

A Study of the Experiences of International Students in Obtaining Training Placements in Central Finland

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Abstract <p>One of the many experiences a student may meet during his or her time in the Jyväskylä University of Applied Sciences is that of the internship and practical training period. This thesis focuses on the various experiences of the students. The main objective is to find out the experiences of international students in their quest for obtaining practical training placements in Central Finland, and what can be done to improve their chances of finding suitable internship placements.</p> <p>The research was carried out via interview and questionnaire. Most of the data was gathered in a face-to-face interview. For those unable to meet due to various constraints, they were given the questionnaire to be filled in and returned via email. Some input was also given from the author's own experiences as an international student searching for internships in Finland.</p> <p>The minor details of the results varied from person to person, but much of the overall facts are that the students would like to do their training placements in Central Finland and help is required to allow more of them to do so. The reasons for the current unsteady success rate can be attributed to a lack of language skills, location of the placement, or just an overall complete lack of placements that would accept the student(s).</p> <p>In the end of the thesis, possible solutions are given which may be implemented by the school and the students.</p>		
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1 INTRODUCTION

This Bachelor's thesis focuses on a particular aspect of the lives of foreign students. That particular aspect is the quest for a practical training placement in the Central Finland region. The thesis will go through various things that influence the students' efforts, from language issues to location issues. It will also aim to propose new ideas and methods that would be helpful for the students. Such ideas could be implemented by the school to further assist students in their quest.

The questionnaires used in the thesis have been made from the point of view of one that has gone through the same processes as the other students questioned, and it has been made in a way that would help gather the most valuable aspects of the problem at hand.

The benefits of this research are available to all of the parties involved: the student, the school, and the businesses. Better training support from the school means that companies in coordination with the school can receive young students with fresh ideas as well as international views that can be very valuable for certain companies.

To sum up, the questions being asked by this thesis are: **“What are the experiences of international students in obtaining internships in Central Finland?”**, and **“What can be done to improve the situation for them?”**.

2 THE PROBLEM

The problem on which this thesis focuses is that of the international students of the degree programmes in International Business and Facility Management and their search for internships in the Central Finland region. The reason for the research into the problem is to help those international students that would like to have a training placement in Central Finland but are unable to obtain a placement due to various reasons.

There are numerous reasons why many of the students are unable to obtain internship placements. Most of these reasons center on language issues. These issues are usually the hardest to overcome for both students and businesses. The lack of Finnish language skills often deters students from seeking internships, and those that do seek out training placements find that the lack of Finnish skills lowers their success rates. For most businesses it is of course important that their trainees speak Finnish to some degree or another. However, a fair to good grasp of the language is often desired.

Another reason for the lack of success is location. The location of students is almost always within the city of Jyväskylä. While internships may be acquired in other areas of the Central Finland region, traveling outside of Jyväskylä is, for the students, a very large undertaking. Various factors contribute to this, the main two of which are the lack of funds and the cost of moving to another city for a short period of time (and usually while maintaining a residence in Jyväskylä).

A third reason may be partly due to the school itself. The school may have multiple resources available to assist the Finnish students in their quests for internships, but, as Niles and Harris-Bowlsbey (2009, 380) have stated: “Historically, international students have not received sufficient assistance with

their career developments.” When the quote is applied to JAMK, it shows that non-Finnish students have a harder time when it comes to certain issues such as internships. While the school does offer assistance to international students, it may not be as efficient or affective as the assistance given to Finnish students. In most cases, the assistance also comes from Finnish advisors that may or may not be “sensitive to concerns of international students (Op. cit. p. 380).”

3 BACKGROUND AND REASONS FOR RESEARCH

3.1 The Role of Practical Training

“People do not just learn in order to work. They learn at work (Jarvis, Holford & Griffin 2003, 129).”

Practical training is meant to provide many things for students, especially international students. There are four key areas in which practical training plays a part: career development, networking, supporting knowledge learned in school, and cultural adaptation. For international students, networking and cultural adaptation can be seen as the most important areas of the four, especially if the student intends to stay in the country.

In terms of career development, practical training can provide a good basis by which a student can gain knowledge and training in a field that may be previously unfamiliar, and it can strengthen the skills and knowledge held by those students with prior experience. Due to the nature of the internship, it allows a student to experience more than just the normal duties of regular employees. This allows the student to have a broader knowledge of the workings of the company. The internship may also serve as a guide for future plans for the student by basing his or her plans on the experiences obtained. A training placement may also expose the student to a previously unknown career path which he or she may decide to follow (Open & hidden labour markets, 2009).

During a training placement a student may meet others in the field and accumulate an informal list of contacts in the business. This networking can be very beneficial for international students that may have no contacts in the business, especially in a new country. Obtaining the right business contacts can be the major factor in finding work after the completion of studies, since good

contacts can be used for references when applying for jobs, or, as the case may be, the student may find a job through a contact. Good networking can be particularly beneficial as it may give the student a chance to stand out from a crowd of other job applicants. Networking is extremely useful when it comes to the hidden job market, which makes up roughly 70-80 percent of the whole market of available jobs. The reason these jobs are “hidden” is that they are not advertised openly in public sources, but more so among those within the company (Open & hidden labour markets, 2009).

Practical training can also be useful in applying the knowledge learned in school to real world situations. Specialized courses in school may help to augment the training experience. Training placements may also be used to further add to the knowledge learned in a classroom but also to possibly make the subject matter more coherent. For example, a student may learn in school about customer service in a hotel, but without any practical first hand experience the teachings may not have the full affect. The first hand experience would not only give the student an idea of the real world application of the knowledge but also allow him or her to use the methods taught for any particular situation. Practical training also allows the students to update their knowledge. While most teachers may strive to give students up-to-date knowledge about their subjects, there is a high possibility for the students to receive information that is out of date. Therefore, practical training serves to further enforce what is learned as well as give some updated information on the workplace. As Jarvis, Holford & Griffin (2003, 67) stated: “In a rapidly changing world, the workplace has therefore become an important site for learning.” (Expertise through practical training, 2009).

For the school itself, the practical training period is used as a reinforcement of the knowledge learned but also as a means to give students work experience. While the school is based on student-centered classroom learning, in which the student is able to recall past experiences to assist in his or her learning, the addition of

practical training allows the student to gather more experience or to gather completely new experiences that will ultimately help to further his or her education (Jarvis, Holford & Griffin 2003, 66).

For the international student, cultural adaptation is probably one of the most important things that a practical training placement can offer. A training placement is good for cultural adaptation because the student gets the opportunity to work with those native to the culture and get first-hand information regarding work culture dos and don'ts. This first-hand information and the ability to use it and see it in action will give the student a better understanding of the theories at work. While the school may teach some aspects of the working life culture to the international students, an internship will not only reinforce those teachings but may also allow the students to gain information about some cultural aspects that may not have been explained. The placement will also give the students the opportunity to apply their teachings themselves, further reinforcing what has been learned. Training in a company in a foreign country may also offer the chance for a student to further his or her knowledge of the language, not only the everyday language but also the formalities and nuances of the working life language. A stronger grasp of the native language can help to create a stronger cultural bond; however, learning the language is only second to learning the culture. (Sarles, J. 2001.)

3.2 Current Projects

Currently the school only has a few small ways in which it can offer any assistance for international students searching for internships in Finland. At the moment a programme is being made that will give students information on the labor market in Central Finland, as well as information about job seeking tips, working culture, and legal issues revolving around things such as work permits, etc. The programme is currently nearing completion and is expected to be finished by the end of 2009, with a launch date scheduled for some time in early

2010. There is also a database being planned in relation to the project. The database will hold all of the international students from JYU, JAMK, and JAO. Employers will be able to search through the database using keywords in order to find students suitable for their company for internships as well as jobs. (Torkkola, 2009.)

Outside of JAMK there is also Jykes, a company that promotes and develops businesses, has teamed with Human Technology to provide a similar service as those in JAMK, but aimed at foreigners in general. Like the JAMK programme, the Jykes programme focuses on the whole of Central Finland. Though the Jykes programme is aimed towards foreigners in general, it is still available to students. The programme is also in the form of a guide to the would-be foreign job seeker, incorporating such things as a working guide, information on how to find a job, and other information concerning general living in the Central Finland area. It also offers a similar service for would-be students, also with information concerning the working environment. Ultimately, the programme offers job seekers, both student and non-student, links to job vacancy portals. (Jykes, 2009.)

3.3 Main Research Questions

The basis of this research is to find out what kind of experiences are being had by foreign students in Finnish training placements and what can be done to help those foreigners that are not able to find a training placement in Finland. The main research questions are as follows:

- **What are the difficulties faced by foreign students when searching for a job in Finland?**

- **What are the experiences of international students in practical training placements in Finland?**

- **What can be done by the school to help the students find internships in Finland?**

4 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

4.1 Qualitative Research

In quantitative research the data can be described and presented in numerical form and are usually represented in a table or graph. The questions presented in such research are usually in multiple choice formats. Such formats severely limit the range in which the sample group may express themselves. In qualitative research, however, "...researchers want those who are studied to speak for themselves (Ely, M., Anzul, M. 1991, 4)." Therefore, qualitative research is used in situations where the quality of information is more important than quantity. The types of questions used are often open-ended and are meant to provoke an in-depth response. Such responses make up for the lack of quantity by providing more quality information. Because of the types of questions involved, qualitative research is usually carried out in person, however, it is also possible that the interviewees receive questionnaires to be filled in by themselves. (Ten Have, P. 2004, 4-5.)

Qualitative research was chosen due to the relatively small sample size as well as the need for in-depth information. The use of open-ended questions was done to allow the interviewees to express their own opinions and thoughts as opposed to adhering to the constraints of the multiple-choice answer format. Due to the fact that quantitative research would have restricted the amount and possibly the quality of the data gathered, qualitative research was deemed to be the better option. Had I formed the questionnaires in a way to resemble quantitative research, there may be some instances in which a student is not able to answer with the correct answer and may therefore answer with another option. For example, if I did not have his or her correct answer listed, he or she may have put a different answer that may have skewed the facts or given the wrong impression about the phenomenon. It is also possible that some of the questions would not be able to be answered in a style similar to quantitative research.

While qualitative research was chosen as the better option, it also has its drawbacks. One main drawback may be the truthfulness of the answers. In an interview-based questionnaire session, the interviewee may encounter some questions which may be met with false answers. Some reasons for this could be, for example: the question was somehow personal and the interviewee did not want to give the right answer, the student is bound to some agreement that would prevent him or her from giving certain information or the student cannot recall the answer to the question and decides to give another answer. Another drawback is the potential for bias in the questions. The bias may range from things like the types of questions presented, which may be formed from a one-sided or based on a single point of view, to the way in which the interviewees are chosen.

The three different questionnaires were sent to roughly fifteen students. The fifteen were divided equally, with five students per questionnaire. The students were not given a time limit to complete the questionnaire; however, most of the questionnaires were received within two to three weeks of being sent. Though not all of the questionnaires were received, it was decided to just use those that were as opposed to waiting on the others.

4.2 Data Collection Methods

In this thesis there are three methods of data collection used: questionnaires, interviews, and browsing the Internet. Most of the data gathered was done via the use of questionnaires. The questionnaires were sent out in electronic format via E-mail and were received in the same format. Some of those students that received questionnaires were also interviewed in person for further information regarding some points that required more details. The rest of the information was

gathered via browsing the Internet and using search engines to seek out the required information.

4.3 Thought Process Behind the Questionnaire

There were three questionnaires were developed for this thesis. Each of the questionnaires were assigned to one of the three groups being studied: those that have done / are doing a training placement in Finland, those that have not done a training placement in Finland, and new students that have yet to start seeking out a training placement. Each group was analyzed to determine what types of questions best suited each of the three.

The first questionnaire was given to the group consisting of students that were successful in finding a training placement in Finland. The questions for this questionnaire are based mainly on personal experiences. The questions were meant to cover most of the basic aspects of the training periods while still being applicable to all interviewees, regardless of training placement. One of the main topics for the first questionnaire is about the level of Finnish possessed by the interviewee. This question is the only one present in some form or another in all of the questionnaires. A few of the other questions focused on the interviewee's placement searching process and what steps were taken in securing the internship.

The second questionnaire was given to those students that have yet to find a training placement in Finland or have decided not to do their placement in Finland. As mentioned before, one of the main focuses was the level of Finnish amongst the students in the group. Another focus was on the internship searching process used by the students in the group. It was planned that the answers for those two focus areas would be used together to determine if there was some obvious reason as to why the students were unable to find a placement in Finland.

The third questionnaire, given to new students, was formed on the basis that those new students have not yet begun to search for training placements. Therefore, the questions are mostly based with the future in mind, such as if the students have any desire to do their internships in Finland.

4.4 Analyzing and Assembling the Data

Due to the timing most of the questionnaires were sent via e-mail as it was not possible to meet with many of the interviewees; however, those that were able to meet were given a face-to-face interview. While there was no deadline given, most of the e-mailed questionnaires were returned within three weeks. The instructions for the questionnaires were sent in the e-mails to the students. After all of the questionnaires were completed and received, they were organized according to questionnaire type and from there were analyzed with the other questionnaires in the group. The analysis of the questionnaires was done so that the questions which received quite different answers were analyzed more so than others.

5 ANALYSIS OF DATA

5.1 Discussion of the Results

5.1.1 Questionnaire 1: Those students that have done their training in Finland

The first questionnaire was sent out to those students that have done their practical training in Finland. The group consisted of four students: three students from the degree programme in Facility Management and one from the degree programme in International Business. Two of the interviews were conducted in person and the other two answered the questionnaire via e-mail.

Two of the four students were quite successful in acquiring internships on the first try. The third student found his internship after searching at the most five places. All three of those students found their internships with the assistance of school officials or through contacts that have been made during school such as guest lecturers. The fourth student searched in many different places for an internship, sending out countless applications, but in the end was successful through the help of a friend. Two of the students had other training options available to them; however, for both of the students there was only one other option. All of the students in this group had no experience in the training field before they entered into their respective training placements.

Three of the students claimed to have a good knowledge of the Finnish language, while the fourth student knows only the basics. Only two of those claiming a good knowledge of the language also use the language on a regular basis, so it can be assumed that they have improved their skills since their training placement. The amount of time spent learning Finnish in the classroom varied between individual, however those with a good knowledge of the language said that they studied the language for about a year to a year and a half. The fourth student had only been

studying the language for about a half year at the time of his training. The same student is a native English speaker and only speaks English and Finnish while the other students know at least one more language other than Finnish and English. All of the students believe that their skills in the Finnish language were beneficial in helping them to secure training placements.

Two of the students believe that they were treated quite well and that they received a lot of special training, more so than the average employee. One of the students did not receive any special training but was treated as a normal employee. The last student felt that she experienced a mixture of treatment, from being a normal employee and receiving some special training to being treated more along the lines of free help. However, she attributes this range of different treatment to restructuring in the company at that time. Overall, all of the students felt that they were given the chance to perform tasks that were viewed as important and that were not given to normal employees.

Half of the students were highly satisfied with their training placements and felt that it gave them a good view of how things operate in their respective fields. They believe that it also helped to improve some of the information gathered during school, adding a practical element to what was learned. The other half of the students were only satisfied, however they claim to have similar feelings about how the internships helped with school teachings. If asked, most of the students would go back to work for their companies as normal employees. One of the students would not go back because by the end of his training he had acquired a different job. Of the four students only two were asked by their training placements to continue working as normal employees. One of those students continued on as a normal employee for only a few months while the other student has been employed since the end of her training period.

5.1.2 Those students that did not find a training placement in Finland

The second questionnaire was sent to students that have not been successful in finding a training placement in Finland. The group consists of only two students, both from the degree programme in Facility Management. One of the interviews was carried out in person while the other was completed and returned through e-mail.

During their search for a training placement the students searched the school website but were unable to find any suitable placements, as all of those listed on the school site were meant for Finnish students. The two students also sought help from a few school officials but were unsuccessful in finding any possible internship. For those reasons they have turned to other outlets for training placements, however they have not yet been able to find any good connections that would offer them placements.

Both of the students are interested in training placements in Jyväskylä because moving away for a short period of time and for little to no money is not practical for them and “more trouble than it is worth”, according to one student. In regards to leaving the town for training, the two students stated issues with the following: finding a new apartment both in the town to which he is going and in Jyväskylä for when he came back, getting all of his belongings to the new apartment or finding a place to store them in Jyväskylä while he is gone, and the possible limited time frame in which the previous two things could be accomplished.

The two students both claimed a good knowledge of the Finnish language and felt that they could get by with it in everyday life. They both believed that it was not because of their language skills that they were unable to find a job placement in Jyväskylä.

5.1.3 First year students

The third questionnaire was sent to first year students. The group consists of five students, with two from the degree programme in International Business and the others from the degree programme in Facility Management. All of the students interviewed were done so via e-mail.

While all of the students were interested in doing their internships in Finland some of them also expressed doubt as to whether or not they would be able to find any placements. All of the students said that they would look to school officials for information regarding training placement possibilities, as well as the school website.

From this group only one student claimed to have a good knowledge of Finnish. The other students claimed knowledge of only the basics or very little at all. Those students that claimed to have a lower level of the language stated that they believe it may cause problems for them in acquiring an internship in Finland; however, they hope that their skills will improve by the time they look for training placements.

Overall, the general consensus of the third group was that if a training placement were offered in Finland from the school or other source, they would accept the position.

5.2 Possible Benefits

There are numerous possible benefits that may be gained from the data presented in this thesis. The main benefit is that more international students should have the option of completing their internships in Finland. While all of the

international students do have the option of completing their internship in Finland, it is not always possible for various reasons. Therefore, the aim is to make the option as realistic and easy as possible. This means that students will hopefully not have to worry as much about finding job placements and should not have to spend time dealing with training placement problems.

Another benefit could be that of a stronger school and working life relationship. Allowing students to apply their knowledge in the working life is not only beneficial for the school and the students but also for the businesses that cooperate with the school, in that the students can be trained for future positions in the company as well as the idea that they can bring in fresh ideas.

One of the more prominent reasons is so that the school may find ways to assist the students in the future. With this information the school can improve upon any existing programme as well as design future programmes that may improve the chances that a student will find an internship in Finland.

5.3 Proposals for Improvement

One of the main things that the school can do is to improve the relationship between itself and local businesses. The school has many guest lecturers from these local businesses and it may be possible to set up some programme with them that would allow the international students to do their training placements with one of the companies. The companies may also have ties with other companies that could offer training placements for the international students. Another proposal along those lines is that the school could incorporate more working life experiences in the schooling. Such experiences could be anything from visiting more local workplaces to having some classes in the workplace.

It is also possible that the school could increase the number of Finnish courses that international students may take. While there are a few basic Finnish courses, the school could offer more courses such as “Working Life Finnish” or any course that could help improve the language skills of those students wishing to work in Finland. Even though most of the students felt that they had a good understanding of the language, many claimed that a few more courses may have helped them gain vital skills that could have assisted them in obtaining training placements.

Another way of gaining more placements for students is to get the placement information from those students that have recently completed their internships in Finland. By doing so it is possible for the school to compile a list of businesses in which international students have successfully completed their practical training period. The list could be posted on the school study forums for the use of future students. The list may contain information such as the type of job or field of operation, the contact person within the company, the location, the suggested or accepted time period for training, and any possible benefits that may be offered from the company.

6 CONCLUSION

In the end it can be summed up that international students seeking internships in Finland will, under the current conditions and systems in place, have mixed luck in actually obtaining any training placement. At the moment, most of the success relies on the students' efforts and how active they are in obtaining placements. Even for some students a training placement is still difficult to obtain no matter how hard they try, as was shown by one of the students from the first questionnaire set. While a student's desired placement may be elusive, he or she should not give up as there are times when internships can be easily obtained.

In the future, with the help of the school, it is possible that foreign students will have an easier time obtaining training placements. Using the school's close relationship to working life aspects, the number of placement options for students can greatly increase. Having a high success rate of foreigners obtaining internships in Central Finland can help to improve the school's image of it being a sort of link between schooling and working life, as well as make it a more attractive prospect for future students.

Overall, supporting international students in their search for training placements is beneficial to all parties involved. The students benefit from having a proper internship in a region in which they are interested. The school benefits with an improved image as well as having students that have obtained valuable practical knowledge. Businesses also benefit from having the opportunity to bring in outsiders that would not only learn from them but may also be able to offer something in return.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1. Questionnaire for those that have done their training in Finland

1. How many places did you look before you found a successful training placement? From where did you find your internship? Did you have other options?

2. Did you have any prior experience in the type of work involved with your internship?

3. What is your level of Finnish? Do you use it regularly? How long have you been studying Finnish? Do you feel that your language skills helped you to get the placement?

4. Do you have any other language skills?

5. How well were you treated in the company? Do you feel that you were allowed to perform special tasks not given to normal employees?

Appendix 2. Questionnaire for those that have yet to find a placement

1. From where did you search for an internship? If you did find a placement(s), why were you not able to accept it/them?
2. Are you interested in placements only in Jyväskylä or the whole of Finland? Why or why not?
3. What is the level of your Finnish? Do you feel that it helped or harmed your chances in obtaining a training placement in Finland?

Appendix 3. Questionnaire for first-year students regarding internships

1. Are you interested in doing your internship in Finland?
2. How would you go about acquiring a training placement?
3. What is the level of your Finnish? Do you think it will help you in obtaining a training placement?
4. If the school were able to guarantee you a placement in Finland, would you accept it?