

AUDIT OF THE UNIVERSITY OF EASTERN FINLAND

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Auditointivuosi **2023**, Karvin julkaisu **7:2023**

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ISBN **978-952-206-789-0 pdf**

4.1 An evaluation area selected by the HEI

- Korkeakoulun itsearviointi

University of Eastern Finland as a study and work environment for international students and employees

One of the key priorities of the University of Eastern Finland's strategy is internationalisation. The key to internationalisation is not only to recruit international staff and students successfully, but also to engage them in the university community. In order to achieve this, the university has chosen as its optional assessment topic *The University of Eastern Finland as a study and working environment/community for international students and employees*

Orientation and integration of staff in the workplace community

At the university, the staff orientation model is the same for both Finnish and international staff. Although the process itself is similar, more in-depth orientation training is provided for international staff, both at the university level and in faculties, and content is tailored as needed.

Induction framework at UEF



Figure 10 Induction framework at UEF

The university has piloted the 'Working in Finnish Universities' online orientation package. UEF has a 10-step orientation package (online), which sets out the key issues for each new employee.

Welcome to the Team events are held twice a year, in the autumn and spring semesters. Orientation topics include: 'Working at the UEF – employment relationship' and 'Living and working in Finland – essentials of Finnish social security, taxation and health care'.

In accordance with Section 35(2) of the Universities Act (558/2009), the administrative language of the University of Eastern Finland is Finnish. Bilingualism is consolidated in the official policies and institutions of the University. In accordance with the language guidelines of the university, the languages of the university's meetings are Finnish or English, which can also be used in parallel to ensure everyone's participation. The languages of the meetings should be chosen so that everyone can participate. Language choices are announced in advance, for example in the invitation to the meeting.

The coexistence of Finnish and English in the university's functions (the UEF Board, University Collegiate Body, and the Faculty Councils) is made possible by the translation of agendas and minutes in cases in which the function includes non-Finnish speakers. In addition, it has been agreed that the meetings of the steering groups and faculty councils are to be announced in both Finnish and English in order to promote participation.

The university encourages its international staff to learn Finnish and has made Finnish language courses available. Diversity and cultural awareness training is provided for all staff. The goal is

increasing the bilingual culture of dialogue at different levels.

The university's Human Resources Services help faculties and units with the orientation of incoming international staff, whether in relation to the workplace community or the practicalities of living in Finland. For international people coming to work at the university, information is available on [a public website](#). Further guidance for staff hosting international staff is available on the Heimo website. The actual orientation and integration into the workplace community takes place at the unit/department level. In services with a high number of international staff, the picture is different from that of services with a low number of international staff. As a result, the need for support also varies from unit to unit.

The Faculty of Science and Forestry has the highest proportion of international staff among the university's faculties. The faculty has invested in the orientation process and refined the general orientation guidelines with a faculty-level induction. The A.I Virtanen Institute for Molecular Science has a particularly long history of working to integrate international staff into the workplace community. The NeuroInnovation doctoral programme has done an excellent job of prepping new recruits through virtual meetings even before they arrive in Finland.

There were no significant differences between the responses of international staff and Finnish staff in the University Services Service Survey. Only in terms of access to staff training did international staff perceive the situation to be worse than that of Finnish staff.

Integrating international students into the university community

International students have access to the same study opportunities and learning environments, as well as accommodation in campus towns and cities as Finnish students. Students have been shown to generally group up within their own reference group. However, according to the surveys and questionnaires carried out, international students would like to be more integrated into the wider student community. In addition, employment in the region requires integration into Finnish life.

International students have access to international career services, which should be strengthened. While students see career guidance as important, both the university's and campus cities' (incl. Employment Offices) career guidance and integration services are poorly known. International students have their own tutoring, and in the future the intention is to combine both domestic and international tutoring. Weekly meetings of the network of coordinators of international master's programmes and international student services promote collaboration and the development of common operational model.

International students would like more information and support on issues such as:

- Finnish language and workplace culture, e.g., a FAQ page or Q&A questionnaire

- Employment-related administrative activities, such as residence permits
- Events where businesses and students meet and network
- Career stories of international students who have found employment
- Personalised career guidance at different stages of their studies

In addition to the services provided to international staff and students, the broad promotion of internationalisation also requires measures for the university community as a whole. The key is to make the identified development needs visible. The university’s diversity work outlines measures to promote this objective.

Internationalisation and diversity have been a university-wide theme in the university level.

Internal audits between 2020 and 2022. In the faculties’ and units’ own internal audits, the following findings emerged from interviews with management, staff, and students. International staff were also interviewed.

Diversity and internationalisation: General audit findings
For the most part, the university's basic principle of equal treatment is implemented well
Bilingualism is common in meetings and English-language material is already relatively widely available. However, better opportunities for international staff to use and practise Finnish in discussions without changing the language of conversation to English were requested.
More informal guidance and administrative messages should also be in English.
People from different backgrounds are generally well integrated into the workplace. However, international staff felt somewhat left out of the activities of the units, as they are not always necessarily included in the discussion and daily activities. This leaves them out of social contact or feeling ignored.
There is a wide range of services and information available for both staff and students, but the biggest challenge is to find the right information and service among all the information.
The communication is bilingual across the different channels and the visual communications are also designed to reflect different nationalities and cultures.
From the perspective of those working with international staff, information about new employees is not passed on to HR in a timely manner and they do not reach all new employees in a timely manner. The quality of the orientation also varies greatly from one institution to another. Significantly more time would be needed for the individual orientation of international workers.
Career progression opportunities were seen as largely equal, and recruitment is very responsive to candidates from different backgrounds. Qualifications, expertise, and suitability for the job are the main factors influencing recruitment. More international staff are employed than before and in a range of positions, including management.
There is no difference in access to complementary research funding and salary levels between international and Finnish staff.
Finnish and international staff work in the same offices. This was seen as facilitating integration and developing language skills on both sides.

Figure 11 Findings from internal audits

Strengths

Services for international staff and students have been strengthened at different levels

Informal meetings between management and international staff

Internationalisation and diversity as part of university management training provides approaches and tools for supervision.

In the recruitment process, materials and guidance are available in Finnish and English and the application process is transparent

Leadership's information sessions and other staff events are bilingual and material is available in two languages.

The integration of international staff into the workplace community has been identified as a strong area for development

The UEF trainee programme supports the employment of international students

Enhancement areas

Developing skills in workplace services for diversity mainstreaming

Systematic use of feedback from international students and staff

Involving international staff and students in decision-making

Developing a comprehensive orientation for international staff

In cooperation with campus cities and authorities, working together to integrate staff and their families

Strengthening career services for international students

UEF as a study and work environment for international students and employees

- Auditointiryhmän arvio

Suitable and timely choice of topic

The audit team commends UEF for its choice of “UEF as a study and work environment for international students and employees”. The audit team thinks that this was a timely, relevant choice of topic that resonated with many of the individuals the audit team interviewed.

The SAR shows a high level of ambition in this area and that many steps have been taken in recent years to improve internationalization. Evaluating the experiences of international staff and students in university surveys and other evaluations is a positive activity that should be continued. The copious next steps identified by the university is a clear strength.

It was clear from interviews that is widely known across the university that internationalization is a goal at UEF. There was wide acknowledgement in the interviews that great progress has been made on internationalization in the recent past. Areas like the new language use policy and updated welcoming processes were highlighted as places where meaningful changes have been implemented. However, it was also clear that there are still many challenges facing international individuals studying and working at UEF. The process to internationalize the university, to make it an excellent place to work and study for all people, has begun well but is still in progress and some steps are still needed.

International staff see progress, but needs further support

The interviewed international staff valued their working relationship with the university. They recognized the work the university has done to become more international staff friendly in recent years. However, international staff still face many hurdles in their employment experiences. The audit team recommends that resources are allocated to improving the international staff experience, including continual monitoring, and improving of the international staff experience by leadership.

The first two years of Finnish language courses for staff were generally praised. However, language is still a barrier to participation in many areas of university governance. In interviews, international staff reported that the university-offered staff language courses were insufficient to bring language learners to a level of Finnish advanced enough to participate in governance and other activities at the university. This restricts their ability to engage and advance as employees at the university and hinders their integration into the community. Continuing advanced language trainings would not necessarily have to be expensive or complicated: mentoring arrangements, regular casual learn-professional-Finnish meetups, informal or formal tutoring, mutually beneficial paired language learning, and other mechanisms could allow the goals to be achieved efficiently and at relatively low cost. The audit team recommends UEF to enhance Finnish language learning opportunities for international staff.

The implementation of the new language policy was cited as encouraging internationalization. It allows everyone to participate in meetings and decision making regardless of language abilities. Some units, especially the student union, are doing excellent work: they provide interpreters for non-Finnish speakers or pro-actively decide the language of the meeting at the start of the meeting based on the abilities of the speakers present. The presence of multilingual materials was common, but continual improvement on this axis is important. Some unit members reported being essentially unable to participate in governance or other group work tasks due to language challenges. The audit team recommends UEF to ensure that all community members, regardless of language skills, can participate in decision making and governance. Sharing the best practices of the units already successfully implementing multilingual practices would be a good way to move forward.

The audit team considers it a strength that internationalization and diversity training is a component of management training. From the interviews the audit team learned that the workplace experiences of international staff were highly variable based on unit. Some units were exceptionally well integrated, developed to a point where internationalization was the norm and managers understood the challenges faced by international staff. However, in some units it was reported that this was not the case. Supervisors should know the importance of their role for

international staff and understand the challenges international staff face. International staff friendly procedures should be integrating throughout the university. While all managers cannot be responsible for all components of an international staff member's experience (housing, visa, health care, etc.), supervisors should know who to turn to for assistance in these matters.

Professional development opportunities for international staff are growing at UEF. However, some international staff reported a lack of ability to progress career-wise or seeing no career potential at the university due to their international status, despite reporting working hard to try to succeed. Some of the lack of ability to progress career-wise was due to language challenges, but other challenges were also cited. Some of the professional development opportunities are still in Finnish only. It was also reported that non-Finnish-speaking staff had reduced capabilities to participate in CV-building events. The audit team recommends UEF to enhance the professional developments to non-Finnish-speaking staff.

Attracting new international talent is vogue and attracts a lot of attention. Multiple international staff pointed out that retaining and supporting the international staff who are currently present does not receive a similar focus as new international staff. Staff felt that enhancing support for existing international staff would likely reap long-term rewards. Support both in the short term, like finding housing, helping with health insurance, visas, and language, and long term, like helping identify career paths and facilitating progression along them, were viewed as important.

While career security seems similar for international and Finnish individuals on the surface, the two groups do not experience career security in a similar manner. International staff often lack local support networks and may face serious ramifications if they lose employment contracts, such as expulsion from the country. The lack of employment security will lead, and reportedly has already led, to international staff leaving the university.

Employment security support is critical for the well-being of international staff, and this support needs to be maintained throughout employment relationships. Employment security challenges were reported in the audit visit even after multiple years of continuous employment and extremely hard work at integration. The audit team thus recommends the university explore avenues to enhance career progression opportunities and the career security of existing international staff.

International students have good experiences, but progress is still possible

Students reported general satisfaction with their programs, many caring faculty members and staff, and good overall experiences. International students praised the educational language skills of the faculty members and reported that excellent English language instruction and educational materials were provided. Teaching and learning methods were generally praised, with faculty

described as approachable and characterized by a lack of hierarchy. The flexibility of the system, including of deadlines and program contents, was highly praised.

The educational model used in Finnish higher education institutions frequently requires independent planning and execution. However, some international students may not be used to this. They reported suffering from a lack of guidance in their studies and a difficulty adjusting to the Finnish system. Students requested more guidance when creating personal study plans and a reduction in the number of self-study courses, especially in core- and early-in-the-program courses. The audit team recommends that international students should have support as they transition to learning in the Finnish style. The structure of courses and programs targeted to international students should be evaluated to determine whether the course structures are optimal for them.

International students reported that individual meetings with their program coordinators were often extremely useful. However, at the same time, several students reported in the interviews that it was difficult to figure out who to approach with problems and that some pinballing of problems – being sent from person to person with no resolution – occurred. As identified in the university's internal audits, there is a wide range of services and information available, but the challenge is to help students and staff find the right service or information. The audit team recommends that the university pursue techniques to facilitate international students and staff to find the services and information that they need. UEF should develop a system to regularly obtain feedback from international staff and students on this topic.

In the audit visit, students generally praised hybrid course offerings. Online, or at least hybrid, courses can provide flexibility for international students who may need, for example, to travel to other countries on short notice. In the interviews, some international students reported not wanting to take solely online courses. Thus, the audit team recommends continual evaluation of course modality in international programs. Modality is important to ensuring the success and well-being of students.

International students report that the welcome works well. The services for international students have been strengthened at the university. They still miss comprehensive career planning. Students reported a lack of support in finding jobs or internships. Others spoke of differences between opportunities at different campuses: international students at the Joensuu campus reported that there were fewer career-related events, as career fairs were mainly held in Kuopio. International students reported in interviews and the workshops that it was challenging to interact and form a community with native Finnish students despite a strong desire to do so. Some of them pointed out that the activities and social media accounts of the student groups are in Finnish. Therefore, they do not include international students who have limited Finnish skills. The audit team recommends better support and mentoring for international students, and more opportunities for them to meet Finnish students.

More international experience and intercultural competence for all students and staff needed

The audit team considers the university is ready to take the next step in internationalization: to regard international students and staff as integrated into the university community. To do this is to embrace international staff and students who are coming to the university as individuals who have an impact on the university, who will change and transform the university through their presence and experiences. Yet the audit team observed in interviews and workshops that the focus of the university was on how to integrate international staff and students into the existing university community, viewing them as an "other" coming in who should be integrated into the existing culture. A more productive view could be that those in the university community gain and learn from the international staff and students and build a joint, hybrid culture that is neither wholly Finnish nor wholly international.

The audit team recommends that the university have a stronger focus on Finnish staff obtaining more international experience and intercultural competence. It could happen in interaction with existing international students and staff who are present at the university. It can also potentially happen through other mechanisms like staff mobility and student exchange.