntary: Some students believe career counselling should remain completely voluntary.

Partly Mandatory: A common opinion is that career counselling should include both mandatory and voluntary components. Several students suggest that certain elements, such as CV and LinkedIn workshops, should be mandatory, especially in the first year. Mandatory elements should focus on essential skills and knowledge, while other parts can remain optional.

Mandatory: Some students advocate for mandatory career counselling, particularly for international students unfamiliar with Finnish work culture, emphasising its value once experienced.

Implementing a hybrid model of career counselling that balances mandatory foundational sessions with voluntary advanced workshops can cater to the diverse needs of international students. This approach ensures that all students acquire essential skills and knowledge early on while providing flexibility for further personalised career development support.

In a hybrid model implementation, some mandatory career counselling sessions should be held in the first year to cover basics such as CV and LinkedIn profile creation. As this is part of the first-year coursework for all degrees, mandatory sessions held at the career centre could rather focus on cultural knowledge and work-life norms in Finland, tailored for international students, as well as essential workshops on soft skills like presentation and interview techniques. Some voluntary components of career counselling could be different types of advanced and specialised workshops, as well as refresh sessions for ongoing support in later years of studies.

Scheduling and accessibility were noted as concerns regarding career counselling as a mandatory program. If having mandatory sessions, it would be important to ensure that sessions are scheduled in a way that minimises conflicts with academic responsibilities and considers students' personal commitments. Flexible timing by offering sessions over multiple time slots and possibly online would be a good way to accommodate diverse student schedules.

From the career centre's point of view, it would be important to focus on awareness and communication. During the student's first year and initial orientation, it is important to clearly communicate the availability and benefits of career counselling services. During the later years, there would be a need to send periodic reminders about available voluntary sessions and the importance of career counselling throughout the study period, as well as establish a feedback mechanism to continuously assess the effectiveness of mandatory and voluntary components and make adjustments based on students' input.

Q8: On a scale of 1-5, how important do you think (information on) the following themes are within career guidance?

Participating students were asked to rate the themes below, according to how important they thought it was for international students to get information within the frames of career guidance. As expected, none of the themes were considered non-important, as they all were rated as a three or higher. There was a slight variance in opinion between participants, but as seen in the ranking, participants considered the most crucial information from career services to be where to establish useful contacts. They want access to events and interactions that help them establish themselves professionally. Although students are aware of also needing the right tools to enhance networking and employability, these hows and whys seem to be considered slightly less important.

N=19

- Networking- and career-related events: **4,89**
- Job search platforms and approaches (websites, Linked-In, personal emails etc): **4,84**
- Interview skills: **4,84**
- Competence mapping: **4,63**
- Job application skills (CV, cover letters etc): **4,57**
- Finnish work culture and integration (workplace etiquette, values etc): **4,54**
- Internships and training programs: **4,52**
- Finnish labour market knowledge (job market insight, workforce laws, trade unions, collective labour agreements): **4,31**
- Entrepreneurship: **3,78**

Networking events and opportunities related to career building were considered the most valuable prospect, that the career services can offer. Nearly every participant wished for more opportunities to come in contact with companies and employers within their field. The networking opportunities, such as the My Future Work event and the Technology Fair were highly appreciated. Engineers were in general more satisfied with the networking opportunities, than International Business students. Business students felt that there were too few opportunities offered, and not enough companies representing their field present at for example the university's internal My Future Work recruitment and networking event. Amongst both IB and MSE, there is a wanting for real-life learning opportunities and a need for support from career services to find these environments.

It seems evident that preparatory skills, such as knowledge of job search platforms and interview skills, are highly valued as part of the preparation to enter the job market. The themes with lower scores, not considered as important to be highlighted in career services, are explainable by students either having varying interests (entrepreneurship) or already getting that information from elsewhere. For example, information regarding internships has already been sufficiently provided through other personnel and important themes for local employment, such as job market insight and workers' rights have been well covered during courses. It, therefore,

seems that more support and information regarding these latter themes are not experienced as necessary, but students would rather that career services focused on building bridges between students and employers, as well as providing students with personalised advice on their career advancements.

Q9: Regarding future endeavours, are you clear on where you are heading from here in your career? Do you feel you have the skills and tools needed to succeed?

The provided responses indicate a mixed but generally positive perspective on whether international students feel equipped with the necessary tools and clarity for their future careers. Several students feel they have acquired the necessary skills and tools to succeed in their future careers. This includes practical skills gained through their programs and support from the university in terms of equipment and resources.

Many students have a clearer understanding of their career paths now compared to when they first arrived in Finland. They feel more secure and confident in their chosen fields. A few students are still unsure about specific career choices or how to combine their diverse educational and professional backgrounds. This indicates a need for more tailored career guidance and support in navigating interdisciplinary skills.

Access to internships and job placements remains a critical need. Students feel that finding relevant work experience is a barrier, despite having the skills and motivation to succeed.

A recurring theme is the challenge posed by the Finnish language. Students acknowledge the critical role language skills play in securing a job in Finland. Despite having relevant professional skills, the lack of Finnish language proficiency is a significant barrier for many.

Some concerns regarding age and experience surfaced, as some students, particularly those with extensive work experience or who are older, express concerns about their ability to reintegrate into their fields or transition into new ones. They recognise the skills they have gained but are uncertain about their competitiveness in the job market due to these factors.

Overall, international students feel more prepared and have a clearer sense of direction for their careers since coming to Finland and participating in the International Talent Journey. However, significant challenges remain, particularly regarding language proficiency and access to internships.

Q10: Any other feedback?

When asked about general feedback, the answers were mainly positive. Below are some examples of the positive feedback received, as well as some matters with room for improvement.

Positives:

- Happy with all opportunities given. The program has been useful and student has gotten a lot of useful knowledge.
- Feels at home at the university. Has gotten individual help, appreciates that.
- Interesting program, especially for internationals. Should be a win-win, both for students and companies.
- Has been good, to help get familiarised with the system.
- Has enjoyed everything, everyone has been very helpful.

Room for improvement:

- Wants to emphasise teaching and learning about subjects that the local job market requires. Feels there is a lack of relevant subjects within the majors.
 - This program could be mandatory for all (international) students. Students may not know how valuable this support is.
 - Has been good but wants more, especially company visits, contact to working life. Fewer presentations, and more practical assignments.
 - Needs more knowledge of zero-experience jobs, what else is there than cleaning and Wolt.
-

Insights for Future Career Guidance

The feedback indicates a need for continued enhancement of guest lecturer series, increased networking opportunities, practical skills workshops, tailored job search support, and cultural integration initiatives. Expanding these elements will better equip international students to navigate the Finnish job market and achieve their career goals.

1. Enhance Guest Lecturer Series:

- Continue and expand the series of guest lecturers at the career centre, focusing on diverse industries and incorporating more interactive elements.
- Introduce more international speakers and alumni, who can share insight and experience from the perspective of a foreigner settling into the local labour market.
- Include sessions on current trends and innovations in various fields to keep students informed and engaged.

2. Increase Networking Opportunities:

- Organise more events specifically designed to facilitate networking between international students and industry professionals.
- Ensure a diverse representation of companies at events like My Future Work to cater to various fields and languages.
- Facilitate access to internships and practical work experience opportunities to help students gain relevant experience and build professional networks.
- Collaborate with local businesses and organisations to create more internship opportunities for international students.

3. Focus on Practical Skills Workshops:

- Regularly conduct workshops on essential job search skills, including CV writing, LinkedIn optimisation, and portfolio creation.
- Introduce advanced workshops on digital skills, presentation skills, project management, and other in-demand skills to enhance employability.

4. Tailored Job Search Support:

- Provide ongoing support for CV and cover letter writing, LinkedIn profile optimisation, and job application strategies.
- Offer personalised career coaching sessions to address individual needs and career goals.
- Focus on individual aspects and creating job search strategies that take into account personal attributes.

5. Cultural and Social Orientation and Integration:

- Foster more opportunities for international students to collaborate with national students through team-based projects and social events.
 - Enhance cultural orientation programs to include more information on Finnish social customs, workplace culture, and societal norms.
 - Create inclusive environments at social events to ensure all students feel welcome and can build their networks.
 - Promote participation in student unions and local events to help international students build social networks and integrate into the community.
-

Conclusions:

The analysis of the International Talent Journey (ITJ) interviews reveals a complex landscape of experiences and insights from first-year engineering and international business students as they navigate their integration into the Finnish job market. The responses highlight both the challenges and successes encountered by these students, providing a comprehensive understanding of their initial perceptions, adaptation efforts, and the support they received through the ITJ program.

The insights from these responses underscore the necessity for a holistic approach to career guidance that encompasses practical skill development, language and cultural training, networking opportunities, and support for both traditional and entrepreneurial career paths. Emphasising continuous professional development, fostering a supportive community, and providing targeted resources can significantly enhance the career prospects, successful integration and satisfaction of international students.



Co-funded by
the European Union

THIS REPORT REFLECTS THE VIEWS ONLY OF THE AUTHOR, AND THE COMMISSION CANNOT BE HELD RESPONSIBLE FOR ANY USE WHICH MAY BE MADE OF THE INFORMATION CONTAINED THEREIN.