

# International students at Arcada and their local employability

This report contains the most important conclusions from the research within the INTERLOCALITY project on international students and alumni at Arcada. You can read about the bottlenecks they experience with regard to their orientation on the local labour market (internship, side jobs) and the success factors that contribute to finding a suitable job in the region after graduation. The perspectives of local employers, Arcada employees and other stakeholders are also discussed.

Although the labour shortage is high, two important groups with a lot of potential remain outside the labour market: international students and international alumni. They have difficulty finding internships and side jobs during their studies. They also struggle to secure a suitable job in the host country after their studies and therefore often return to their home country or move to a third country. This is clearly a missed opportunity, according to the partners of the [INTERLOCALITY](#) consortium, and the question is how to retain these talented groups in the local regions. Four universities of applied sciences ([UCN](#) in Denmark, [FH Münster](#) in Germany, [Arcada](#) in Finland and [Fontys](#) in the Netherlands) and an agency focused on international labour and student mobility ([SEND](#) from Italy) have joined forces for the INTERLOCALITY project to help their international engineering and business students in their orientation and landing on the regional labour market.

## INTERLOCALITY

The aim of the project is to develop various tools that could improve the preparation and entry of international students into the local labour market, including:

- an International Alumni Monitoring Tool (I AM Talent), which collects information about the career steps of international students and alumni, and their perception of the local labour market;
- activities to support international students in their first steps on the labour market during their studies (International Talent Journey);
- online training courses in guidance & counselling, intercultural sensitivity and employer-ability to increase the knowledge of higher education institution employees, employers and regional actors.

For the development of these tools, interviews were held in the autumn of 2022 with 40 international students and alumni, 40 local employers (SMEs), 15 staff members from the universities of applied sciences involved in the project, and 15 third-sector actors involved in internationalisation on the local labour market. The purpose of these interviews was to map the needs and experiences of the various stakeholders with regard to the local employability of international students. This handout specifically discusses the conclusions relating to international students at Arcada in the capital region of Finland.

## INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

### FACTS AND FIGURES

#### International students in Finnish higher education

In 2023, 15 950 international (non-Finnish nationality) degree students studied at research universities and 15 800 at universities of applied sciences (UASs) in Finland. 9,6% of all students at research universities were international, and 9,1% at UASs. 77% of the international students at research universities and 81% at UASs had non-EU/EEA nationality. (Source: [www.vipunen.fi](http://www.vipunen.fi))

#### Placement one year after graduation

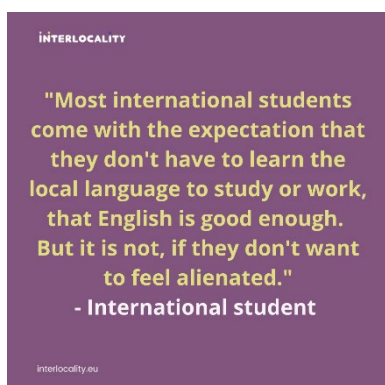
In 2022, only 52% of international graduates from research universities, compared to 91% of graduates with Finnish nationality, had found employment one year after graduation. Only 62% of international graduates from UASs had found employment one year after graduation, compared to 92% of graduates with Finnish nationality. (Source: [www.vipunen.fi](http://www.vipunen.fi))

### INTRODUCTION TO THE LABOUR MARKET

During their studies at Arcada, international students come into contact with the local labour market through e.g. side jobs, internships, projects, or final thesis projects.

The interviews show that it is difficult for many international students to find an internship or a side job. Employment is mainly complicated by not mastering the local languages. Also, not all students have the skills to prepare a CV or motivation letter as expected, or to present themselves well during a job interview. Cultural differences also play a role. The students' and alumni's impressions are that local employers are not always open to international talents. Prejudice appears to be persistent.

Networks appear to have a major influence on finding work. International students and alumni have smaller networks than their local peers. International students would therefore like to receive more guidance in coming into contact with the professional field. They also want more information about the rights and obligations of employers and employees in Finland as well as more local language training.



Once international students start working, they increase their self-confidence. They get to know the local languages and cultures better and gain insight into the local labour market. This helps them with the orientation for the period after graduation. Yet some encounter problems. The informal way of communicating at work appears to take some getting used to. Many also mention not mastering the local languages as a reason for social exclusion at work. They do not always feel like they belong. Many international students therefore prefer a company with many other international employees.



## LANDING ON THE LABOUR MARKET

The interviews show that most international students decide that they want to stay in Finland after graduating (often from a Bachelor's degree programme) to complete a higher degree (Master's) or because they have family or a spouse in Finland. Some also mentioned the well-functioning Finnish society as a reason. Others mentioned a reluctance to return to their countries of origin.

Some of Arcada's international student respondents said that they might leave Finland if they cannot find employment after graduation. They also mentioned difficulties with integration into the host society as a potential reason for leaving. Additionally, possibilities to gain more experience elsewhere were mentioned as push-factors.

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**"I think there's more of a deeper cultural issue, where employers are not necessarily open to outsiders. I've tried to find jobs with or without connections, I had some interviews, but still no luck in the hiring process."**

**- International student**

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**"Speaking as a non-European, there is a visa problem. It has to be applied for by the company. So there's paperwork for them, and extra costs, since it's time consuming. So the company has to be more committed if they want to hire us."**

**- International student**

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For a better transition from study to work, international students and alumni indicate that employers should allow English at the workplace and be more open to people with different cultural backgrounds, even if this means more paperwork in the HR process for people from outside the EU/EEA. They would like it if employers drew up the employment contract and other important documents in English, spent enough time on their onboarding and funded local language lessons. They also find it important that the organisational culture is inclusive so that they feel at home among their colleagues. Training in the field of intercultural awareness or diversity and inclusion could be helpful for this. Students also like it when employers participate in Arcada's career events or graduation projects so that they can get to know each other in an accessible way.

## EMPLOYERS

Interviews with local employers show that there are several reasons for hiring international students and alumni:

- Some employers are having difficulty finding local candidates with the specific knowledge and experience they need to grow their business due to the tight labour market. Recruiting international talents helps to fill these gaps. We see this, especially in the tech sector.
- Other organisations want to expand their business activities and are therefore looking for international talent with knowledge of these new markets. In addition, they bring language skills that are important when expanding into foreign markets or serving a diverse customer base. We see this in both the tech sector and in the domain of international business.
- Recruiting international talents can also aim to increase the cultural diversity of an organisation. International employees bring new perspectives and ideas, which can lead to a more inclusive and innovative work environment.

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**"We just want to work with the best people, and sometimes the best people have an international background."**

**- SME employer**

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We found that many small SMEs find it difficult to recruit and select international students and graduates due to language concerns. They are afraid that international talents who do not speak the local languages will be left out in an organisation with mainly local employees. In some cases, they also feel that the level of English of international students is not high enough when it is not their mother tongue.

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**"In our company we have a certain communication style and way of working. I'm not saying it always comes down to cultural differences, but something we've noticed is that internationals might think we are rude, even though we don't mean to be rude."**

**- SME employer**

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In addition, many employers are unsure about their own level of English or that of their team. Other reasons given for excluding international talent in the recruitment process are cultural differences, the onboarding that would take more time, the bureaucratic steps that need to be taken, the team's prejudices towards foreigners, and the lack of HR departments in smaller SMEs. This means that they might not have resources, nor time for recruiting or onboarding. Smaller SMEs therefore recruited international talents via their own networks or employment organisations (staffing), rather than through advertising open jobs.

Employers would like to receive help with various recruitment matters. For example, they see a need for employer branding to generate more interest in their company among international students and alumni. More intensive collaboration with Arcada for internships and thesis projects is sometimes suggested as a solution to this, as are guest lectures and company visits. They also wished for specific contact persons for internships, for Arcada to act as an intermediary in the employment of international students, for more information about the degree programmes and for collaboration on curriculum development and research projects. From third-sector organisations employers wished for English language support when drawing up job vacancy texts, employment contracts and other important documents. Several employers also wanted to learn how to deal with unconscious bias in recruitment and cultural differences within the team.

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**"There is still work to do when it comes to diversity and inclusion. We have local people who've been working in our company for a very long time. Then driving change to include internationals can sometimes be a bit challenging."**

**- SME employer**

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### Recommendations

- Participate in Arcada's activities to get in touch with international talent;
- Provide employment contracts and other important documents in English;
- Use the services of third-sector organisations for legal and regulatory assistance;
- Facilitate local language courses for international talent within the work environment;
- Create support among other employees for the hiring of an international;
- Educate staff on intercultural awareness to increase knowledge and access practical tips for dealing with intercultural diversity.

## ARCADA AND OTHER ACTORS

The interviews with Arcada employees and other actors show that they know the barriers that international students face. They note that despite this, it is difficult to provide the right support because many national and regional employment initiatives are aimed at local students, general job seekers, or expats (supported by their employers). International students and alumni are often not a specific target group, which means that existing initiatives do not always meet their needs.

It also appears that the support offered by Arcada to international students to increase their employability during their studies is not always used. Some students are not aware of the various services that Arcada offers, others are too busy with their studies and side jobs to engage in other activities in the context of their employability. There is also a group of international students who do not see the need for support services.

**"One step for non-EU talents is to make the visa process easier, especially when your status hasn't changed. And locals need to be more aware of the struggle that people experience, because if you were born and raised here, you do not realize that."**

**- Third-party organization employee**

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In addition, it appears that employers do not tap into all the resources offered when recruiting and selecting internationals. Many SMEs are reluctant to participate in career events or partnerships with higher education institutions because of the time investment. The services that third-sector organisations offer to employers regarding language and regulatory matters are often not used. There is probably a lack of awareness of these initiatives. There is also a group of employers who lack resources and time for recruitment, which leads to internationals being 'automatically' left out, as they are considered a higher risk and more time-consuming to recruit.

INTERLOCALITY

**"A lot of companies are internationally oriented, but they aren't ready to adapt to internationals. There's a difference between hiring or accommodating. Now it's more like: you can join us, as long as you play by our rules."**

**- Higher Education Institution employee**

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The original Dutch handout was created by coordinating researcher Loes van Beuningen and researcher Dick Siesling. Sandra Slotte, INTERLOCALITY Project Manager at Arcada, has edited the information according to the data collected for Finland and Arcada.

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