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The barriers in the employment of international students in Vaasa

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ABSTRACT:

The Finnish labor market will see a deficiency in the labor force in near future: a gap that could be filled with skilled international talents. However, studies indicate that international degree students trained at Finnish universities, many of whom would like to stay in Finland after graduation, are forced to move out due to employment difficulties. The purpose of this study was to identify barriers that influence the employment of international students in Vaasa and what could be done to overcome these barriers to improve the employment prospects of foreign students. The research was carried out as a qualitative study by interviewing five individuals in Vaasa that fulfilled the status of an international student.

The most significant barriers international students in Vaasa experience are related to language and work experience. Cultural barriers appear prominent especially for students coming from outside Europe and cultures far apart from the Finnish culture. Challenges regarding networking and job search skills were also significant for some respondents. Discrimination is proven to hamper employment from students, which can be evaluated to be employers' unwillingness to recruit foreign students. To overcome these barriers, cooperation between higher education institutions and employers in Vaasa need to be increased. Together they should create a supportive community for the career development of international students. University curriculums need to be altered to serve the needs of international students to support their learning and integration. To alleviate discrimination and overcome the underlying attitudes and lack of receptivity from employers in Vaasa, requires changing attitudes towards hiring international students as well as establishing more practices that include diversity and inclusion whilst also lowering requirements for foreign students. Vaasa needs consider these development practices not only for the sake of international student retention but also to prevent them from relocating to other cities in Finland in the pursuit of better possibilities.

KEYWORDS: International students, foreign students, employment, employability, Vaasa

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background

International students can be seen as one of the most important resources for countries hoping to increase the amount of skilled labor force. They can be categorized as the ideal immigrants due to their prime employment age and unique skillset specifically trained for the labor market of the host country. Furthermore, their skillset and qualifications can be recognized efficiently by the employers of the host country, which makes them more attractive compared to migrants that are educated or trained elsewhere. (Mathies & Karhunen, 2020). Therefore, the transition of international students into the host country's labor market plays an important role for countries to remain economically competitive, innovative and successful (Malik, 2016).

During the last few years, a considerable transition to more controlled immigration of foreign students has been detected and many European countries have put increased emphasis on measures designed to improve the retention rates of the international students. This is largely due to demographic changes such as low birth rates and ageing population that are already visible across the Western world. (Mathies & Karhunen, 2020). Similarly, the Finnish labor market will see deficiency in the labor force in near future due to the retirement of baby boomers, and a diminishing population or working age. A gap that can only be filled with skilled international talents (Villa et al., 2016). Furthermore, Finnish companies are experiencing pressure to respond to rapidly changing globalized operating environment, which makes international students a significant resource for them (Mathies & Karhunen, 2020). Therefore, it is important for the economic development of Finland that international students who graduate from Finnish higher education institutions will remain in Finland and become integrated in the society and the labor market.

As established, international students are an integral part of a country's social, academic, and economic growth. Consequently, the number of international students in Finland has substantially increased during the last decade and annually almost 3000

international students graduate with a higher education degree from Finnish universities (Liiten & Teivainen, 2014). According to the Eurostudent survey (2019) international students chose Finland especially for the good reputation of the Finnish education system but also because they found Finland as an attractive destination for employment after graduation. The results of the survey also show that 50 % international students planned to stay in Finland after graduation (Juusola et al. 2021).

According to Shumilova et al. (2012) Finland appears as an attractive destination for international students. In fact, 60% of international students in Finland stated that Finland was their first choice for studies abroad and 87% would recommend Finland as a place to study for their friends and relatives. The Finnish education system stands out also in student satisfaction surveys as Finland was chosen as the Europe's number one place for international students in 2014 and 2015 (Studyportals). Consequently, it can be stated that Finland is seen as an appealing destination for both studies and employment among international students.

However, studies indicate that international degree students trained at Finnish universities, many of whom would like to stay in Finland after graduation, are forced to move out due to employment difficulties. (Kinos & Kirjavainen, 2021). According to Pareliusson et al. (2016) the retention rate of foreign graduates in Finland, is 50 % lower than the average for OECD countries, which can at least to some extent be attributed to the barriers in the integration of the international students to the local labor market. A study conducted by Villa et. al (2016) indicates that only less than half of the students that graduate from Finnish universities will employ in Finland within a year. Furthermore, statistics published by Juusola et al. (2021) show that, despite the intentions of staying in Finland the graduation phase, a significant proportion of foreign students move out of Finland after graduation. For example, over a third (38%) of EU and EEA citizens graduating from university of applied sciences and 43% of university students had left Finland within a year after graduation.

Furthermore, the research indicates that a quarter of the students will move away within one year of graduation indicating a significant barrier in the employment of international

students as well as a huge loss for the Finnish labor market, business community and the students themselves. Research conducted by Majakulma (2011) shows that the employment rate of international graduates from higher education programs taught in English was only 58 % when at the same time the employment rate for Finnish students was 81.9 %. It is also notable that although studies show that international jobseekers are more active to apply for jobs than those with a Finnish background, the unemployment rate among international students is still clearly higher, at 15.9 %, compared with 8.6 % of Finnish students (Kinos & Kirjavainen, 2021). Based on the existing studies, it can be stated that the transition process from completing a degree to employment is a crucial phase for the international students, both in Finland and across the world, where they seem to encounter several barriers.

1.2 Research gap

Due to a shortage of skilled workforce and competition over international experts intensifies further it is essential for societies, employers and universities to understand the barriers that influence the employment of international students to be able to overcome the barriers and successfully retain the valuable resource these students are to their host country. Although several studies have been carried out on employability of foreign students in Finland, there has not been one focusing specifically on international students located in Vaasa. In addition, there is a need to study the barriers that complicate international students find employment in Finland and Vaasa to maximize the benefits for the Finnish society and economy. Finland, suffering from the shortage of skilled labor force and taxpayers to fund the welfare society, can not afford to lose its international students. Furthermore, it is important to detect and understand the existing barriers of the employment of international students in order to ensure that students that have the desire to work and build a life in their host country will be given the chance to fully integrate to the society.

1.3 Research question and objectives

The aim of this study is to understand the barriers that influence the employment of international students in Vaasa and what could be done to overcome these barriers in order to improve the employment prospects of foreign students. The importance of this topic can be perceived from the increasing demand for skilled workforce in Finland due to demographic and internationalization factors as well as the willingness of international students to find employment and stay in Finland after graduating with a higher education degree from a Finnish university.

The primary purpose of the research paper is to present a theoretical framework on barriers that exist to complicate or prevent international students finding employment in Vaasa. This will be done through evaluating different approaches and existing studies on barriers in employment. To develop an understanding of the existing barriers of employment and how their implications on international students finding employment in Vaasa could be overcome the research question for this study is:

What are the barriers in the employment of international students in Vaasa and how to overcome them?

Several research objectives have been set to this study to provide clarity and assistance in providing a more detailed answer to the research question. Research objectives will also assist the reader to develop a better understanding of the topic of the research paper. Therefore, the following objectives have been set for this paper:

1. To identify barriers that influence the employment of international students in Vaasa
2. To analyze the data received from interviews to suggest how these barriers could be overcome
3. To assess whether data received from interviews supports the theoretical framework

2 Literature review

2.1 International students

An international student is a student who is not a citizen or permanent resident holder of the country where their studies are taking place but are rather crossing borders solely with the objective to study (Vaarala & Kyckling, 2017). An international student can also be defined as a person who has lived in several societies or cultures (Välimää et al., 2014). It should be considered that there is a difference between the terms 'international student' and 'foreign student'. Foreign students are classified as students that hold a permanent residence permit in the country they are studying in and they may have moved to the country for other reasons than studying. (Giang, 2014, Vaarala & Kyckling, 2017).

Due to the rapid internationalization more and more higher education institutions around the world are making internationalization an integral part of their long-term strategy. Consequently, many students from all around the world are increasingly interested in pursuing a degree away from their home countries. (Malik, 2016) According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development data, the number of international students has increased from 2.1 million in 2000 to almost 5 million in 2014. Despite the pandemic, the data from OECD countries such as Finland and Germany indicate that the number of international students has increased and is forecasted to keep increasing in the upcoming years (Gardner, 2021).

International students have become a highly competed resource globally not only because they enhance demographic situation of aging Western world where the working force is diminishing but also because countries have noticed the number of direct and indirect benefits international students provide to their host countries (Hughes, 2019). When employed, these international graduates are known to demonstrate a range of valued qualities including domestically relevant educational qualifications and skills, locally recognized credentials, familiarity with the host culture, as well as host-country language ability (Pham et al., 2018).

Through International students, host countries can increase the quality of higher education as international students tend to contribute scientific and technical research by bringing new angles into topics and question the existing system, which can then lead to improvements. (Hughes, 2019). The presence of international students is proven to improve the employability of the graduates as the experience in multicultural and multilingual environment prepares them for the global labor market, which often leads to longer-term business relationships and economic benefits. (Kralikova, 2013).

Cultural diversity that international students stimulate can also bring a new range of skills and abilities, experiences, and perspectives into the work environment of the host country. Cultural diversity at the workplace has been proven to increase innovation and creativity, which are an integral part of the knowledge economy. (Ritzen & Marconi, 2011) The social capital that international students bring to their host countries should also not be forgotten. Through international contacts companies can increase cross-border exchange of ideas to boost possibilities for international trade. (Bonin et al. 2008).

International students can be considered as the best resource of the high-skilled migration for the host country as they have already familiarized themselves into education and administration system of the country as well as the local culture and therefore are more likely to become integrated to the host country than other high-skilled migrants. Due to their young age, they also build contacts more efficiently with their peers and are also more likely to establish families in the host country. (Kralikova, 2013). International students also enable a more efficient allocation of human resources on the labor market as they tend to be more mobile than the local labor force (Kahanec and Kralikova 2011).

In addition to the number of direct economic, cultural and demographic factors that international students generate for the host country there are also indirect effects that are perhaps more influential than the direct ones. According to Kralikova (2013), international students act as the key instrument in the process of opening the host country to other immigrants. This has been proven not only to increase the diversity of the host country but also to make the host country more open-minded and welcoming for diversity in general. Host countries that can see the benefits of diversity and embrace them

increase the self-confidence of the society. Hence by becoming a tolerant, self-confident society, host countries are likely to see increase in the number of international students and other highly skilled immigrants ready to generate those important direct benefits for the society. (Kralikova, 2013).

2.1.1 International students in Vaasa

Also, the Finnish higher education system has internationalized rapidly over the past two decades. The number of foreign higher education students has substantially increased from about 6000 to more than 21 000 between the years 2000-2016. Vaasa is one of the largest student cities in Finland in terms of population. The city has about 13 000 higher education degree students and about 4 000 students in vocational education. Six university units offer degrees in dozens of different fields in three languages, Finnish, Swedish and English. (Vaasan kaupunki, 2022). Vaasa has traditionally been a popular destination for many international students and in the academic year 2020 - 2021 almost 700 international students chose Vaasa as their destination of studies. (Yrkehögskolan Novia, 2020).

Similarly, Vaasa is actively taking part in increasing the number of international students coming to study to the city. The increase in the share of international degree students is not a coincidence but follows a preset internationalization strategy of the Finnish higher education institutions. Due to the decreased amount of age groups, it is necessary to attract students and researchers outside the borders if the University of Vaasa wishes to keep its quality and rank among the Finnish universities. Consequently, the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture will allocate 15 % of university funding to activities supporting internationalization between 2020 - 2024. The University of Vaasa's share of the funding is approximately 2.5 million Euros per year. Also, the city of Vaasa is working closely together with the universities and has various incentives and projects to increase the number of international students and internationalization in Vaasa. (Rintamaa, 2021).

Universities located in Vaasa also wish that international students would stay in the city after graduation. For example, the University of Vaasa has invested to support this

development through hiring an international staff. Furthermore, universities collaborate actively with local companies to increase the integration of international students to the work life already during their studies. (Rintamaa, 2021). As it has been established that experts and the dense concentration of expertise are important for economic growth of the host country. Therefore, by increasing the number of international degree students the city of Vaasa is hoping to increase the number of skilled specialists by creating an income channel through which talented workforce can be recruited and developed into specialists demanded by the labor market. The effectiveness of this strategy is likely to be emphasized in the future decades in the whole Finland as the declining age structure of the population requires a significant increase in the recruitment of international specialists while at the same time, there are also estimates that the competition over international experts will intensify further. (Mathies & Karhunen, 2019).

2.2 Employability of international students

Employability is considered to include a range of achievements, skills, understandings and personal attributes that are in the key position to employ graduates and make them successful in their field of occupation which then generates mutual benefits to the workforce, the community, the economy and the graduates themselves. (Nguyen & Hartz, 2020). Employability is seen as an integral part in the retention of international students. It has been established that many international graduates do not only wish to stay in their host country for career or financial benefits but to fully integrate to the society due to the social ties and cultural knowledge they have already developed during their studies.

Several studies show a link between the efficiency of recognizing educational credentials of the employers of the host country and international students. Consequently, the experience international students encompass is likely to be valued by the employers of the host country. However, due to many practical barriers that have been said to lie in between the international students and the labor market of the host country, it can be argued that international graduates would employ faster and better into the companies of the country of their origin instead of their host country. (Cai, 2012).

This chapter focuses on identifying the key barriers that need to be overcome in order to international students finding employment in the host country. Some of the barriers are host-country specific while majority of the barriers can also be identified worldwide. The chapter will also focus on overcoming the existing barriers through identifying and listing the best practices to improve the employability of international students and other high skilled migrants.

2.2.1 Language skills

Sufficient language skills are one of the most important prerequisites for employability (Villa et al. 2016). Similarly in Finland, Finnish or Swedish language skills are considered an integral part of employability and integration of international graduates into the Finnish labor market (Majakulma, 2011). However, strict language requirements set by the employers often serve as a barrier for international students to be hired.

Many employers state that language plays the key role in not hiring international workforce. Also in Finland, research conducted by the Ely Centre (2020) indicates that only less than a fourth of companies are willing to recruit employees who do not encompass fluent Finnish skills. While every second employer that took part in the study evaluates that almost native level Finnish language skills are a requirement for working in a company. Many companies have given feedback to universities that proficiency in the Finnish language is necessary in the labor market, even when the company's working language is English (Ollanketo, 2018). The lack of language skills is therefore a major barrier to employment for international students, which also prevents using and improving language skills. Language proficiency can be seen as a seemingly legitimate requirement when it comes to employment, however it can be argued whether fluent language requirements can also disguise prejudice and discrimination. (Rask, 2021).

2.2.1.1 Overcoming barrier of language skills

To overcome the barrier of language proficiency requires efforts not only from international students but also from the higher education institutions and employers. Rask (2021) suggests utilizing the so-called hybrid model at workplaces where the main idea

is that each employee is allowed to use Finnish or English depending on the situation or preference. Furthermore, Pratchett (2021) suggests employers to focus on the benefits that international students can bring to the company and how for instance the co-use of Finnish and English can generate added value as there are a more diverse and representative group of experts involved in the planning and decision-making, which will ultimately contribute to the Finnish working life. Emphasis should be on understanding that requiring less than fluent Finnish does not mean lowering the level of expertise required, changing the language of the whole organization nor that all the administrative material needs to be translated. Instead, employers should focus on adapting an international student trainee's task and working environment accordingly, so they can succeed and fully support your organization.

Tomperi et al. (2021) suggest employers to familiarize themselves better to the national and international language proficiency level frameworks Finnish National Certificate of Language Proficiency YKI (1-6) and the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (A1-C2) in order to succeed in defining the right level of language competence for each role within the company. She highlights that often A2 or B1 level would be sufficient for the job, versus native level C2. According to research conducted by Rask (2021), half of international students felt more comfortable that language requirement of job opening was basics level rather than fluent. 81 % also valued the opportunity to work in English when applying for open positions. Both Tomperi et al. and Rask (2021) encourage employers to lower language requirements which would enable to attract more international applicants and therefore diversify the pool of applicants.

Rask (2021) also highlights the importance of offering language teaching during working hours that is sponsored by the employer which would translate to increasing inclusiveness and work-life balance. Furthermore, Tomperi et al. (2021) that language courses offered at the high education institution would be in line with the international study program pursued by the student. For instance, Finnish for business students, Finnish for Engineers, Finnish for Nurses etc. The Finnish language teaching system has been criticized for being too theoretical, which is why the emphasis should be more on practical

speaking and grammar that is also much required when students transfer to the workplace after graduation.

2.2.2 Cultural competence

Recruiters tend to avoid the risk of cultural barriers and continue hiring employees from similar cultural backgrounds. Due to these existing attitudes, it is difficult for international students to find employment. According to studies, managers are putting significant emphasis on hiring employees with cross-cultural adaptability. Furthermore, the research also indicates that managers value adaptability, sensitivity and respect for cultural differences as well as intercultural communication skills. (Schaftel et al., 2007). Consequently, cultural competence, defined as the ability to effectively function in cross cultural settings, has been argued to be an important employability attribute for international students. Knowledge of history, culture, customs and beliefs of the host country and the ability to effectively communicate with the people of the host country are considered as an integral part of cultural competence. Furthermore, understanding the economic, legal and social systems of the host country is a key to live happily and in harmony in a multicultural society. (Nguyen & Hartz, 2020).

Over time, there has been a contention that seeking higher education overseas result in cultural transformations. Thus, when studying away of the home country, many international students are also at risk of experiencing culture shock during the process of integrating to the host country (Pyvis & Chapman, 2005). It has been argued that studies abroad are solely aimed at gaining international experience instead of adopting the culture of the host country and simultaneously abandoning one's cultural heritage (Ibrahim, 2017). For instance, in Finland, international students may be challenged not only by the Finnish language but also by deeply ingrained religious and cultural taboos concerning the Finnish social behaviors, lifestyles, sexual morals, social rules and gender relations (Gao, 2017). It should be considered that the further the international student's cultural heritage is apart from the culture of the host country, the greater the risk for experiencing culture shock is (Ibrahim, 2017).

Mainly, culture shock appears as the initial state in the process of developing an understanding of a foreign culture. Confrontation of a new culture can generate also enlightening and positive outcomes which in turn promote cultural competence and integration of the international students. However, it may also trigger a state of culture shock and international students may suffer challenges associated with their deeply held cultural understandings and beliefs, which are a threat for their cultural competences and integration, which in turn can create a barrier between their employability. They may also generate a perception that pushes international students towards a harmonious cultural assimilation through crisis and adjustment stages, which makes culture shock a considerable barrier for the employability of international students globally. (Gao, 2017).

2.2.2.1 Overcoming barrier of cultural competence

The importance of the academic environment is crucial from the perspective of international students and thus universities play an important role in supporting the integration (Juusola et al., 2021). In order to tackle the cultural barriers influencing the employability of these highly skilled migrants Villa et al. (2016) stresses the importance of integrating international students into the culture of the host country already during studies as research shows that even a satisfactory level of knowledge about the host country's culture, society, and working life demonstrates to better employability. Students have the responsibility to accustom themselves to the culture of the host country already during their studies to establish an understanding of important practices before entering working life. However, higher institutions should support this integration process for examples through multicultural projects and group work where the students of the host country and international students work on projects together and share cultural knowledge among each other.

Finland has also introduced a tool called a work life certificate to increase and measure the extent of cultural competence. After accomplishing a satisfactory level of knowledge about Finnish culture, society, and working life as well as having demonstrated this through a separate test, the international student is awarded a work life certificate that they can use to show their competencies and skills needed for their work. There are also

various ongoing national projects in Finland that are targeting to improve the position of international students and other highly skilled migrants. VALOA project established by the University of Helsinki aims to increase employment opportunities of international degree students on the Finnish labor market by surveying the current status of employment and developing concrete tools and forms of action and guidance for employers and universities in order to promote the employment of international students. Staff and counsellors at the higher education institutions were offered an opportunity to develop their skills for guiding international degree students into working life and employers were encouraged to grasp the opportunities brought by international students, for instance, by offering guidance in language, culture, and work permit affairs and by organizing networking events. (Villa et al., 2016)

Mathies and Karhunen (2020) demonstrate that family ties, previous experience of living in Finland, for example through student exchange, and the location of the country of origin in Europe seemed to predict permanent stay in Finland. Findings support the connection with the fact that the closer the home country's culture is to the culture of the host country, the easier it will be to adapt to the lifestyle and study and work life. Therefore, host countries should move their focus on improving the ability of highly skilled migrants to integrate into the host country's labor market and promoting an environment conducive for their families. Especially for the students that come from cultures that are deemed too far apart from the host countries. Focusing on these aspects would likely to reduce possibility of experiencing culture shock and producing higher rates of international students staying as well as contributing to host country's labor market and society.

2.2.3 Work experience

One of the primary concerns for higher education institutions in the host countries has been the work experience of international students. Lack of work experience has been proven to establish a barrier between international students and their employability. The best option for an international student would be finding an internship that would enable students to gain work experience as well as learn about the work culture and

operating methods of the host country and build valuable networks for the future. Unfortunately, this is often not the case, and students tend to apply to companies in their home countries that are already familiar to them. (Ollanketo, 2018).

This is much due to the competition in the labor market becoming more intensified while the pandemic has disrupted the traditional pathways from graduation to employment (Ball, 2021). Particularly in Finland international students are faced with a relatively small-sized labor market, which can also make the competition for internships more intense. In terms of work experience native students are most likely to outshine their international peers when it comes to employability as they encompass valuable work experience which international students may not have. Furthermore, the origin country of the previous work experience as well as the position the international student has previously worked in influences the employer's willingness to hire. Consequently, the work experiences the international student may have gained in their home country may not be as valuable in the host country. (Giang, 2014).

Nykänen and Tynjälä (2012) argue that higher education institutions were not able to provide students with the skills required by the labor market. Employers have reported a lack of sufficient communication skills and practical knowhow of graduated students, which they have been then able to acquire through workplaces rather than universities. Higher education institutions in Finland, for instance, have been accused for not providing enough practical knowledge and lack the ability to exhibit self-regulation. Students support this argument by listing lack of experience as one of the most significant barriers when applying for jobs. According to Prospects Early Careers Survey (2021), 45% of university students feel unprepared and lack experience to apply for jobs or apprenticeship. The research also shows that students understand the value of work experience for employers and for themselves but find it difficult to gain that experience, which creates a significant barrier for the employability of international students.

2.2.3.1 Overcoming barrier of work experience

To ensure that international students will graduate with enough experience to overcome the barriers in employment, Villa et al. (2016) emphasizes the need of higher education institutions to acknowledge and include the requirements and needs of business life in the curriculum so that students can gain competencies that match needs of employers. The universities should also more actively put resources in providing guest lectures that would include representatives of business life or organizing joint projects with local businesses and universities to increase their understanding of the host country's business practices and required skillset. Furthermore, local businesses could offer more thesis opportunities for international students which would increase international students' knowledge of culture and practices of the local companies before graduation.

Offering international students summer work and internships is in the key position in tackling the barrier of lack of relevant experience. However, for some companies hiring international students may seem arduous, and these attitudes require changing. To overcome this challenge, for instance In Finland, a project called KILKAS, developed by five universities of applied sciences has developed an operating model for universities that promotes the employment of international students. The project has established an operating model that administrates internships and theses for international students as well as focuses on identifying and developing such forms and practices of internships that consider account the special challenges of employment that international students face combined with the unexploited potential of the Finnish labor market. (Ollanketo, 2018). To facilitate the recruitment process for companies, Villa et al. (2016) suggests organizations to utilize a concept of group recruiting, meaning that the universities would offer companies several trainees instead of just one, which would decrease the resources required by, for instance, individual workplace introductions.

2.2.4 Networking and job search skills

The lack of job seeking skills and building networks in the host country pose major barriers in the employability of international students. The concept of networking is about

building, maintaining, and utilizing relationships for instance to support work and career. Knowing right contacts in the labor market of the host country has been proven to be an opportunity for employment. (Arzamastseva, 2021). Similarly In Finland, having social networks and informal contacts is also important attribute for enhanced employability (Orjala, 2021). Students that have been able to network and develop a large group of contacts have been proven to be able connect with more employers, which has generated a higher number of quality job opportunities. Employability has been proven to be a significant challenge for international students without local contacts, encompassing only qualifications and skills obtained in their home country (Sofat, 2021). Furthermore, international students tend to be mostly in contact with their fellow foreign students, which does not assist them into integrating to the society or working life of the host country, while in most employers expect good recommendations and connections from their international applicants (Arzamastseva, 2021).

Job seeking skills can be referred as skills needed to seek employment successfully in a competitive labor market (bin Hashim, 1992). According to Spencer-Rodgers and Cortijo (1998) the most common barriers that international students face in terms of job seeking skills are the unfamiliarity of the job search process, preparation of a competitive resume that suits the style and prerequisites of the host country as well as cultural and linguistic challenges during the employment interview. Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge that required job seeking skills can vary from country to country which complicates the job seeking process especially for international students that may not be familiar with the system and requirements of the host country. For instance, a common characteristic of the Finnish job market is that many jobs are not put in open search, which may not be a familiar practice for international applicants (Orjala, 2021). A study conducted by Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment (2017) also supports the statement of the popularity of informal recruiting among Finnish employers. The results show that in 2017, only 27% of the job seekers in Finland had come across their current job by applying to an open call. (Alho, 2020).

A 'job search strategy' can be defined as a method exploited by the job seeker to find employment. A successful job seeking strategy can also be included in the job seeking skills that influence the employability of international students. Alho (2020) claims that international students need a job search strategy to enter to the job market of the host country. Networking is also an integral part of the job search strategy and different social ties that international students may have tied in the host country can be in a key position in providing valuable connections and information.

bin Hashim (1992) states that international students should realize the importance of having a job search strategy due to the nature of the current labor market where increased competition over positions indicates that the available openings will go to the best qualified candidates. A study from Brown & Konrad (2001) also emphasizes the importance of effective job search strategy during financially challenging times, which is applicable to the current situation of worldwide pandemic causing a period of economic downturn. Therefore, it can be concluded that the lack of necessary networking, job seeking skills and an effective job search strategy can cause significant barriers in the employment of international students.

2.2.4.1 Overcoming barrier of networking and job search skills

Various guidance methods for students provided by employers and higher education institutions jointly could be seen as a potential tool to overcome barriers in the employment. According to Villa et al. (2016) recent experiments combining employers and higher education institutions for offering guidance and organizing mentoring from business life representatives to international students have yielded good results. Furthermore, development of a career plan together with a career advisor during studies before transitioning into working life is an important for international students to overcome barriers in the employment. The plan is suggested to withhold detailed steps, for instance, how the students keep in contact with business life, network with employers during their studies and guidance on how to draw up a qualitative resume. The progress of the plan should then be closely followed by the university and the student. Furthermore, Lee (2016) suggests closer cooperation between career advisors, international

student services, employer relations, and alumni association in order to create a supportive community for the career development of international students. Attention should also be paid in training the university staff to serve the needs of international students.

Many higher education institutions in Finland organize networking events and workshops for students to get in to contact with the employer representatives of the Finnish working life and learn about the Finnish work culture and regulations (Villa et al., 2016). According to research conducted by Lee (2016) students have also found these kinds of events the most helpful for their career development and building networks. Lee (2016) highlights the importance of tailoring workshops, programs and networking events to respond the requirements and needs of both students and employers, to optimize students' job search skills in the host country while also making connections with the right people.

A common guidance method of the higher education institutions in Finland has been organizing company visits, during which international students can get to know companies operating and other organizations in Finland. Furthermore, there have been several campaigns and projects in Finland hoping to bring employers and students together. Findwork.fi, organized by Sitra, Team Finland, Finpro, Amcham Finland and Me2We, focuses on promoting the employment of international students in Finland by providing employers a platform to publish job vacancies for which students can apply directly from the vacancy notice. The Cosmos Network, a project established by the Turku University of Applied Sciences, works together with local SMEs with an aim to facilitate the access to education, internships, and employment for international technology students. (Villa et al., 2016).

Networking and developing relevant job seeking skills requires motivation and hard work from the students' side as well. Lee (2016) suggests that the so-called best practices for international students for securing a job or an internship would be actively attending career events and being involved in campus life and thus building a personal network

that could be utilized in the job search. Other best practices also include utilizing internet resources for job search and showcasing their best academic and career performances.

2.2.5 Discrimination and stereotypes

The employment of international students requires also receptivity not only from the employers but also from the education institutions and the society of the host country. Employment of many international students is often hampered by identified or unrecognized prejudices, attitudes as well as racism and other discriminative behavior (Kinos & Kirjavainen, 2021). Although the benefits of international students are widely recognized by host countries and many categorize them as the 'ideal' immigrants, they are proven not to be free from discrimination, stereotypes and other types of ill treatment immigrants typically experience (Alho, 2020). For instance, a study conducted by Adam (2016) in Finland revealed that there are still deep negative attitudes and perceptions among Finnish employers towards international students and other foreign migrants which need to be eliminated.

Research conducted in the U.S argues that there is new form of discrimination referred as neo-racism which indicates that discrimination against international students is evident when they are banned from employment or losing jobs. The results of the study showed that policies in the U.S denying international students working outside campus more 20 hours per week discriminatory and restricts them to a limited range of occupations, usually low-paying ones. (Tran & Soejatminah, 2019). Research data from Finland also indicates that a large proportion of highly educated immigrants work in jobs that do not correspond to their education (Kinos & Kirjavainen, 2021). Another study conducted in Australia proves the vulnerable position of international students due to many of their work-related barriers, but particularly due to their poor awareness of workplace rights. Consequently, local students and international students are not in a similar position to bargain and therefore international students have been found to accept very poor conditions of employment. (Tran & Soejatminah, 2019). Thus, it can be stated that unequal regulations regarding allowed working time make international students accept jobs

below their skill level, which affects significantly their employability while insufficient knowledge of workplace rights may expose them to discrimination at the workplace.

Study conducted by Mosneaga & Winther (2013) identify a significant difference in the treatment between the students from EU/EEA countries and students non-EU/EEA countries in the Nordic countries. For instance, international students coming to Finland as citizens of the EU/EEA countries are not required to have residence or work permits. However, residence permit regulations and variety of judicial restrictions for non-EU/EEA students put them in an unequal and stressful situation of finding employment in due time after graduation as their legal right to reside in the host country is based on finding employment within a specific time period. Similarly, to the U.S also non-EU/EEA students in Finland experience restrictions in the weekly hours since they are allowed to work only 25 hours per week during semester and full-time during holiday breaks while EU/EEA students have no limits as regards working time. (Alho, 2020).

Racial discrimination can not be ruled out as a barrier influencing the employability of international students. The results of a research conducted in Finland unveiled that especially persons with Somali, Russian, Estonian and Vietnamese background have reported to face discrimination during the job search process (Alho, 2020). Research by Pohjanpää et al. (2003) indicates that there is a certain ethnic and racialized hierarchy present in the workplaces around the world. The respondents of the study also supported the claim by stating according to their experience 'western' and 'white' looking employees would not be victims of discrimination. Research by Hanassab (2006) also proves the vulnerable position of people of color at the labor market.

Furthermore, research data from Norway shows that the desire of international students to stay and integrate was also hampered by endless stories of applicants with foreign names not getting employed (Alho, 2020). Similarly, according to a study conducted by Ahmad (2019), employers in Finland significantly prefer Finnish applicants over ethnic candidates, and within ethnic applicants, they prefer candidates with a European name over a non-European name. Also, in the US, a similar pattern has been identified as

according to Brown (2020), white-sounding names received 50 percent more callbacks than Black-sounding names.

Although there has been many claims and indicators that the equity gap that lies between men and women at workplaces seems to be closing, women are still continuously underrepresented as leaders in industry, business, and the public sector. Studies conducted by Sipe et al., (2009) and Ngo et al. (2003) showed that women lag men on virtually every known economic indicator. According to the results women experience inequality especially in salary progression, rewards and work conditions. They are also more likely to work in underpaid jobs that do not correspond to their education as well as have decreased likelihood of promotion and authority in the workplace. Therefore, international students may experience gender-based discrimination when seeking employment.

2.2.5.1 Overcoming discrimination and stereotypes

To overcome this challenging barrier affecting the employment of international students Mittelmeier and Cockayne (2020) argue that it is important that higher education institutions work actively to prevent discrimination and decrease stereotypes. Tran and Vu (2016) highlight the critical role of teachers in changing and overcoming stereotypes against international students as they are part of both institutional and work placement experiences of the students. They emphasize that higher education institutions should not replicate the social injustice international students already experience at the workplace or in the community. Instead, teachers should understand the heterogeneity and complexity of the international students and foster confidence and positiveness to go after their goals and aspirations as well as proactively work to tackle the unjust stereotypes.

Furthermore, according to Mittelmeier and Cockayne (2020) continued commitment and funding for societies, campus events, curriculum and teaching that promote intercultural engagement and interaction has been proven to diminish discrimination on campus. They also suggest universities to include international students to faculty roles for anti-racism initiatives and on existing equality and diversity committees. There is also a

need to train the university staff to identify and act on discrimination occurring in the classroom and on campus. Furthermore, by developing culturally sensitive mechanisms that encompass explicit policies designed to tackle discrimination and racism when it is occurred is also an important countermeasure university should exploit in the battle against discrimination.

The results of a study carried out by Hanassab (2006) indicate that off campus discrimination is more common among international students compared to on campus. Therefore, the prevention of discrimination requires solutions also at the level of the community and society. When examining the impact of various policy measures on students' willingness to stay in Finland after their studies, the responses emphasized policies that promote openness and a need to consider society's receptivity to foreign students (Juu-sola et al., 2021). For example, stereotyping is especially hard to tackle because its origins lie in wider society. Societies decrease discrimination by promoting democracy, respect for human rights and citizenship. Therefore, the government of the host country should ensure that the education institutions prioritize language and cultural competences, multi-perspective history and gender equality. In this way, citizens of the host country can acquire competences for democratic culture that support the state of inclusion and welcoming all the people as a part of the society.

The Finnish labor market has been accused of being fairly closed and inflexible traditionally and thus not very receptive for foreign labor. Therefore, to ensure better employment for international students and other high skilled migrants there is a highlighted need for labor market structure reforms. Greater labor market flexibility is demanded as well as some policy changes for residence- and work permits. Even though the Finnish government expanded the time frame for securing employment after graduation for international students from six months to 12 to facilitate the integration one can argue whether time frame is long enough to find employment. By facilitating strict terms and restrictions applicable for international students, Finland can ensure the retention of skilled, international workforce and appear as flexible and desirable destination for students around the world.

There are various measures that employers can take to decrease discrimination at the workplace. The importance of providing employees different forms of diversity training, workshops and seminars that focus on identifying biases, stereotypes and other forms of discriminative behavior in the workplace has been emphasized in many studies. Bobek et al., (2018) highlights that many discriminatory activities and mindset has been formed in early childhood and multiple generations, which shows the deep implementation of stereotyping and prejudice in our minds and therefore also in our behavior and thinking. Therefore, it is crucial to intervene through educational events and activities that involve the whole organization in a systematic manner to develop a more inclusive mindset.

Roberson et al., (2020) suggest that various enforcement actions for instance, affirmative action goals and progress reports that monitor workforce demographics are an effective tool in tackling discrimination at workplaces. Continuous monitoring of projected versus actual employment rates of minorities such as gender and race over indicate greater workforce diversity. Similar methods could also be utilized when trying to enhance the recruitment of international students. Also, identity-blind practices, where the focus on performance rather than demographics has been shown to protect employees from unconscious biases their employers may encompass. Within organizations formalized HR structures especially practices that consider both group membership and individual merit have been proven to yield results in changing the composition of organizational workforces at all levels.

3 Methodology

Two most common research methods utilized in scientific research are qualitative and quantitative methods. A qualitative research method focuses on data collection that is based on the personal experiences and outlooks of the respondents whereas a quantitative research method utilizes measurable prior research data on the chosen research topic. More generally, the aim of the qualitative research method is to describe research data through words while quantitative method focuses on numeric data measurements and whether their cause-and-effect relationships are in line with the phenomenon investigated. (Kumar, 2011).

Research method chosen for this study is the qualitative method. Therefore, this chapter will introduce the research philosophy, approach, and strategy behind the chosen research method as well as present justification for the chosen method. The chapter will also focus on underlining the data collection a data analysis utilized in this study as well as discuss about the reliability and validity of the research.

3.1 Research philosophy

It is important to take into account the research philosophy when selecting the research method. Galliers (1991) defines research philosophy as a perception of the way how the data about the researched phenomenon should be gathered, analyzed and utilized, whereas Saunders et al., (2007) refers to it as a term that is associated to the development and nature of knowledge. Research philosophies can be distinguished into three different types based on the diverse assumptions each makes. These types are epistemology, ontology, and axiology. Epistemology is based on assumptions and human knowledge. Ontology is based on the realities encountered and lastly, axiology is based on one's beliefs that impact the research method.

According to Saunders et al., (2007) different philosophies, also known as positivism, interpretivism, realism, and pragmatism can be attached to each of introduced research philosophy type. The concept of positivism is based on facts and mainly utilized in

quantitative research. Realism on the other hand focuses on a more scientific approach when developing knowledge of a phenomenon and it can be utilized in both qualitative and quantitative research. Pragmatism relies on multiple methods and practicality when seeking solutions to a problem. The research philosophy chosen for this research is interpretivism, that concentrates on one's thoughts and views as well as the effects of social and cultural aspects and the knowledge of the phenomenon is developed through one's interpretations. Interpretivist approach utilizes a naturalistic approach of data collection including interviews and observations, which indicates that meanings in the research usually develop towards the end of the research process. In this research philosophy the researcher is also part of study and performs a specific role in observing the social world. (Saunders et al., 2007)

Interpretivism was chosen for this research due to its close relation to the qualitative research method and therefore to the researcher's obligation to develop a subjective and socially constructive understanding of the studied phenomenon. The reason for utilizing the interpretivist approach for this research stems from the fact that the experience, opinions and views of the participants of the study will assist in answering the research question.

3.2 Research approach and strategy

There are two commonly used approaches for scientific research, deductive and inductive. Deductive approach exploits a research strategy where first theory and hypotheses are developed and then tested. This study will utilize the inductive approach, meaning that data will be collected through the qualitative research method and then observations will be analyzed to develop a theory. In addition to the deductive research approach, an exploratory research strategy has been chosen for this study. The aim of the exploratory research strategy is to utilize open questions to gain valuable insights of a phenomenon or to develop and understanding of an issue or a problem. Flexibility and adaptability are the benefits of exploratory research. Furthermore, the strategy can be exploited to first broaden the focus of the study and then narrow it when the research progresses. In this research exploratory strategy is exploited in the form of semi-

structured interviews, which have been proven to be a useful method in gaining deeper insights of explanations and decisions of the interviewees in addition to develop an understanding of the reasons behind their shared perceptions and opinions. Use of semi-structured interviews will also enable further exploration of the research problem through open-ended questions. (Saunders et al., 2007).

As the goal of this research is to understand the barriers international students have faced in their employment and suggest solutions how these barriers could be overcome, this study will be conducted utilizing the qualitative research method and semi-structured interviews. Organizing semi-structured interviews enables flexibility during the interview and will allow interviewees to share their experiences more openly.

3.3 Data collection and analysis

Data for this research was collected by interviewing international students through semi-structured interviews. The length of the interviews varied between 30-90 minutes. The interviewees selected to the research were author's acquaintances and peers established through previous studies. To organize the interviews, the participants were contacted through social media or e-mail. The participants for the study were selected based on two criteria; firstly, they are an international student currently studying in Vaasa or graduated from a higher education institution located in Vaasa. Secondly, they are either in the process of seeking employment or have recently employed in Vaasa.

Five individuals that fulfilled the forementioned criteria and encompassed a status of an international student were chosen for this research and interviewed to gain their experiences and insights on the barriers they have been facing when seeking employment in Vaasa as well as what kind of support they could have wished to have in order to overcome the identified barriers. As the data collection was conducted through semi-structured, the interview questions were prepared in advance, as well as sent to the respondents to gain a better understanding on the topic of the research. The interview questions included both open- and close-ended questions, and the interviewees were also asked to evaluate the significance of each barrier of employment on a scale from 1 to 5. In

cases where the interviewees did not elaborate some of the close-ended questions, the researcher would encourage them to explain their views in a more detailed manner. The interviews were recorded with the permission of the participants and the data received from each interview was then transcribed into text in order to form an analysis. The most important findings and quotes are presented as a proof in the findings chapter of the study.

The collected research data was sorted into a table to present general information of the participants of the study. The table below presents the background information of the interviewees that took part in this study, which confirms that they are in fact international students from different parts of the world. Then, the research data was categorized under similar themes and observations whilst including participant's quotes under each theme.

Participant	1	2	3	4	5
Home country	Vietnam	Vietnam	China	Russia	Philippines
Gender	Female	Female	Female	Male	Male
Higher education institution	Vaasa University of Applied Sciences	Vaasa University of Applied Sciences	Vaasa University of Applied Sciences	Vaasa University of Applied Sciences	University of Vaasa
Study status	graduated	graduated	graduated	graduated	student
Employment status	job seeker	job seeker	employed full-time	employed full-time	employed part-time

Table 1. Participants of the research

3.4 Limitations, reliability and validity

The concepts of reliability and validity in scientific research are the key aspects to evaluate the quality of the study. Saunders et al., (2007) defines reliability as “the extent to

which your data collection techniques or analysis procedures will yield consistent findings". Participant error, biases related to the research subject or participant as well as observers' error and biases can threaten the reliability of the research. Therefore, in order to assure the reliability of the study it is crucial that it reaches trustworthiness and quality. The reliability of this research was reached through anonymity as the interviews were conducted through Zoom and participants' names or personal information would not be presented in the study to ensure they could openly discuss and express their experiences, opinions and insights.

According to Saunders et al., (2007) the validity of the research "is concerned with whether the findings are really about what they appear to be about". History, testing, instrumentation, maturation, mortality and ambiguity about causal direction pose the most significant to validity of a research. In qualitative research, it may be difficult to assess validity as researcher's own views and opinions about international students may affect to the results. Furthermore, as the number of interviews conducted for the research was only four can influence the validity of this study. However, adequate and in-depth literature review utilized as well as findings included and presented in this study support the validity of the research. Participants of the study were also given a good impression on the topic of research by providing interview questions to them beforehand to ensure the validity of the study.

The aim of this research is to widen the perspectives of existing literature and offer new approaches, however, certain limitations apply for the study. Since only five students took part in this study, the results of the research can not be generalized. Furthermore, due to different cultural and linguistic backgrounds of the researcher and interview participants, there is always a risk that participants of the study interpreted interview questions and terms in a different way, which in turn can generate scattered and unclear research data.

4 Findings

This chapter focuses on demonstrating and reviewing the main findings of the research received from participants of the semi-structured interviews. The results of the study will be analyzed and presented based on the research question and objectives of this research. The background of the participants was provided in the previous chapter. The findings have been divided into themes, similar to the literature review, to assist in gaining a better understanding of the responses of the participants. Furthermore, the most relevant quotes from the interviews have been presented in this chapter to support the analysis and findings of the study.

4.1 Barriers in employment

4.1.1 Language skills

Previous research shows that language requirements have affected the employability of international students significantly. According to Ely Centre (2020) only less than a fourth of companies in Finland are willing to recruit employees who do not encompass fluent Finnish skills. Whilst every second employer evaluates that almost native level Finnish language skills are a requirement for working. The data received from the interviews supports previous findings and show that language proficiency is a significant barrier in the employment of the international students in Vaasa. All five respondents rated the lack of relevant language skills either 4 or 5, meaning they have experienced it to be significant or extremely significant barrier affecting their employability.

Rask (2011) argues that even though language proficiency can be seen as a seemingly legitimate requirement when it comes to employment, it can also disguise prejudice and discrimination. From the interviews, it was revealed that all participants had at least one experience where companies did not hire them because the lack of Finnish language proficiency. Respondents explained that they understood the importance of learning the local language, but many had experiences applying for big international companies

whose corporate language was English, which would turn them down due to the lack of Finnish language skills.

“It is ridiculous how many recruiters require Finnish even though the company language is English or when they say it’s a plus but then end up hiring a person who speaks Finnish in the end. It is a shame that they focus more on the language rather than skills”. - Participant 4

Furthermore, a participant who had learned Finnish, and was willing to learn more felt like they were not given a chance to demonstrate their knowledge because companies emphasized the importance of fluent language skills.

“If I didn’t know any Finnish at all they could easily reject me, and I would understand. But I did learn, and I have at least some level of knowledge which I would like to improve, and I’m not even given a chance”. - Participant 2

According to Ollanketo (2018) many companies have given feedback to universities that proficiency in the Finnish language is necessary in the labor market, even when the company's working language is English. However, several respondents pointed out that Finnish teaching offered at the universities does not translate to the requirements of the employers. They agreed that higher education universities in Vaasa offer enough Finnish courses for their international students but argue that the courses organized were not extensive and intensive enough. In addition, one respondent emphasized that they were not told how important factor the language would be when applying for jobs.

“no one told us that it is very important to have Finnish language skills when looking for jobs in Finland. Many international students think that as there are so many international companies in Finland and Finns can generally speak English really well, no one took learning Finnish very seriously”. - Participant 1

The interviews also revealed that Vaasa is losing international students for many bigger cities within Finland, due to shortage of international companies and strict language requirements for both, Finnish and Swedish. Many had expanded their job search outside

Vaasa and noticed that they not only had more options, but companies were also more willing to hire international students and not require fluent Finnish or Swedish skills.

“The lack of Finnish language skills narrows down job possibilities because you can only apply for international companies. And there are not that many international companies located in Vaasa. We don’t have very wide options compared to the local students here, which forces us to move to bigger cities like Helsinki”. - Participant 3

“I have been looking for options elsewhere because I was desperate to find a job and there were not that many options in a small city like this. Like it wasn’t already hard enough to find a job, then there is also the requirement of knowing both Finnish and Swedish to employ here”. -Participant 5

4.1.2 Cultural competence

Nguyen and Hartz, (2020) argue that cultural competence is an important employability attribute for international students. Knowledge of history, culture, customs and beliefs of the host country and the ability to effectively communicate with the people of the host country are considered as an integral part of cultural competence. However, previous research shows that recruiters tend to avoid the risk of cultural barriers and continue hiring employees from similar cultural backgrounds. The interviews revealed that especially international students from Asia experience cultural barriers in Finland. All participants coming from these continents evaluated their cultural challenges either 4 or 5, while the respondent from Russia, evaluated their cultural challenges to be just 1.

“Many Finnish employers are not afraid to hire because the lack of skills but because of culture. They are afraid of cross-cultural conflicts and international students’ readiness to adapt to their culture”. - Participant 3

Many respondents emphasized that their insufficient knowledge of the Finnish culture and procedures also affected their employability. Especially respondents from Asia emphasized that they had experienced difficulties due to not having adequate knowledge of the Finnish culture, which they evaluated to be the result of not being able to form

friendships with local students. Some criticized the local universities in Vaasa of the lack of joint activities that would facilitate the networking between local and international students.

“There were definitely division between students and the university wouldn’t help with that at all. Finnish students would go with Finnish, foreigners would go with foreigner and there was not that much interaction between these groups”. - Participant 2

“Our classes were basically divided into two groups: Finnish students and the international students. And we only got together when there is compulsory group work, which does not really help internationals integrate. There were also not that many activities organized by the university to help us meet people”. - Participant 3

The knowledge of the Finnish economic, legal and social systems varied between respondents. Some said that they knew just enough to get by while others stated that due to visa processes and other legal paperwork, they were required to file on a regular basis had assisted them in gaining better knowledge on how important procedures work in Finland.

“If I would have to evaluate on a scale of 1 to 10 how much knowledge I have of the systems here I would have to say four. I know just enough to get by”. - Participant 1

“Due to the fact that I’m outside EU/EEA I have had to figure out how things work here in order to survive. For instance, I must apply for a visa separately each year for studies and then job seeking visa after graduation, so I feel like I have adequate knowledge of the Finnish system”. - Participant 4

Pyvis and Chapman (2005) state that many international students are also at risk of experiencing culture shock during the process of integrating to the host country. The data received from the interviews shows that all respondents except one had experienced culture shock as an international student in Finland. Ibrahim (2017) argues that the further the international student’s cultural heritage is apart from the culture of the host country, the greater the risk for experiencing culture shock is. The findings of the

interviews support this statement as the respondents from Asia declared to have experienced culture shock while the Russian respondent had not.

“Almost everything was different. I come from a more restrictive culture, and we have for example different entertainment culture than here, so it was really shocking in the beginning” - Participant 3

“For example, the concept of “partying” for Asian students is different than for Finnish students. I also come from a country with high power distance while Finland is very informal everywhere school, workplace. It was surely very different”. - Participant 2

Previous research indicates that managers value adaptability, sensitivity and respect for cultural differences as well as intercultural communication skills. (Schafstel et al., 2007: 21) One respondent stated that many Finnish employers withhold from recruiting international talent due to doubts about cross cultural conflicts and abilities for foreign members to integrate to the work culture. Therefore, it could be argued that even though employers expect cross cultural adaptability from their applicants, but the company culture does not represent the same values.

“Finnish employers are not afraid to hire because lack of skills but because of culture. They are afraid of cross-cultural conflicts and adaptation to the culture”. - Participant 3

4.1.3 Work experience

According to previous studies the lack of relevant work experience has been listed as one of the most significant barriers of employment for international students. The data received from the interviews reveal that international students in Vaasa also experience significant challenges regarding gaining relevant work experience as all five participants rated their barrier of work experience either 4 or 5. Ollanketo (2018) argues that internships that would enable students to gain work experience as well as learn about the work culture and operating methods of the host country and build valuable networks for the future. One of the respondents, who was able to work in Vaasa already during studies

emphasized the importance of gaining work experience to facilitate other barriers international students may face when entering the Finnish work life.

“My employer provided me really good training of the Finnish working culture, society and employment in general, what are the labor laws, rights, responsibilities and benefits. If you haven’t been fortunate enough to employ you don’t know anything because the schools certainly don’t provide any training on how things work at Finnish workplaces”.

- Participant 3

Previous research from Ollanketo (2018) also found that despite many benefits of employment in the host country, many students tend to apply to companies in their home countries that are already familiar to them. The data received from the interviews revealed that 4 out of 5 participants ended up taking an internship in their home country while experiencing significant challenges in getting one in Finland. Some also emphasized that they would even be willing to work for free just to gain relevant experience and contacts that could assist them finding employment later.

“I don’t know why internships are so hard to find. I could even work without getting paid just to improve my skills and knowledge”. - Participant 2

“Compulsory internship was part of my studies, but I ended up doing it in my home country because landing an internship here turned out to be impossible”. - Participant 5

Participants that were not able to gain work experience in Finland during their studies experienced significant challenges when trying to employ after studies. According to their experiences many Finnish employers seem to appreciate domestic work experience over international one. Furthermore, several respondents also pointed out that the skills employers expect international students to have been unfair and unrealistic when combined with the fact how many students are able to gain relevant work experience during studies.

“I feel that a lot of Finnish companies saw that because I don’t have any professional experience in Finland and assumed that I wouldn’t know anything. One company told

me that I don't know the Finnish market, culture, while I had only worked with Vietnamese people so they don't see how I would fit into Finnish environment". - Participant 1

"Employers have high expectations for all students in general but we international students are required to be even better than local students to get recognized". - Participant 5

Nykänen and Tynjälä (2012) argue that higher education institutions were not able to provide students with the skills required by the labor market. All the participants confirmed this statement to be true to high extent. Many emphasized that there seem to be an enormous contradiction between the skills and knowhow taught at the higher education institutions in Vaasa and the skills and knowhow required by the employers in Vaasa. All respondents agreed that universities were able to provide relevant knowledge of their field of studies but not able to prepare students to the working life completely as practical experience is required in order to find employment after studies.

"From my experience, even though the school provided me sufficient skills, it will never be enough. What Finnish employers require from students does not match with the skills students learn in school". - Participant 2

"University gave a good basis and understanding of my field of studies, but it wasn't enough because I did not succeed in gaining relevant work experience". - Participant 4

4.1.4 Networking and job search skills

Previous research carried out by Sofat (2021) argues that employability has been proven to be a significant challenge for international students without local contacts, encompassing only qualifications and skills obtained in their home country. Students that have been able to network and develop a large group of contacts have been proven to be able connect with more employers, which has generated a higher number of quality job opportunities. The data received from the interviews revealed that more than half of the participants experience significant barrier regarding these networking and relevant job

search skills. Three respondents rated their challenges 4, meaning significant barrier to employment, while one respondent rated their challenges at 3 and one at 2.

Several participants emphasized that it is more challenging to network in Vaasa than in other bigger cities in Finland. Many had attended job fairs and networking events outside Vaasa that are not only organized more often but also have proven to be helpful in gaining relevant contacts. Especially Asian participants emphasized that the challenge to network with local people has left them without important contacts, which can also be attributed to the significant cultural barriers they experience in Finland. Some did not see a problem in networking with people in general, but many pointed out the difficulty to network with people who work in a key position in the company of their interest.

“Networking here has been relatively easy for me, I went to different events, parties, was active on LinkedIn and all that. However, the lack of strong professional networks that were in the position of a recruiter or someone who has good connections to recruiters in general for your area of interest is the key issue”. - Participant 4

“It is hard to know people in the field you are interested in. Maybe you know some people in a specific company, but you don’t know who the person is who is in the key position to guarantee a job”. - Participant 3

“It’s hard to find people that have the right connections, that actually work in positions that can enable hiring”. - Participant 5

Spencer-Rodgers and Cortijo (1998) argue that the unfamiliarity of the job search process, preparation of a competitive resume that suits the style and prerequisites of the host country pose barriers to employment. The data received from the interviews these points to be true at least for some of the respondents. All respondents agreed that they had received at least some guidance how to apply for jobs in Finland from their higher education institutions. However, many stated that they were either unfamiliar with the style requirements for resumes and cover letters, or simply lacked knowledge of relevant websites where to look for job postings.

“At some point, I realized that my style in writing resumes and cover letters and my style of networking wasn’t working here in Finland because it was so different from my home culture”. - Participant 1

“I feel there are different requirements for example in terms of resumes and cover letters for locals and foreigners. As a foreigner you have to make them more engaging to stand out”. - Participant 2

Spencer-Rodgers and Cortijo (1998) also argued that it is important to acknowledge that required job seeking skills can vary from country to country which complicates the job seeking process especially for international students that may not be familiar with the system and requirements of the host country. Participants also emphasized that they were not familiar with practices that seem to apply only for the Finnish job market. One respondent highlighted the importance of having references, the practice they had not encountered before coming to Finland. While the other respondent mentioned the importance of sending open applications as the in the Finnish job market many jobs are not put in open search. Also, the difficulty to compete with local students who already have a more extensive network and better references was mentioned as one of the key barriers in the employability of international students.

“The referencing culture in Finland is very strong. To my experience, an international student needs good references or to know right people to employ. My local friends usually have more references and have larger networks, so they often outshine us international students”. - Participant 2

“I had been looking for jobs here for at least a year when someone finally mentioned me that I should also send open applications to companies since every position may not have an open call. I wish I had known sooner”. - Participant 5

Alho (2020) argues that international students need a job search strategy to enter to the job market of the host country. four out of five participants of the study, said that follow at least some kind of job search strategy. However, many were unsure whether their strategy was a successful one and wished they could receive professional help to hone

their strategies. Majority of respondents mentioned that the key to a successful job search is to narrow down search to specific positions in their field of interest.

“My strategy is quality over quantity. I target jobs that spark my interest and then take a lot of time to prepare the CV and cover letter to stand out”. - Participant 3

“It’s important to pick a niche and then target those positions and really put your emphasis on preparing a CV and application for those. There is no point sending hundreds of applications that you have not put any effort to”. - Participant 4

4.1.5 Discrimination and stereotypes

A study conducted by Adam (2016) argues deep negative attitudes and perceptions among Finnish employers towards international students and other foreign migrants still exist widely. However, the data received from the interviews shows that only one out of five respondents stated to have experienced discrimination to the extent that they had identified it being discriminatory behavior. Some reported that they have encountered into singular individuals who have gave them weird looks on the streets, or customers that gave them hard time, but only one of the respondents could identify a specific situation what kind of discrimination occurred and in what kind of situation. Participants praised particularly universities in Vaasa and the Finnish society being respectful and responsive for international students, but mentioned that some employers, certain older generations and rare singular individuals will pick up the lack of language as a sufficient reason to discriminate.

“Schools and the Finnish society are very receptive on their part. But the Finnish companies not so much”. By requiring fluent Finnish, which I totally understand, they are cutting out international people solely based on language”. - Participant 1

Tran & Soejatminah (2019) argue that a new concept, neo-racism, indicates that discrimination against international students is evident when they are banned from employment or losing jobs. Therefore, it can be claimed that an international student who is not hired based on language requirements can also disguise prejudice and discrimination,

thus all the respondents have faced discrimination during their job search process in Finland. Many respondents stated they have been losing jobs due to language requirements, but many also explained that it was one of the reasons they are trying to learn the local language. Furthermore, according to the data received from the interviews, language barriers can also affect the atmosphere at workplaces when local workers and international workers may not have a joint language to communicate with.

“Sometimes we international students feel discriminated due to language barrier for example when our Finnish colleagues speak in Finnish and don’t translate so we feel left out. It’s challenging but it is also the reason why I’m learning Finnish”. - Participant 3

“Based on the attitudes employers in Finland have towards language I guess is an indication that there is discrimination against international students”. - Participant 5

Several respondents also mentioned that language requirements feel unfair especially considering how time consuming it can be to balance between learning a language and looking for jobs or studying simultaneously. Furthermore, Finland’s tight visa requirements put pressure on international students finding employment within the set time frame, which prevents them focusing on developing their other skills.

“I don’t have the energy to focus on both, studying Finnish and looking for jobs. Since I only have one year to find a job here, I’ll have to put my focus on that.” - Participant 1

Research data from Finland also indicates that a large proportion of highly educated immigrants work in jobs that do not correspond to their education (Kinos & Kirjavainen, 2021). International students that took part in this research have been working in lower-income jobs even though they all have graduated with a degree from different Finnish higher education institutions. Some respondents also mentioned that Finnish employers seem either lazy or don’t recognize the benefits of international students while reporting to have seen their Finnish friends with similar education, experience and qualifications to employ quickly after graduation.

“I think that a big mindset here is that international students have to put a lot of effort just to get an entry level job. They have to try so hard to get a job that corresponds to their education, otherwise they are stuck to do waitressing, food delivery and all that”. - Participant 2

“The general attitude is that it is easier for them to go with a local because they can speak the languages and know the market, so it feels like they don’t bother to go to lengths to hire international talent”. - Participant 3

4.2 Overcoming barriers

4.2.1 Language skills

Tomperi et al. (2021) suggests that language courses offered at the high education institution would be in line with the international study program pursued by the student. From the interviews, it was clear that all respondents agreed that higher education universities in Vaasa offer a sufficient number of Finnish courses for their international students but argue that the courses organized are not extensive and intensive enough. Several respondents also pointed out that they wish they could choose courses that target a specific field of studies including vocabulary suitable for their area of expertise, for instance business Finnish for business students, as well as flexibility to combine language studies alongside studies or job search process. Furthermore, several respondents pointed out that the language teaching in Finland is too easy and requirements need to be set much higher for students to learn. Many mentioned that the unique characteristics of the Finnish language make language learning more difficult for international students and therefore it should require more resources from the higher education institution to integrate more language learning into the curriculum

“Schools should provide more intensive language courses. It is also hard to combine language studies and being a full-time student or looking for jobs simultaneously” - Participant 1

“The language courses here are not extensive and intensive enough and the requirements are too low. If they really want students to learn Finnish curriculum and requirements need to be stricter”. - Participant 5

Rask (2021) suggests offering language teaching during working hours that is sponsored by the employer which would translate to increasing inclusiveness and work-life balance. The data from the interviews shows that also several international students feel the same and wish there was also a possibility to develop their language skills at the workplace.

“There are already so many training sections inside the company so I don’t know why there aren’t any section for improving language skills whilst working because that would generate more value for the company. Maybe to spare like 30 minutes every day for language training”. - Participant 3

Both Tomperi et al. and Rask (2021) suggest employers to lower language requirements which would enable to attract more international applicants and therefore diversify the pool of applicants. The data received from the interviews, indicates that participants’ most important wish would be for Finnish employers to lower their language requirements and realize the other type of value they would be bringing to the company. Some respondents also mentioned that the company culture would be more flexible in combining several languages but highlight the fact that not everything needs to be translated. Many mention that they acknowledge that there are certain positions that always require Finnish skills and that it requires a lot of resources from companies to translate existing materials to English. However, the respondents argue that the requirements should be lowered for those positions that there is no compulsory demand for fluent Finnish skills.

“Many international companies expect Finnish skills, but I think it should depend more on the position, what the requirements are, they could be more flexible for positions where English is more dominant”. - Participant 3

“Company culture is also a big factor here. Imagine if a company has been working in Finnish for ages. All the documents and communication are in Finnish, and you end up hiring someone who is talented but doesn’t speak any Finnish. It is a big dilemma”. - Participant 4

Rask (2021) suggests utilizing the so-called hybrid model at workplaces where the main idea is that each employee is allowed to use Finnish or English depending on the situation or preference. Respondents that had at least some Finnish skills also mentioned co-using languages as a possible way to improve language skills as well as facilitate the integration to the Finnish workplaces.

“I think it would be beneficial for those who already have some knowledge of Finnish to be included in an environment where they could communicate in both English and Finnish. Sometimes I forget a word in English but know it in Finnish and then would just say the word in Finnish and vice versa. It would make me more comfortable to have each language as an option”. - Participant 2

4.2.2 Cultural competence

Previous research shows that a satisfactory level of knowledge about the host country’s culture, society, and working life demonstrates to better employability. Therefore Villa et al. (2016) suggests integrating international students into the culture of the host country already during studies and universities play an important role in supporting this integration. Furthermore, higher institutions could support integration process through multicultural projects and group work where the students of the host country and international students work on projects together and share cultural knowledge among each other. The data received from the interviews shows that international students in Vaasa wish to improve their cultural understanding especially during their studies through culture-based courses and interaction with local students. One of the respondents highlighted those connections with local students assisted not only the integration but also employability.

“I wish there was some kind of Finnish working and cultural life course offered at universities and more networking with locals who could teach about the culture and customs.”

- Participant 5

“More events to involve local students with foreigners. I also wanted to learn more about Finnish culture, so I wish there was more teaching material about the culture”. - Participant 2

“Thanks to my Finnish boyfriend and classmates I was able to adapt to the Finnish culture more easily which also helped me to find employment”. - Participant 3

“We haven’t had too much interaction outside studies with the Finnish students, so maybe if we did interact more the cultural shock and cultural aspects would become easier for those who are having difficulties to adapt here”. - Participant 4

Schaftel et al., (2007) argues that managers are putting significant emphasis on hiring employees with cross-cultural adaptability. Furthermore, the research also indicates that managers value adaptability, sensitivity and respect for cultural differences as well as intercultural communication skills. One of the respondents highlighted the need for cross-cultural adaptability also from the side of Finnish students, universities and employers. They argued that being inclusive from both sides would help international students to integrate when their culture and challenges they are experiencing would be understood better by the Finnish stakeholders.

“Creating an inclusive environment also from the Finnish students’, universities and employers’ part - being inclusive from both sides. International students expected to be open-minded and absorb new culture but so should Finnish people” - Participant 3

4.2.3 Work experience

To increase the relevant experience of international students Villa et al. (2016) suggests higher education institutions to acknowledge and include the requirements and needs of business life in the curriculum so that students can gain competencies that match needs of employers. It is also suggested that universities would more actively put

resources in providing guest lectures that would include representatives of business life or organizing joint projects with local businesses and universities to increase their understanding of the host country's business practices and required skillset. The data received from the interviews also indicates that international students wish more assistance and engagement from their higher education institutions in order to gain relevant work experience.

“Everything starts from school. I would have wished for more project works involving real projects from employers, so students get a glimpse of what it's like to be in working life. Mentoring to map what kind of skills are needed and how to contact people.” - Participant 3

If we had projects targeted to gain skills for the requirements of a specific field of studies would have helped so much because now, I had to learn everything from scratch by myself” - Participant 4

“A lot of the tools that they taught at school were outdated, so I lacked relevant skills to many roles I was pursuing. Career coach could have helped to map the qualifications needed for the jobs I was seeking”. - Participant 1

Participants of the study also emphasized that there seems to be a lack of communication and cooperation between higher education institutions and local employers in Vaasa, which shows as inconsistency between expectations and reality when it comes to work experience and other skills employers require. One respondent had good experiences of a career organization that was operating at their university and wished that more universities would adopt the concept and establish some form of own organizations to assist students finding employment.

“Companies and universities should be clear about the requirements needed at the Finnish job market already from the start, so students have enough time to gain these skills during their studies”. - Participant 2

“Companies and universities in Vaasa need to cooperate more. I would have liked to have more real-life projects during studies that would have prepared me better for the future employment”. - Participant 5

Ollanketo (2018) suggests that offering international students summer work and internships is in the key position in tackling the barrier of lack of relevant experience. However, all the participants have been experiencing significant challenges to find even unpaid internships in Finland, which can be attributed to arduous attitudes from the employers' part that require interference from a higher level of the society.

4.2.4 Networking and job search skills

Villa et al. (2016) suggests development of a career plan together with a career advisor during studies before transitioning into working life. The plan is suggested to withhold detailed steps, for instance, how the students keep in contact with business life, network with employers during their studies and guidance on how to draw up a qualitative resume. The data from the interviews shows that international students wish more assistance from universities not only for networking but for the whole job search process itself. Many stated that they had attended courses during their studies where they had received assistance for the job search but argue it was not consistent, intensive and extensive enough. All respondents disclosed to follow at least some kind of job search strategy, but many were unsure of its' functionality since they had not received job offers and were hoping for feedback from professionals.

“Career advisors could be exploited more to coach students for job search by introducing websites and relevant skills that are needed for job search in Finland”. - Participant 2

“I wish that I had learned more about the Finnish work culture for example very simple things like how to write a CV, cover letter, how to network with Finnish people, and what kind of companies I should target as there are quite few companies who would hire international students”. - Participant 1

School prepared us to prepare a CV and cover letter and organized job fairs to connect with recruiters but they did not disclose any websites or other skills needed for the job search so we were left to figure out them ourselves, which is not too hard, but I would have wished to receive more support from them". - Participant 4

Lee (2016) suggests closer cooperation between career advisors, international student services, employer relations, and alumni association in order to create a supportive community for the career development of international students. Data from the interviews reveals that international students in Vaasa also wish a more extensive support network to assist in their employment. Respondents wish more collaboration between employers and higher education institutions through for instance career presentations on different industries and relevant companies, advice on who to contact inside companies as well as training to prepare for job application processes and interviews. Respondents also wished universities in Vaasa would provide more practical projects that connects students with local companies and mentors from local companies that would coach students to target special field of interest.

Villa et al., (2016) suggests organizing networking events and workshops for students to get in to contact with the employer representatives of the Finnish working life and learn about the Finnish work culture and regulations. Also, international students that took part in this research emphasize the need for networking events. Some argued that Vaasa doesn't have enough job fairs to connect with employers compared to other. However, in addition to getting information about networking and Finnish working life, they were hoping that events would include teaching on how to look more employable to Finnish companies. One respondent also emphasized the importance of teaching alternative networking options alongside traditional networking events.

There are not enough networking events in Vaasa compared to other cities. I would also really like get feedback from employers on how to look more employable from the company's point of view". - Participant 2

“I wish universities would put more emphasis on newer, universal ways of networking and applying for jobs like LinkedIn, which as a job search platform is underrated”. - Participant 4

“We are not taught properly how to find jobs. There are so many better ways to look for jobs, but we are not taught that in schools”. - Participant 5

Respondents agreed that they wish to receive assistance for networking especially from employers' part to improve their employability. Several also emphasized that higher education institutions need to take a more active role not only in organizing event but also involving students in these events and the market the importance of networking.

4.2.5 Discrimination and stereotypes

Mittelmeier and Cockayne (2020) suggests higher education institutions to work actively to prevent discrimination and decrease stereotypes. Tran and Vu (2016) also suggest teachers should take more active role in changing and overcoming stereotypes against international students as they are part of both institutional and work placement experiences of the students. Based on the data received from the international students interviewed to this study it can be stated that universities in Vaasa have succeeded well in creating a welcoming and inclusive atmosphere for their international students. No one of the participants reported to have experienced discrimination in the higher education institutions they had been studying. Many praised universities in Vaasa for having friendly staff that as well as providing them sufficient amount of guidance.

“Universities in Vaasa are very welcoming; professors are really helpful, and universities have a lot of resources for integrating international students”. - Participant 2

Education institutions in Vaasa certainly love and welcome international students, but the puzzle is how to retain them and not make them leave especially here in Ostrobothnia”. - Participant 4

In the light of the data received from the interviews it can therefore be argued that discriminatory behavior concentrates more around employers and the Finnish society itself

than higher education institutions at least in Vaasa. However, developing inclusive practices should not be forgotten in universities located in Vaasa and they should continue active work for developing measures to recognizing and tackling discrimination to ensure that the welcoming and inclusive atmosphere stays for the upcoming international students in the future.

Previous study conducted by Hanassab (2006) proves off campus discrimination to be more common among international students compared to on campus. Participants of the study also reported to have experienced some form of discriminatory behavior, attitudes and stereotypes as international students in Vaasa. Mostly, the respondents reported to have experienced discrimination based on language, but one of the respondents had also experienced racial discrimination. However, generally the experiences of living in Finland, specifically in Vaasa, had been positive. International students praised Finnish society to be respectful, helpful well-educated and kind. Education institutions are also in the key position in tackling discrimination and stereotypes on a society level therefore, Juusola et al., (2021) suggests the government of the host country should ensure that the education institutions prioritize language and cultural competences, multiperspectivity in history and gender equality. Therefore, one can argue that by tackling language and cultural barriers also identified in this study can in part reduce discrimination in the whole society.

Previous studies show that the Finnish labor market has been fairly closed and inflexible traditionally and thus not very receptive for foreign labor. The data from the interviews confirms that international students feel the same. Respondents feel like employers do not welcome foreign students to Finland the same way Finnish universities and societies do. Several respondents state that some companies are not even willing to hire international students, while those that hamper their possibilities by too high expectations on language and experience. Furthermore, many international students feel enormous pressure to find jobs within the time frame Finnish government has set for the foreign graduates.

“Finland is advertised differently abroad than what the reality is. People come here for excellent education and are hoping to employ and stay here after graduation but are disappointed to find out that the employers are not very receptive”. - Participant 1

“There are companies that don’t want international talent and don’t need them because they operate solely in Finland and are not looking to expand elsewhere” - Participant 5

Companies that wish to expand and especially those who define themselves as international companies really need diverse, talented workforce and they are also looking for and willing to hire international students, however, it does not always translate to international students actually getting employed to these companies”. - Participant 4

Therefore, it could be argued that the real barrier here to overcome is the underlying attitudes and receptivity on employers’ part in Vaasa. Respondents that had employed in Finland had not experienced discrimination at the workplace either. Roberson et al., (2020) suggest that various enforcement actions for instance, affirmative action goals and progress reports that monitor workforce demographics are an effective tool in tackling discrimination and could also be utilized when trying to enhance the recruitment of international students. Also, identity-blind practices, where the focus on performance rather than demographics has been shown to protect employees from unconscious biases their employers may encompass. Stereotypes and unconscious, underlying attitudes of Finnish employers are more difficult to uproot and require consistent cooperation from all the stakeholders: higher education institutions, employers and the society.

4.3 Summary of findings

The findings of this study show that the most significant barriers international students in Vaasa experience are related to language and work experience. Cultural barriers also appear as prominent especially for students coming from outside Europe and countries, whose culture is far apart from the Finnish culture. Challenges regarding networking and job search skills were also significant for some respondents, while others did not identify them interfering their employment. Discrimination based on language and other relevant skills are proven to also hamper employment from all the respondents, which can

also to some extent to be evaluated as unwillingness to recruit international students from the part of Finnish employers.

Based on the findings, it can be suggested that to overcome the barriers identified, cooperation between higher education institutions and employers in Vaasa need to be increased. Together they should respond to the demand for various forms of student services and organizations international students need in order to create a supportive community for their career development in Vaasa. To alleviate especially linguistic, cultural and networking challenges, university curriculums need to be altered to serve the needs and wishes of international students to better support their learning and integration. To alleviate discrimination and overcoming the underlying attitudes and lack of receptivity from employers in Vaasa, local companies need to work hard on changing attitudes towards hiring international students as well as establishing more practices that include diversity and inclusion whilst also lowering requirements for internationals students. Vaasa needs to pay careful attention to these developing practices not only for the sake of international student retention but also to prevent them from relocating to other cities in Finland in the pursuit of better possibilities.

Barriers of employment (scale 1-5)	Language	Culture	Work experience	Networking & job search skills
Participant 1	5	4	5	3
Participant 2	5	5	4	4
Participant 3	4	5	4	4
Participant 4	5	1	5	2
Participant 5	5	4	5	3
Average	4.8	3.8	4.6	3.2

Table 2. Barriers of international students in Vaasa

5 Discussion and conclusion

This chapter will draw a conclusion on the main results of the research and discuss of their relevance to the existing literature. The chapter will also evaluate if the research question and objectives set for this study are answered through explaining whether they were confirmed or contradicted. The chapter will then end with a conclusion of the research.

The results of the interviews were aligned with the literature review of the study and could be predicted. The respondents indicated that they had been experienced significant barriers related to language, culture, work experience, networking and job search skills as well as discrimination while being international students in Vaasa. Furthermore, the responses of the participants also showed that there is still demand for certain measures to be taken in higher education institutions and employers in Vaasa in order to overcome these barriers international students still face. The received data from the respondents of this research also provided an extension for the literature utilized to this study.

The first objective of the research was to identify barriers that influence the employment of international students in Vaasa. Lack of sufficient language skills was one of the main barriers identified by the respondents and Villa et al., (2016) has proven language skills to be one of the most important prerequisites for employability. Several respondents had also experienced that cultural barrier affected their employment in Vaasa, similarly Nguyen & Hartz (2020) had found out that cultural competence is an important employability attribute for international students. Additionally, Ibrahim (2017) emphasized that the further the international student's cultural heritage is apart from the culture of the host country, the greater the risk for experiencing culture shock is. This was also proven to be true since the Asian respondents of the study reported to have experienced significant culture shock as international students in Finland.

Lack of work experience was also listed as a barrier preventing the employment of international students, the results are in align with Ollanketo (2018) who states that work

experience has proven to establish a barrier between international students and their employability. Some respondents of the study also reported to have experienced difficulties to network and encompass relevant job seeking skills needed to search for jobs in Finland. Accordingly, Sofat (2021) suggests employability being a significant challenge for international students without local contacts, encompassing only qualifications and skills obtained in their home country. Kinos & Kirjavainen (2021) argued that employment of international students can be hampered by identified or unrecognized prejudices, attitudes as well as racism and other discriminative behavior. The interviews support this statement and reveal that especially employers in Vaasa practice either conscious or unconscious discrimination against international students.

The second objective of the study was to analyze the data received from interviews to suggest how these barriers could be overcome. The respondents listed increased cooperation between higher education institutions, employers and other crucial stakeholders in Vaasa to one of the most important development goals. Similarly, Lee (2016) suggests increasing cooperation between career advisors, international student services, employer relations, and alumni association in order to create a supportive community for the career development of international students. Respondents of the study also wished that university curriculums would be altered to serve the needs and wishes of international students to better support their learning and integration. The respondents wished especially more intensive and extensive learning of language and culture. Accordingly, Juusola et al., (2021) suggests the government of the host country should ensure that the education institutions prioritize for example language and cultural competences, multiperspectivity in history and gender equality.

The respondents of the interview also emphasized that employers in Vaasa would need an attitude correction, be more receptive and inclusive as well as re-evaluate the qualification they have set for their international applicants. In accordance, Alho (2020) suggests that by facilitating strict terms and restrictions applicable for international students, Finland can ensure the retention of skilled, international workforce and appear as flexible and desirable destination for students around the world. Data received from the

interviews indicated also that there is a highlighted the need for cross-cultural adaptability also from the side of Finnish students, universities and employers. Being inclusive from both sides would help international students to integrate when their culture and challenges they are experiencing would be understood better by the Finnish stakeholders. Bobek et al., (2018) and Roberson et al., (2020) suggest that various enforcement actions for instance, diversity training and affirmative action goals and progress reports that monitor workforce demographics are an effective tool to increase inclusiveness and tackle discrimination.

The last objective was to assess whether data received from interviews supports the theoretical framework. When evaluating the literature review constructed to this study together with the main findings of this study it can be stated that the results of the interviews are in line with the theoretical framework utilized for this research. The concepts that were part of the study have been confirmed and extended based on previous studies. Consequently, research propositions set for this research can be confirmed.

In conclusion, research provided clear evidence that there are significant barriers related to language, culture, work experience, networking and job search skills as well as discrimination that complicate international students finding employment in Vaasa. The study also provided clear evidence on practical measures that could be taken to overcome barriers and facilitate the employment of international students. These measures include increased cooperation between higher education institutions and employers in Vaasa, altering university curriculums to match students' needs and desires as well as promoting diversity and inclusion whilst also lowering requirements for international students.

6 Managerial implications

The chapter will discuss the implications of the research and provide some guidance for different organizations, employees, managers and teachers that are drawn from the results of the study. This research contributes to the existing literature on barriers of employment for international students as well as offers a new point of view from the perspective of foreign students located in Vaasa. It provides valuable information on the current state of employability of international students and advice for actions higher education institutions and employers could take in order to improve the employment of international students in Vaasa.

This research contributes also to the literature linking international students with benefits and value they could bring to employers in Finland and Vaasa. Actions that could assist employers and organizations to maximize their benefits through recruiting international talent to ensure the flow of diverse ideas, innovation and international competitiveness. Therefore, to understand the benefits international talent can bring as well as facilitating their integration, diversity training to employers could present valuable measures to gain an understanding of the positive impacts of having an international student part of a team. Furthermore, employers could utilize the unique skills and knowledge that international student encompass to bring added value and new competencies to a team. Managers could reap the benefits of the competencies of international students for example through professional contacts, foreign language abilities as well as projects and tasks related to their home country's market.

Teachers' role in the employment of the international students can not be forgotten since they are being part of both institutional and work placement experiences of the students, they are also in the key position for example tackling discrimination, providing support and assisting students to integrate in Vaasa. It is important that they recognize and understand their role in the process of securing international students' employment in Vaasa.

7 Future research

The final chapter of this study will discuss and evaluate suggestions for future research. There are several possibilities for future research that can be identified from the basis of this research topic and results. In order to be able to generalize the results of this research a broader sample is needed. Therefore, future research on the same topic could also be conducted as quantitative research to reach a wider understanding on the barriers in the employment of international students in Vaasa. Future research could also be conducted for international students located in different cities in Finland to see if there are any differences in the barriers between Vaasa and other Finnish cities. Furthermore, if there is a need to get a more detailed information of a specific target group, future research could also focus on investigating barriers that international students from a specific country or a continent face when finding employment in Vaasa.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Interview questions

1. What is your current employment status? Could you share briefly about your job search process and working experience during/after your studies?
2. Do you speak Finnish or Swedish? if yes, at what level?
3. What kind of challenges have you experienced regarding your language proficiency when finding employment in Vaasa? Evaluate on a scale 1 to 5 (1 = not challenging at all, 5 = extremely challenging) how significant have these challenges been for you?
4. Based on your experience, what kind of support would you have wished to receive to improve your language proficiency?
5. What kind of challenges have you experienced regarding your cultural knowledge/competency when finding employment in Vaasa? Evaluate on a scale 1 to 5 (1 = not challenging at all, 5 = extremely challenging) how significant have these challenges been for you?
6. Do you feel like you have adequate knowledge of the Finnish culture, and its economic, legal and social systems?
7. Have you experienced culture shock as an international student in Finland?
8. What kind of support would you have wished to receive to improve your understanding of the Finnish culture?
9. Did you have any work experience in Finland before graduation?
10. What kind of challenges have you experienced regarding your work experience when finding employment in Vaasa? Evaluate on a scale 1 to 5 (1 = not challenging at all, 5 = extremely challenging) how significant have these challenges been for you?
11. What kind of support would you have wished to receive to improve your chances to gain work experience before graduation?
12. What kind of challenges have you experienced regarding networking: finding relevant contacts, and gaining relevant job search skills when finding employment in Vaasa? Evaluate on a scale 1 to 5 (1 = not challenging at all, 5 = extremely challenging) how significant have these challenges been for you?

13. Have any personal connections established during your studies assisted you finding employment?
14. Do/did you have a specific job search strategy?
15. What kind of support would you have wished to receive to improve your networks/ contacts and relevant job search skills?
16. Have you experienced discrimination at any point during your studies, during a job search process or during employment in Vaasa? If yes, what kind of discrimination and in what kind of situation did it occur?
17. What kind of attitudes, in your experience, higher education institutions, employers and the Finnish society have towards international students?
18. Any other experiences, thoughts you would like to share or have there been any other challenges you have faced when finding employment in Vaasa?

List of Figures and Tables

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