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Facilitating Job Market Integration for International Students in Finland

A Case study of Mikkeli

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Abstract
The purpose of this thesis is to explore the experiences of international students in the South Savo region when looking for a job. The objective is to highlight the challenges students face on the job market and propose ways to overcome these challenges for the students, companies and for municipalities. The qualitative study found perceptions of Finland and social integration, limited job opportunities and job market accessibility, language barrier and language-based discrimination, factors influencing retention and departure, and proposed solutions. It proposes strategies for overcoming the employer mindsets that lead to language-based discrimination in job application, highlights the possibilities of internships and analyses Mikkeli as a student town.

Keywords Social integration, job market integration, language discrimination, international student retention, Mikkeli.

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Titel Utmaningar som internationella studenter möter på arbetsmarknaden i Finland – en fallstudie av Sankt Michel

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Sammandrag
Syftet med denna avhandling är att undersöka internationella högskolestudenters upplevelser gällande arbetsansökning i staden Sankt Michel i landskapet Södra Savolax i Finland. Målet är att belysa de utmaningar som studenterna möter på arbetsmarknaden och att rekommendera olika tillvägagångssätt för att bemöta dessa utmaningar både ur studenternas, företagens och kommunernas perspektiv. Den kvalitativa studien beskriver uppfattningar om Finland, social integration, arbetsmarknadsintegration, språkbarriärer och språkbaserad diskriminering samt faktorer som påverkar om studenterna stannar kvar eller utvandrar från Finland. Studien föreslår strategier för att motverka negativa attityder hos arbetsgivare som kan leda till språkbaserad diskriminering vid rekrytering och lyfter fram möjligheter gällande praktikplatser samt analyserar Sankt Michel som studiestad.

Nyckelord Social integration, arbetsmarknadsintegration, språkbaserad diskriminering, retention av internationella studenter, Sankt Michel.

Contents

Preface and acknowledgements

I want to thank my thesis supervisor Kaisa Pekkala, for her good advice and guidance.

I want to thank my loving family and incredible parents who I know I can always lean on and who support me in wherever I go in life. Thank you for making me value education and teaching me the importance of continuous learning. I also want to thank my amazing friends for their support, especially Casper Wiedmer and Tommi Turpeinen for always being there for me. I'm extremely lucky to have you.

Mikkeli, 14 April 2025

Felicia, Student

1 Introduction

1.1 Demographics and the Role of International Students for the Finnish Economy

Finland's aging population and the decreasing birth rate creates a shortage of workforce and makes attracting foreign workforce increasingly important (Christoforou, 2022). Predictions made by Statistics Finland (2021), indicate that by year 2060, there will be 700 000 more deaths in Finland than births if the birth rate remains the same. At the same time, the working-age population is expected to decrease significantly. With declining birth rates and a growing elderly population, the shrinking workforce will present significant demographic challenges.

With birthrates continuing to drop as well as elderly population growing, the smaller share of people in the workforce poses serious demographic challenges. The working-age population is projected to decline significantly after 2040, worsening the demographic dependency ratio (number of dependents per 100 working-age people) (Statistics Finland, 2021). These trends are closely tied to the state of the economy, which means that this demographic shift will likely lead to economic difficulties in the future.

When a country experiences negative population growth, international graduates can be another source of population increase. Increasing the number of foreign workers can positively impact the host country's GDP per capita (Hsu and Chen, 2020), and therefore, it is recognized that retaining international graduates from Finnish higher education is crucial for Finland's economic growth.

Additionally, international students have the potential to greatly benefit host countries by fostering cultural diversity, driving economic growth and enhancing human capital. However, it is crucial to be able to successfully integrate the students to the job market (Lu, Härkälä, 2024).

1.2 The Role of South Savo (Etelä-Savo) and Mikkeli

As this research uses South Savo and Mikkeli as a case study, let us go into more dept about the region. South-Savo (or Etelä-Savo) is a region located in the south-east of Finland. There is a total of eleven municipalities in the area, of which three use the title of city: Mikkeli, Pieksamäki and Savonlinna (Maakuntaliitto, 2025).

Figure 1- A picture of South Savo, Etelä-Savon Maakuntaliitto, n.d. Jäsenkunnat – Etelä-Savo kartta.

On Maakuntaliitto's (2025) website following is stated: *"We in South Savo rely on our own strengths: forests, water and food. They provide businesses, residents, cottagers and tourists with livelihoods and well-being. Research and education are important to us, and our focus in these areas is on environmental and materials technology, electronic services, building the environment, tourism, forestry, and food."*

It also states that *"South Savo has plenty of opportunities for entrepreneurs and employees. Suitable space can be rented or purchased at reasonable prices. The region has skilled workers and there are good transport connections to the rest of Finland. These things and well-functioning services facilitate the growth efforts of companies."*

Mikkeli was founded in 1838 and is located on the waterfront of Saimaa, Finland's biggest lake. It has an area of 3,229.57 km² out of which a big part, 681.11 km², is water. Even though Mikkeli is geographically big, there is a small population of 51,960 people living in the municipality (Mikkeli municipality, no date).

Higher education in Mikkeli is provided by XAMK or the South-Eastern Finland University of Applied sciences (previously known as MAMK), the Mikkeli University Centre and the Mikkeli Summer University. Vocational education is provided by the South Savo Vocational College Esedu and the Finnish Youth College.

1.2.1 Regional Demographics and Economy

In South-Savo, there has been a constant decline of population between 1990-2024, with an exception in 1992 (Tilastokeskus, 2024). Between January and December 2024, the region's population declined by 523 people. During the same period the year before, population decreased by 537 (Maakuntaliitto, 2025).

According to the population forecast (Tilastokeskus, 2024), the population decline will continue until 2045 in the entire South Savo region. It is predicted that by the year 2045, the population will decrease from the current approximately 130,000 people to 112,880. On an annual basis, the population decline in South Savo is approximately 774 people per year. (Tilastokeskus, 2024) South Savo has the oldest population structure in Finland. In terms of population development, there are more deaths than births in the region. Due to workers retiring, there is a big need for replacement recruitment in various sectors.

However, the most positive signal for the population development of the South Savo region is the positive net immigration (Maakuntaliitto, 2025). These gains have been thanks to immigrants. However, there are still challenges getting working-age immigrants to stay in Etelä-Savo. The challenge is both the pull and retention power because there are many employment opportunities offered around Finland and Europe (Etelä-Savo Ennakoi, 2025).

International talent has been recruited most often for seasonal agricultural work, the construction industry, the concrete and metal production industry, the manufacturing of electronic equipment, and in social and health services. Additionally, individual specialists have been recruited in various fields. Even if there currently are ongoing layoffs being done in the social and health sector, there is a big challenge in hiring qualifies workers and the sector has continuous need to recruit from abroad.

In South-Savo, the level of education of the population is lower than the national average and the proportion is one of the lowest out of all of the regions in Finland. There is a significant number of adult students, almost three quarters of the students study in vocational institutions. This can be explained by work tasks becoming more diverse and continuous learning in working life is becoming more important (Etelä-Savo Ennakoi, 2025).

If we compare the population of the South Savo region of the entire country, it was 2.4 percent in 2022. The share of the gross domestic product was 1.9 percent compared to the whole country. In a comparison of regional gross domestic product, South Savo ranks second to last after Päijät-Häme. There are over 48,000 jobs in South Savo. The latest data shows that the number of jobs has decreased. The largest decrease was in the field that employs the most workers in the area, the health and social service field. Meanwhile, the largest increase of jobs was in the field of administrative and support services. (Maakuntaliitto, 2025)

Over the year 2024, there was around 9400 open positions in Mikkeli. Respectively, the amount of open job positions in the city was 16600 in 2023.

The number went down by 68,5%. In 2023, most open job positions where in the service and sales fields.

By contrast, in December 2023, Mikkeli had 3607 active job seekers. In 2024, the number had risen by 2% to 3697 active job seekers, out of which 1384 were foreigners. Out of foreign job seekers, 359 were students (*Työllisyyskatsaus: Etelä-Savo, 2024*, 2024).

1.3 Research Questions and Objectives

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the experiences of international students in Mikkeli. The objective is to highlight the challenges students face on the job market and propose ways to overcome these challenges for the students, companies and for municipalities. The research aims to answer the research questions:

RQ1: How do international students in higher education perceive and navigate the Finnish job market, and what challenges do they encounter?

RQ2: What key factors influence international students' decisions to stay in or leave Mikkeli and/or the host country after graduation?

RQ3: How can educational institutions, municipalities, and organizations facilitate the integration of international students into the local job market and encourage graduates to remain in smaller regions?

2 Literature review

The literature review discusses relevant theories and literature that relate to the retention of international students. Since a big part of employment integration has to do with social integration and how the host country and individual interact with each other, the social integration theories and research is reviewed. The review continues by discussing what qualities employers are looking for in employees and the role of international students for the host economy.

Further, the literature discusses challenges for international students in finding jobs as well as at the workplace, recent policies and political climate in the host-country as well as the attitude of international students towards staying. Retention and migration theories are discussed, and a conceptual framework is developed based on the literature.

2.1 Integration

Integration is generally defined as the process of blending and joining a society (Cambridge dictionary). To this definition, Lu and Härkälä (2024) adds that individuals adapt to the lifestyle in the host country while preserving their home country's culture and identity. According to them, this

definition aligns with the concept of acculturation, that explains how the interactions among individuals and groups from different cultural backgrounds. They occur at both the individual immigrant level and host society level.

Berry (1997) proposed a model outlining four acculturation strategies that cultural groups and individuals can adopt when faced with a new culture:

- Assimilation: abandoning one's original culture and trying to adopt the host culture.
- Separation: prioritizing one's original culture and avoiding interaction with the host culture
- Marginalisation: Small cultural preservation as well as little engagement with the host culture
- Integration: as a two-way process, striving to maintain one's original culture while actively participating in the host culture.

Berry's (1997) acculturation framework emphasizes the importance of adapting to a new culture and engagement between immigrants and the host society. The research highlights how individuals react in multicultural environments and concludes that the integration strategy is the most preferred and most effective when looking at the health and wellbeing of immigrants.

However, Berry's framework only measures how an individual or group adapts when faced with a new culture. On the other hand, Bourhis et al. (1997) builds on Berry's acculturation strategies by expanding it into a more dynamic model called the interactive acculturation model (IAM). According to it, integration results from the acculturation strategies of both the host culture and the individual immigrant, simultaneously. Additionally, these are both shaped by state integration policies. This way, it shows that integration is a two-way process. It is not only the individual that adapts to the host culture, but also the host culture that adapts to the individual. It uses the four acculturation strategies that Berry proposed (assimilation, separation, marginalisation and integration), but also an additional one – individualism, which means that host members prioritize individual traits over cultural identities and therefore interact with immigrants based on personal characteristics.

The IAM highlights the role of integration policies and integration as a two-way process where the host society can play a role in facilitating integration. The model strongly also supports the concept of multiculturalism, meaning cultural pluralism or diversity (merriam-webster), and argues that policies that promote pluralism and civic ideologies are more likely to foster positive and harmonious relationships while policies based on assimilation, separation and exclusion often lead to conflict.

While Berry focuses on individual and cultural factors, Garcés-Mascareñas and Penninx (2016) emphasize structural and policy-related factors. They argue that instead of a two-way process, integration is a three-way process for individuals to be (or not be) accepted into a society. There are three levels of integration. The process can be measured on individual,

organizational and institutional level. Additionally, there are three dimensions that are measured simultaneously:

- The legal-political: that examines immigrants' legal status, rights, and political participation.
- The socio-economic: that focuses on access to housing, education, employment, and healthcare.
- The cultural-religious: That considers perceptions of cultural and religious diversity and acceptance by the host society.

Instead of focusing on how immigrants identify themselves, this framework focuses on how they are positioned in each of the three dimensions and levels. It recognizes the security that these dimensions bring to individuals and how they contribute to their integration into society.

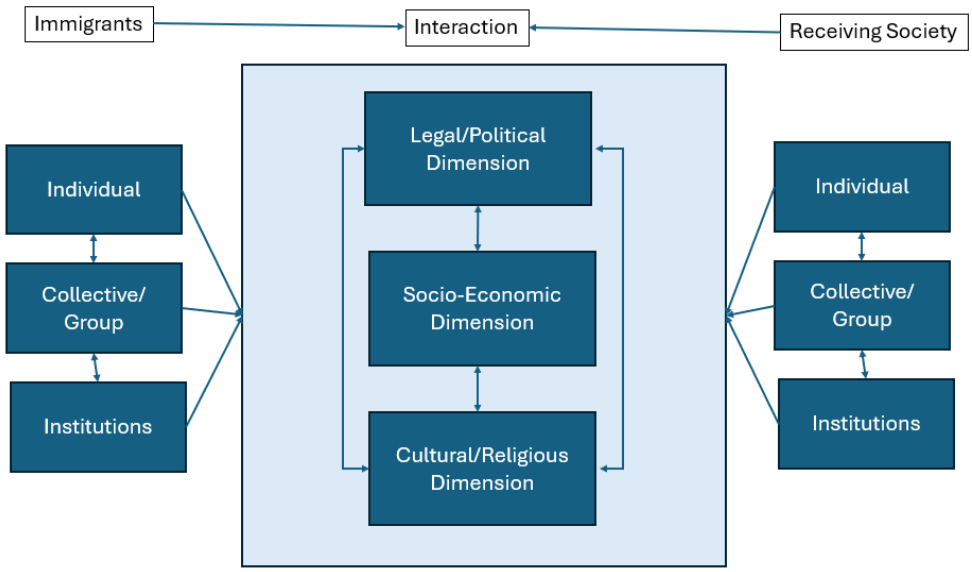

Figure 2: Garcés-Mascareñas and Penninx (2016), Heuristic model (authour's picture).

The approach tries to distinguish the levels of policy making and the different perspectives and players that exists. Instead of grouping the host-society into one group it recognizes the complexities and multiple layers of a host-society and an integration process that need to be considered when forming policies. Integration is interplay between institutions, organisations, groups and individuals. As we will be focusing a lot on how schools, organisations and companies could facilitate the employment integration of international students, this perspective is valuable for the research.

How do we then know what is successful integration? To measure successful integration, Ager and Strang (2008) proposed a conceptual framework where 4 key themes were identified: markers and means, social connection, facilitators, and foundation. These key themes include the following 10 core domains

- Markers and means: success in areas like jobs, housing, education, and health.

- Social connection: social bridges, social bonds, and social links.
- Facilitators: language and cultural knowledge, safety and stability.
- Foundation: rights and citizenship.

Figure 3: Ager and Strang (2008), conceptual framework for core domains of integration (author's picture).

For example, language and cultural knowledge can affect social bridges which in turn can offer employment. Employment can affect housing which then will bring safety and stability. Safety and stability can bring health. All these factors can affect each other and enhance the integration of an individual. This model recognizes how factors are linked and how enhancing one might also better another aspect of life.

2.2 Graduate employability

Employability means the competences and abilities that enable you to secure employment (Cambridge dictionary). According to Yorke and Knight (2004), it is a combination of skills, knowledge, and personal attributes that enhance the possibilities for graduates to find employment and succeeding in their chosen careers. This benefits not only themselves but also the workforce, community, and economy. Clarke (2017) defines graduate employability to be influenced by human capital, social capital, individual attributes, behaviours, perceived employability, and labor market factors, rather than just skill-based learning outcomes.

Human capital theory (Becker, 1993) views things like education and training, medical care, and migration as an investment. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), defines human capital as "the knowledge, skills, competencies, and attributes embodied in individuals

that facilitate the creation of personal, social, and economic well-being". If we invest resources in people, we can stimulate future financial returns and enhance the overall wellbeing of individuals and society. The theory suggests that enhancing the skills of international students, positively effects the Finnish economy by for example addressing labor shortages.

Yorke and Knight (2004) emphasize the role of higher education in supporting the promotion of employability. Institutions and organizations can support students by offering networking, internships, and teaching job-seeking skills. Brooks and Youngson (2016) argued that when gaining employment, work experience was a key differentiator. The study discussed the benefits of "sandwich" placements, which are opportunities for work experiences during academic courses. The study found that students that participated in sandwich placements tend to have higher grades and better employment outcomes.

A study done in the UK by Tomlinson and Anderson (2021) reveals that higher education institutions, student, government and employers have varying perspectives on graduate employability and who holds responsibility for it. While the government defines employability with a focus on developing and gaining knowledge and vocational skills, employers prioritize soft skills. Higher education institutes tend to follow government policies and therefore there is a big gap between what the government promotes as relevant and what the employers need (Tomlinson and Anderson, 2021).

Employers play a key role in shaping employability by defining the skills that they seek in graduates. A study conducted among employers in the United states, concluded that employers prioritize interpersonal skills, critical thinking, and problem-solving as key competencies for graduates (Conway and Cebula, 2019).

Employability goes beyond having qualifications or technical skills and includes "soft skills" like adequate communication and working effectively with others (Yorke and Knigh,t2004). Similarly, Pool and Sewell (2007) understood that not only the "hard" skills like academic knowledge are demanded by employers, but also "soft" skills like communication and teamwork. Their framework emphasizes that employability isn't only influenced by a university degree, work experience and career development, but also generic skills and emotional intelligence are important for employment.

When focusing on international graduates, they might lack language skills but are might be highly familiar with a multicultural work environment. International students can provide companies a global perspective, multilingual proficiency and other competences that contribute to innovation and enhance competitiveness in international markets (Solheim and Fitjar, 2016). Additionally, many immigrant students are highly motivated to learn and aim to achieve high levels of education to enter professional careers. By helping migrants develop their skills, offering career and education guidance, and supporting them in creating future plans, education systems can make the most of their motivation and ambition, benefiting both the students and their host communities (OECD, 2021).

2.3 Challenges when seeking employment for international students

International students frequently encounter greater difficulties securing employment compared to domestic students (Lu and Härkälä, 2024). Common challenges include language barriers, lack of knowledge of local job markets and work culture, limited networks and discrimination. On the other hand, studies using ISM as a theoretical framework indicate that employment significantly increases the likelihood of staying after graduation. The overall stay rate of international graduates is high (over 62%), even when controlling for prior residence in Finland (Mathies and Karhunen, 2020).

The study also indicates that family and employment ties strongly influence international graduates' decisions to remain in Finland. Tsishuk (2024), concludes that factors such as sunk costs, forming friends and acquiring language skills can all be influences that encourage international students to stay in the country where they completed their education. On the other hand, in the same study he finds that the most prevalent challenge in the Finnish job market is to find employment opportunities. Consequentially, some international students have changed their initial intention to remain in Finland after graduation, in favour of relocating to other countries instead. In the study, it was found that there are not only difficulties landing a job but also landing a job interview. Therefore, the importance of networking is highlighted.

However, networking can be difficult as there often exists so-called language bubbles that divide students into groups based on language. This leads us into the other most prevalent challenge for international graduates in the Finnish job market that Tsishuk (2024) identified: the language. Tsishuk (2024) also concluded that even though students are eager to learn the Finnish language, students find it hard to pick up and there is absence of communicative Finnish language courses. Most students have done their studies in English and the realization of the importance of the Finnish language in the Finnish job market often becomes apparent toward the end of a student's studies. According to one interviewee in Tsishuk's (2024) study, there is a common belief that English is sufficient, since it is often assumed to be widely spoken.

Another study done by Lu and Härkälä (2024) found through in-depth qualitative interviews several key challenges faced by international students, including insufficient information about the labor market, unfamiliarity with recruitment processes, a lack of industry connections, and language barriers. For instance, participants had come across some companies that work in English but post job listings in Finnish. Additionally, some postings listed Finnish as a requirement, but when asked about the job, it became evident that it was unnecessary and had been copied from another source. These inconsistencies led to miscommunication, further complicating the employment process and job search experience for the international graduates.

Language discrimination is unfortunately not the only type of discrimination that international graduates might face in the hiring process. With the growing amount of AI used in recruitment, international names might get lost in the selection due to algorithmic biases. It is crucial that HR teams ensure fairness and consider the risks when using AI in the hiring process (Rigotti and Fosch-Villaronga, 2024).

2.4 Policy and Support for International Talent

According to a study by Hsu and Chen (2020), governments should focus on policies that enhance the skills (human capital) of foreign workers. This study addresses a research gap by examining how host governments' industrial policies impact foreign workers' human and social capital development, benefiting firms and the host country. Using data from the Philippine Learning Commons in Taiwan, it proposes an exogenous growth model linking foreign workers' capital accumulation to national and firm-level competitiveness.

The 2001 internationalization strategy marked a significant shift in Finland's higher education policy, integrating international activities as a core part of the system. Since then, there has been different strategies that emphasize that internationalization and attracting international students would enhance the quality and reputation of Finland's education system. Since 2001, matching education programs with the needs of the Finnish labor market has been important. However, in the "IS2017-25" strategy, ensuring that there is a supply of skilled labor in the context of the declining birth rates and ageing population became one of the major justifications for student recruitment (Jokila, Kallo and Mikkilä-Erdmann, 2019).

One major step in 2021, was the EU Blue Card which is a work and residence permit for non-EU/EEA nationals. It offers equal employment conditions with EU nationals, a pathway to permanent residence, citizenship, free movement within the Schengen area and benefits like family reunification. After graduation in Europe, non-EU/EEA students can apply for an EU Blue Card to stay for 12 months to find a job. Eligibility requires higher qualifications or experience, a job offer, and a high salary compared to the host country's average.

In Finland 2022, a new law granted international students residence permits for full duration of their studies and extended the jobseeker's permit for graduates and researchers from one year to two years, which can be applied for within five years of their residence permit's expiration (Finnish Government, 2022). This initiative was aimed to streamline permit processes and make Finland more appealing for students and professionals, according to Minister of Employment Tuula Haatainen.

The Finnish government has set an ambitious goal: The aim is to triple the number of new foreign degree students to 15,000 by 2030. At the same time, the aim is to increase the employment and staying of foreign students in Finland to 75 percent (Valtioneuvosto, 2021).

2.4.1 Recent policies and political climate in Finland

It is important to note, that several government plans currently under consideration may impact the professional life of international students after graduation. The proposed measures could reduce employment opportunities for international graduates and complicate efforts to retain international talent.

The government program includes several changes like for instance the "3- and 6-month rule" for if employment unexpectedly ends (e.g., resignation, termination during a trial period, lay-offs, or bankruptcy). Fixed-term contracts ending as planned do not include a grace period for job searching. Under certain conditions, individuals may receive a 6-month grace period instead of 3 months before their permit is terminated. This proposal has been widely criticized by the Finnish Chamber of Commerce and has sparked protest. Many foreign workers in Finland express concern about the political and public discourse surrounding immigration. In one survey, nearly 90 percent of respondents said they were "worried" about how the issue is addressed in Finnish society (Yle, 2024a).

However, Finnish prime minister Petteri Orpo addressed the importance of straightening the retention strategy designed for international students (Yle, 2024b). He recognized that many talented graduates leave Finland after finishing their studies, and proposed a bill to grant permanent residence permits to recent graduates who meet specific language requirements.

This recognizes the importance of the Finnish language on the Finnish labour market which also is shown clearly in existing research (Back and Piekkari, 2024). Therefore, equipping international talent with local language skills can be considered one of the key strategies for addressing Finland's socio-economic challenges.

2.5 International student migration and attitude to stay

A fundamental theory used in this thesis is the theory developed by Lee (1966) explaining the factors that influence why people migrate from one place to another. It looks at the forces that push people to move out of their region or home country and factors that pull them towards a new destination and is therefore called the Push-Pull theory. The theory suggests that individuals migrate due to "push" factors like limited career opportunities, political instability in their home country or region and "pull" factors in the host country or region like better job opportunities, quality education, beneficial immigration policies. For instance, it is of economic importance for South Savo to ensure that its pull factors are greater than other regions around Finland and compete with more attractive regions. However, while this theory might explain why international students have moved to Finland or to South Savo, it doesn't explain why they would choose to stay.

On the other hand, the theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen, 1991) suggests that an individual's intention to remain is shaped by attitudes (how

they perceive staying), subjective norms (social pressure to stay or to leave), and perceived behavioural control (how easy or difficult staying is). In other words, the theory suggests that people are more likely to intend to do something and follow through with it if they have a positive attitude towards it, feel social support for it and believe in their ability to do it. This framework directly answers the question: "why do international students choose to stay in Finland?". Therefore, the framework is another important one in this thesis.

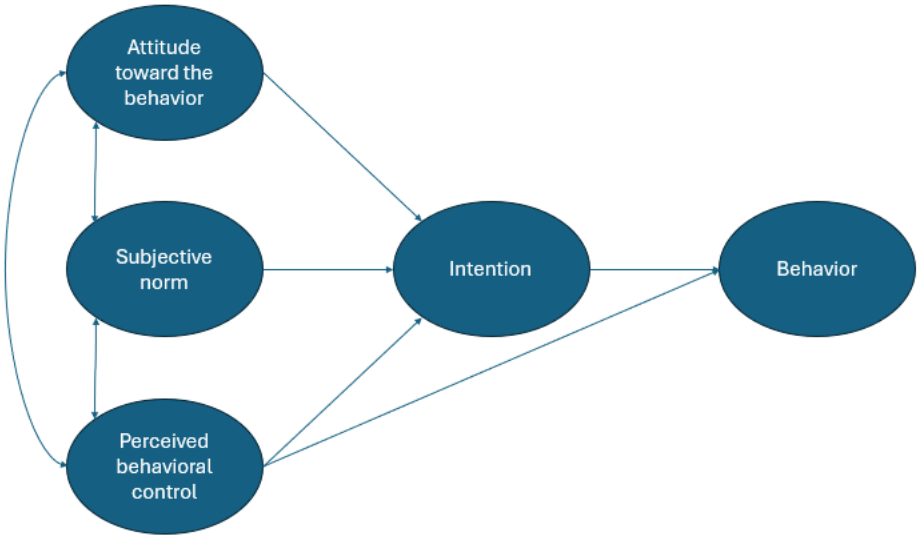

Figure 4- Ajzen (1991) Theory of planned behaviour, (picture by author).

Like previously discussed in this literature review, studies indicate that international graduates' attitudes toward staying are influenced by their integration experiences, including job availability, societal acceptance, and policy support. Meanwhile, perceived behavioural control is shaped by structural barriers or challenges, such as policies, Finnish language requirements, and discrimination.

Nikou and Luukkonen (2023) found that the strongest influence on students' intention to stay in Finland was the idea of professional growth and social status after graduation. Additionally, they concluded that people were more likely to stay in a country if they have a positive attitude about it and this attitude is influenced by things like how welcoming the country is in terms of support gained from schools and institutions. Policymakers and educators should tackle challenges by developing specific support programs and strengthening partnerships between universities and businesses (Nikou and Luukkonen, 2023).

2.6 Regional Integration Efforts in South Savo and Mikkeli

In South-Savo's strategy for 2030, internationality is emphasized as a supporting factor for the competitiveness of the region. It is stated that "improving the international capabilities of the region's companies, educational and research institutions, and development organizations requite systematic and targeted development work" (ETELÄ - SAVO – SAIMAAN MAAKUNTA 2030, No date).

In 2011 MAMK started a project called "Ulkomaalaiset opiskelijat Etelä-Savon voimavaraksi -hankke" (International sudents as an asset for South-Savo). The aim of the project was to develop cooperation between universities, companies and international students. It's main objective, however, was to concretely help students find internships and collaborate with companies and organizations for school projects and thesis topics.

Before the project, international students had very few contacts with working life, and many students transferred to Southern Finland because they could not find part-time jobs or internships in the region. During the project, information about the internships and other entrepreneurs' experiences were provided for companies and students were given personal guidance on job-seeking in Finland. Additionally, a "Sano Se Suomeksi - campaign ("Say It in Finnish"- campaign) was launched and students were encouraged to read, listen to podcasts and watch series in Finnish. The possibilities for finding internships improved thanks to the communication, collaboration and networking that the project group made possible.

A recent initiative in Mikkeli is the strengthening of the integration services by hiring a Head of International Services and expanding the services in 2025. The services offer guidance to immigrants living in Mikkeli and collaborates with authorities, educational institutions, companies and organizations. They also offer support for internationalization of business operations together with the city's development company, Miksei Mikkeli (Mikkeli municipality, 2024) (Mikkelin kehitysyhtiö Miksei Oy, 2024). Miksei Mikkeli also offers other types of guidance for free for entrepreneurs and companies.

2.7 Conceptual framework

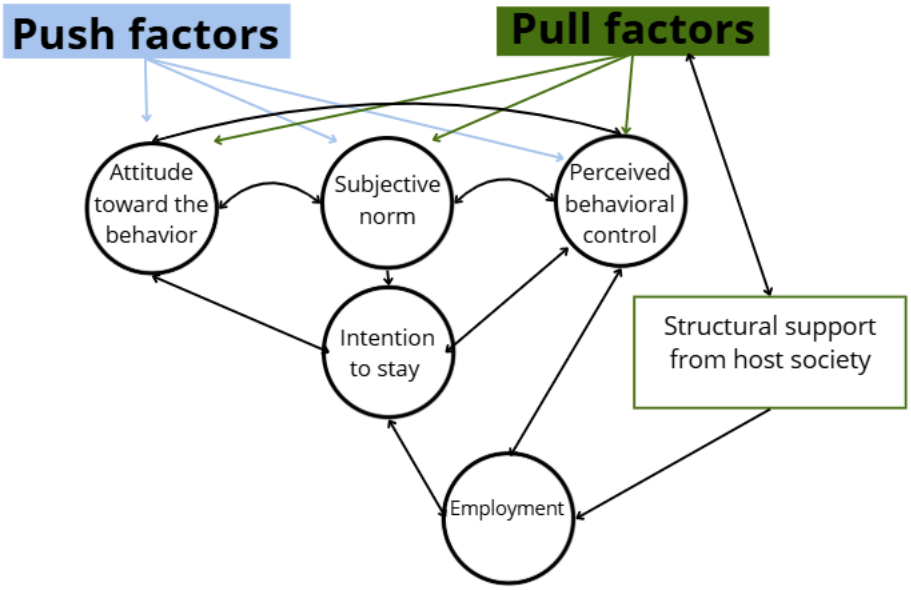

Figure 5: Conceptual framework (picture by author).

This model describes a framework for understanding how to effectively support international students to integrate into a host society's job market. It is based on the theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen, 1991) and emphasizes the importance of influences that an individual gains from interacting with a new culture. It also considers Berry's (1997) and Bourhis et al.'s (1997) theories, which suggest that the host country and individuals mutually affect eachother during the integration process. It considers the push and pull factors developed by Lee (1966) that influence the intention to stay in a country, as well as the support needed to do so.

Here is an explanation of what is meant by the different terms:

- Push factors (in blue): represent barriers or challenges that discourages the individual to integrate and stay in the host country. For example, language barriers or not having professional networks large enough to be able to find employment opportunities are challenges that could "push" someone to move.
- Pull factors (in green): represent the encouraging factors that facilitate the integration. For instance, community or institutional support systems, like company internships, networking opportunities, university career services, social networks or mentorship programs.
- Structural support: could be for example policies and rights or institutional support for integration. These are crusial for finding employment because there could be policies or employer attitudes that prevent employment.

- Attitudes, subjective norms and perceived behavioural control (based on the theory of planned behaviour): It proposes that individuals are more likely to develop an intention and take action if they have a positive attitude toward the behavior, feel socially supported, and believe in their ability to accomplish it.
- Intention to stay: The decision to try to gain employment. The intention to stay is influenced by attitudes, subjective norms and perceived behavioural control and host-society structural support.
- Employment: The end goal. When the graduate has decided that they want to stay and when the structure of the host country supports it (for example with policies, employment agreement etc.)

Having reviewed the literature and theories for the analysis, in the next section the author discusses the methodology that will be used when conducting research. The section will build on the literature reviewed and develop a framework to further study perceptions of the job market, employment integration and retention of international students in Mikkeli.

3 Methodology

This section outlines the methodological framework used in this thesis, explaining how data was collected, stored and analysed. It also discusses ethical standards of the research for example about participant confidentiality. In addition, it justifies the choice of a qualitative approach and the use of semi-structured interviews.
It aims to answer the research questions:
RQ1: How do international students in higher education perceive and navigate the Finnish job market, and what challenges do they encounter?

RQ2: What key factors influence international students' decisions to stay in or leave Mikkeli and/or the host country after graduation?

RQ3: How can educational institutions, municipalities, and organizations facilitate the integration of international students into the local job market and encourage graduates to remain in smaller regions?

3.1 Data Approach

This study will include primary qualitative data gathered through individual interviews and will be supported by secondary data in the form of local academic research. This mixed approach enhances the depth of the research by combining firsthand perspectives with existing studies. Through the interviews the aim is to collect insights from students, graduates, organizations and the municipality. On the other hand, secondary data from existing research and reports support the findings and help analyze them deeper. I will also use secondary data to dive deeper into what municipalities, organizations and universities in Mikkeli are doing to keep international talent in Finland and in Mikkeli. This data can complement the data gathered in the interviews and provide a more holistic view of the situation. The interview questions can be found in Appendix 1 at the end of this thesis, however, since these were semi-structured interviews they do not include every single question posed to the interviewee.

Through the in-depth semi-structured interviews, the study will try to explore international students' experiences and perspectives on the Finnish job market, as well as intention to stay after graduation. Additionally, interviews will be conducted with the development company Miksei Mikkeli to discuss for instance employer challenges in hiring international graduates. Gaps will be identified between student expectations and employer needs. In addition, an interview with the municipality will provide more in dept information about the municipality's future employment and education plans and strategies.

Qualitative research provides a more personal approach, as it allows the researcher to explore subjective experiences and perceptions, without being bound to how one has perceived these things based on previous research. While semi-structured interviews provide a framework that

compares responses, they also offer flexibility, enabling the researcher to explore themes that may not emerge through structured questions alone. By using this research approach, in-depth individual insights are explored as well as personal experiences and cultural aspects that might influence integration.

3.2. Collecting data and ethical considerations

Interviews were conducted with international students and recent international graduates from the Mikkeli campuses of Aalto university, LUT university and Xamk university of applied sciences. LUT university offers the master's program in water technology on Mikkeli campus while both Aalto and Xamk offer bachelor's programs. Interviewees on bachelor's levels were studying in the International Business program in Aalto as well as in the Information Technology program and the Environmental Engineering program in Xamk. The interviewees were encouraged to take part in the interviews through face-to-face invitations or through text messages sent directly to the participants. Among the students interviewed where individuals from Myanmar, Russia, Sweden, United States, Brazil and Kazakhstan. Out of the six interviews conducted with international students, one interview was done online using Facetime and the remaining were done face-to-face.

While the interviews conducted with Mikkeli municipality where individual, the interview with Miksei Mikkeli was a focus group discussion. It was conducted as a roundtable discussion were four employees shared their point of views with the whole group. This was mostly done according to different work positions and expertise within the organisation. The author led the discussion based on interview questions that can be found in the end of this paper labelled Appendix 1.

Prior to recording the interviews, all the participants were asked for oral consent for collecting, using and analysing the data. After the interviews, they were transcribed using an AI-transcription tool called TurboScribe as well as checked and corrected by the author to make sure that the transcriptions included everything mentioned in the recording as well as corrections for the spelling and other mistakes. After the completion of the coding and identification of themes, the recordings were deleted.

The interviewees identities are protected by using different names like "Student 1" or "Employee 1 at Miksei". The genders are also not disclosed and the author refers to the interviewees as "they" or "them". In the section comparing different experiences of students from different universities the students are just referred to as "Aalto student" or "Xamk student".

A description of the sources of data used:
Primary Data:

- The semi-structured interviews with students and graduates.
- The semi-structured interviews with the municipality.
- Semi-structured focus group interviews with Miksei Mikkeli.

Secondary Data used to support the interviews:

- Other or previous research that has been done in the area and supporting findings with relevant theory.
- Research about the municipalities', organizations' and universities' actions to retain international talent.
- Making sure the information gathered in the interviews about initiatives or other facts is correct.

3.3 Philosophical assumptions

It is important to understand the philosophical standpoints of this thesis since qualitative research builds on the personal experiences of international students. To do this we need to consider the ontology of this research. It is a branch of philosophy that investigates what exists and how things relate to each other (Smith, 2003). The ontological position can influence the design of the research as well as analysis and interpretation of the data collected (Tsishuk, 2024).

When analysing how students' job-seeking experiences are influenced by culture and social norms, it becomes clear that constructivism is a relevant theory to use in this thesis. It is defined as a research paradigm that views knowledge as something that is socially constructed through interactions and experiences. In this context, the theory explains how international students' job market experiences are shaped by their interactions, perceptions and cultural context (Allen, 2022).

To understand how students interpret experiences on the job market, interpretivism is used. It is based on the idea that reality is socially constructed and subjective. Different people might understand an event differently. In this research paradigm the researcher is also part of the study since they interpret the findings rather than just observing (Ryan, 2018).

However, to fully comprehend the situation and how for instance immigration policies or labor market discrimination shape the student's experiences, critical realism can help explore both individual perceptions as well as systematic issues. Critical realism uses both positivist and constructivist approaches and argues that reality exists independently of human perception but can only be understood through interpretation (Lawani, 2020).

By understanding the ontological position of this thesis, it can be recognized that this study is not only about collecting data but also understanding the reality that is being investigated. The job-seeking experiences are socially influenced and therefore moves away from positivist views that seeks objective truths. Therefore, paradigms that consider social and cultural influences are used.

3.4 Methods of choice

This study uses thematic analysis and follows the outlines published by Braun and Clarke (2006) to analyze qualitative data. Thematic analysis is a flexible method to identify, analyse and reporting patterns in qualitative data. It provides a structured and flexible way to analyse qualitative data and focuses on finding meaning rather than producing a theory (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

In this thesis, the data will be analysed by using an inductive approach, where themes emerge from the data instead of a fixed theory. Additionally, the study will take a hybrid approach and conduct semantic analysis of what has been explicitly said in the interviews but also a latent analysis if needed to explore underlying assumptions, meanings or social norms (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

The process of the analysis follows the six-step process that Braun and Clark (2006) proposed in their article. To begin with, the author will familiarize herself with the transcripts and data collected. After she has read through the transcripts thoroughly, she will start coding features to the data that appear relevant to the research questions. Next, she will organize the codes into key patterns that appear frequently. After reviewing the themes, she will then define and name the themes. This way it is easier to know what each theme represents and how it is relevant to answering the research questions. The final part is to write up the findings and analysing them using the hybrid model with both semantic and latent analysis.

Ryan and Bernard (2003) discuss multiple methods for identifying themes in qualitative research and point out various observational methods. Techniques identified can be used to analyse the transcripts of interviews and include easier techniques like repetition where the researcher tries to identify frequently mentioned topics. Additional relevant scrutiny techniques for analysing interviews include comparing responses of different students and identifying similarities as well as differences. Identifying linguistic connectors like “because” or “therefore” to find causal phrases, identifying metaphors or analogies as well as specific terms used to describe experiences can also help identify certain feelings that the interviewee experiences and hence help identify certain themes.

3.5 Limitations

Even if this study has tried to consider people from different backgrounds, it mostly focuses on the experiences of students actively studying in Mikkeli, not recent graduates. Mikkeli offers only one masters program on a higher education level and in this research most interviewees were bachelor level students. This poses a problem since working might not seem as important

at that stage, assuming that people might want to continue studying a master's since most universities encourage that in Finland.

The sample size was also quite small and interviews at the municipality as well as with Miksei Mikkeli were made in Finnish which might pose translation issues. The translations are done using google translate as well as AI tools like chat-GPT. The author goes through them carefully and corrects any translation issues that are found according to her language skills.

4 Findings

This study identified four key themes that emerged in the interviews that were seen as important from the point of view of the researcher. These key themes include perceptions of Finland and social integration, limited job opportunities and job market accessibility, career support, language barrier and language-based discrimination, and solutions discussed by interviewees. The following table shows the subthemes identified within key themes.

Key theme	Subthemes identified
Perceptions of Finland and social integration	The pull factors of Finland
	Social integration through student life
	Easier to get in touch with international people
	Policies affecting student retention
	Frequently mentioned pull factors and integration issues in Mikkeli
Limited job opportunities and job market accessibility	Challenges - Perceptions of limited job opportunities
	Helsinki – the place for better opportunities
Career support	Career services
	Importance of networking
	Role of internships
Language barrier and language-based discrimination	Reasons for not hiring English-speakers
	Language discrimination and unclear language requirements
	Language learning motivation and support
Solutions discussed by interviewees	

Table 1: Describing key themes and subthemes identified in the study

4.1 Theme 1: Perceptions of Finland and social integration

Since integration to the job market also includes social integration, topics about studying in Finland and social integration came up frequently in the interviews. Finland was seen as a country of educational opportunity, but it

was easier to get in touch with and connect with other internationals during the studies. University and student life was viewed as an important link towards integration; however, the students did not feel a very strong connection to the city of Mikkeli.

4.1.1 The pull factors of Finland – seen as an attractive place to study

In the interviews, international students frequently highlighted Finland's high-quality education as well as educational opportunities as key reasons for studying here. In line with Lee's (1966) theory of Push and Pull factors, the aspects mentioned can be seen as pull factors and affect students' decision to choose Finland as a study destination. The host country was considered a good place to study and when asked why students had chosen Mikkeli and Finland for their university studies, the following pull factors were stated:

- Accessibility of education and scholarships
- Opportunity to study at top school
- Inclusion of master's program
- Interest and trust in the Finnish education system
- Nordic countries are seen as an attractive place to live
- Social security.

The responses emphasize academic, financial, social and cultural factors that make Finland and Mikkeli an attractive place for higher education studies. Students emphasize that Finland has a global reputation of high-quality education and there is a trust in the educational system. A clear academic path is provided that often includes an automatic study right for master's as well. Scholarships were also frequently mentioned, and this was not only seen as a bonus but often as a decisive factor in choosing the study destination.

Additionally, the Nordics are known for the clean environment and sustainability, safety, equality, and progressive values (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2022). Since some of the students were looking to move far away from home, indicators of a well-functioning society and safety were important factors. Knowing that they will be cared for and protected was important and the social security net was often mentioned as a pull factor. When asked about why they chose Finland and Mikkeli as their study destination, student Student 4 states:

> *"The reason I decided to study here is because... my high school education. It's not internationally recognised, so I had to find a way to study. And then I came across this programme in Mikkeli in Finland, which gave us a scholarship... Since it's the best university in Finland, this is the programme that I'm really interested in... I think I read a book about Finnish education in high school. And then I found out that they had the best kind of education. So, I thought maybe Finland would be really cool as*

well, since it's in Nordic countries. And I kind of like their lifestyle, their safety, environment, and also their openness to everything."

In this answer, the student illustrates several of the main pull factors that were also recognized by the other students. For this student in particular, the accessibility of the education was a key pull factor due to a non-recognized high school diploma. The availability of scholarships, the top ranking of the school, recalling reading about the well-regarded Finnish education system and Nordic social security led to them choosing Finland as a study destination. It highlights how Finland's global reputation can reach students long before they consider university studies here.

4.1.2 Social integration through student life

Since student life affects the integration of international students, this study also explored how it was viewed and how it affects the students' attitudes towards staying in Finland. As noted by Ager and Strang (2008), building a strong network is part of successful integration into society.

Students had very different experiences of student life depending on which schools they study at and their level of study. Students from Aalto university shared that the community and rich student life at the campus was one of the best things about Mikkeli. They expressed how it helped them integrate into the Finnish society as they enjoy interacting with other students and contributing to the community by organizing events. Through these experiences students also discussed how they learned to appreciate the Finnish student experience, including the accessible education, government support and program unity. Overall, they were enthusiastic about the international and inclusive community, pointing to how integration in Mikkeli is easier than at the main campus in Otaniemi thanks to the strong student community and unity.

On the other hand, students from LUT university found it very hard to connect with other students since there was not many student activities available according to them. One student came to Mikkeli expecting limited social life due to the small size of the city, but was still disappointed by how little there was to do. The student events are geared more towards the PHD students since there are very few master's students and they study with a hybrid model.

Students at Xamk also expressed a positive experience with student life and how it offers different activities, there are parties as well as non-alcoholic events. The students talked about how the sports offered by the school and by the municipality have helped in integration and offering important outside of school activities. Students mentioned bouldering at Saimaa Stadium, Xamk gym, basketball both indoors and outdoors as well as the availability of the free public facilities like the skate park and ice-skating rink.

However, the Student 2 also expressed that it is hard to meet people with similar interests through the sports activities:

> *"For international people, it's important to have kind of hobbies… But the problem is that it's hard to kind of find people who have the similar interests… Everyone goes to different courts and I think it would be cool if they would be in one place."*

The student finds it hard to connect to others with similar interests since there is no centralized platform that unites and connects people. The student also feels there is not a physical place where hobby possibilities are centralized, and this creates a failed opportunity for integration since it is harder to meet others with similar interests. The student acknowledges that hobbies are not just leisure, but also critical for integration. It can create a sense of identity and continuity in a new environment and provide potential for bonding and forming a network. This align with Berry's (1997) definition of integration where the individual should be able to preserve their own culture while participating in the host culture, therefore this should be seen as a missed opportunity.

Even if student life, events and activities offered by the schools are seen as helpful in meeting other students and gives students the possibility to contribute to the student community, they are not directly linked to finding jobs. The community involvement is expected to be an employability boost since it gives the students the possibility to build soft skills and experience, but students describe how the skills are not recognized by employers.

4.1.3 Finns are nice, but it's easier to get in touch with international people

When it comes to cultural differences, interviewees mostly highlighted everyday behavioural differences rather than fundamental value clashes. Even if Finns were seen as reserved, they found them to be kind and polite. Even though it took some time to get used to the culture, the experience in Finland was seen as manageable and people were perceived as welcoming.

Some students had also expected Finnish people to be less sociable and difficult to approach. This was explained with the existing stereotypes, where Finns are seen as introverted and shy. However, a reoccurring theme was that the students were surprised at the high level of English proficiency of Finns. Students reported that communication was easier than expected and people of all ages could communicate in English, which made the integration process much easier. Particularly, interactions with old people were highlighted as positive.

Despite generally positive experiences, some students viewed it as harder to integrate into Finnish social circles despite participating in different student activities. Student 2 described local Finnish friends as more of "acquaintances".

> *"I think that I found a lot of people who I like to hang around with, even though most of the people are exchange students. Because for some reason I found it hard to integrate into Finnish society. Like, I have some people who I know and are friends with, like skateboarders or some people from the gym.*
> *But honestly, I don't hang out with them that often, and it's more on a random basis that I meet them just by accident. And then I say a couple of words."*

The student indicates that even if they took part in events and activities, the friendships with Finns felt like they were very surface level and stayed as casual encounters. Instead, strong bonds were formed with other international students since they had more in common, were seen as more open and more eager to indulge in shared experiences.

In accordance to the multidimensional integration framework developed by Garcés-Mascareñas and Penninx (2016), this indicates challenges on a cultural-religious dimension of integration. The interviews indicate a culture gap between Finns and internationals that hinders integration on a collective or group level.

However, international students see the value in making the effort. Student 3 says that they usually have to make the first move and start the conversation with Finns. However, they do not see it as a bad thing and the effort usually ends up being worth it. Another student echoed this but added that it is easier to get to know Finnish people that have some sort of international background than Finns who have lived their whole life in Finland. Since those students were more internationally minded they were also easier to approach. This suggests that shared global experiences help bridge cultural gaps and can contribute to deeper interactions.

4.1.4 Policies affecting student retention

As discussed in the literature review (Yle, 2024a), the fast-changing current policies are affecting international students' and highly educated immigrants' motivation and future plans when it comes to staying or leaving Finland. The new policies are demotivating people to stay since they affect the rights of internationals as well as safety and stability, which based on Ager and Strang's (2008) framework are important factors for successful integration.

Hsu and Chen (2020) present a model outlining that governments should try to enhance the human capital of foreign workers through policies since it benefits the economy. Student 5 talks about how policies like stricter time frame for completing the studies is affecting the possibilities to integrate into the Finnish job market. It is no longer possible to take a few gap years between studies to work, limiting job market integration, well-being and career planning. The lack of employment also pushes students to take survival jobs unrelated to their field, which makes Student 5 question the

long-term effectiveness of scholarships, career growth and sustainability of staying in Finland. Is it sustainable for the government to provide scholarships if people have to move out of the country to find a job?

There were different perspectives on the ease of getting visa identified in the text. Student 3 found it relatively straightforward and flexible in terms of job search since there is a job-seeking window after graduation, even if the visa expires. This shows that the Finnish system provides a certain level of ease and support for those who want to stay after graduation, and this is seen as encouraging for labor retention.

On the other hand, student 2 had faced difficulties renewing their visa due to political factors. Despite having completed academic requirements, the student's ability to stay in Finland was complicated by the issues with the visa status. Therefore, the student faced an urgency of obtaining a citizenship before their visa expires and expressed concerns about the political decisions as well as work rights. Due to this, the student was trying to extend their studies to be able to solve issues with the visa. Furthermore, the student's focus was not to stay in Finland but to be able to work in their desired profession. This emphasizes the link between immigration status and that obtaining citizenship can be necessary for the career development. This is finding is supported by the models for measuring integration developed by Ager and Strang (2008).

4.1.5 Frequently mentioned pull factors and integration issues in Mikkeli

The employee interviewed from the city of Mikkeli emphasized that the municipality sees students as important for Mikkeli's future and the vitality of the city, hence they emphasized that it as important to make Mikkeli attractive as a student city. The city has also invested heavily in making Mikkeli more international in preparation for the Nato base that will open in the near future.

Both employees at Miksei Mikkeli and city of Mikkeli agreed that currently, Finnish and international students are mostly valued for bringing life to the city and using local services**.** While the students might not have that much money, they support businesses and bring a youthful image to the aging demographic in Mikkeli.

Consistent with the theory of human capital (Becker, 1993), the employee at city of Mikkeli expressed that there needs to be a shift of perspective, students should be seen rather as intellectual capital and a resource. They continue by saying that the idea is to get students to settle in Mikkeli, start families, use local services, and of course pay taxes.

However, students had mixed views on Mikkeli as a student city. While some students were not happy with Mikkeli as a student town and did not feel that the city paid enough attention to the programs, others had gotten the impression that the city cared about the educational programs provided.

All students expressed that they would like to see more initiatives to integrate students into the working life.

Some students also indicated that even if they feel a connection towards the program they study in, they don't really feel connected to the city of Mikkeli. Student 5 expressed the following:

> *"I think maybe this is a bigger issue, but I don't really feel a connection towards the city itself. I feel a connection towards the program, yes. But yes, the campus is physically located in Mikkeli, but it's not very much rooted in Mikkeli…*
> *If no one here knows about the program, and the students don't really know about the local people, then how are they going to make meaningful connections, business, and so on?"*

The student feels a sense of belonging towards the academic program but suggests that it is easy to only live in a student bubble and there are limited opportunities to integrate into the broader community. Even if the program exists in Mikkeli, the student does not feel a connection to the city. Following the multidimensional framework by Garcés-Mascareñas and Penninx (2016), the student feel connected to Mikkeli on an institutional, collective, and individual level through school but lacks connection to Mikkeli on a collective level and individual level since they do not have many personal connections outside of the programs and do not feel belonging outside of the student community.

The student highlighted that the program has limited visibility and low local awareness among residents. This can also limit opportunities for networking and partnerships since there seems to be a lack of interaction between students and local people, both socially and professionally. The student suggests that higher visibility of the program would strengthen ties between students and the city and contribute to people remaining in the area for longer.

In the interviews with the city of Mikkeli and with Miksei, it came clear that the employees wished that international students would recognize Mikkeli's soft values, like being close to nature and having a more relaxed atmosphere as well as working culture than bigger cities. It came apparent that these are things that also the students value with Mikkeli, as it is seen as a very safe place with beautiful nature and a great connection to the Finnish culture. Student 1 put it like this:

> *"So, I'm very happy that I got the experience of having a true Finnish, like a "perus" Finnish experience before moving to a more bilingual and international city, because it allowed me to fully immerse myself in a Finnish environment and understand a lot more about Finnish culture than I would have just by moving to Helsinki, for example."*

With this, student 1 is saying that living in a smaller town like Mikkeli can make it easier to get exposed to Finnish culture which in turn deepens the understanding of Finland. This student views it as a good way to get introduced to Finnish culture and society, making it an effective way to help international students integrate.

On the other hand, even if Mikkeli was recognized as a good place to start a family and settle down in after already kickstarting a career and having a decent amount of job experience, the city was seen more of a place to come visit as a tourist.

This study identified social integration issues that could be grouped under push factors since they affect the future decisions of students to remain in Finland. Social integration issues identified were the following:

Integration issues	Description
Cultural differences & integration into social circles	**It was more difficult to connect with Finnish students than other internationals, friendships were often shallower with Finns. Cultural differences like the reserved nature of Finns made integration harder.**
Language barrier	**Even thought the language barrier was not as severe as anticipated thanks to a high level of English skills in Finland, it proposed a challenge in deeper integration and networking.**
Limited student activities & community engagement	**Some students, especially from LUT, found that there was too little social activities and this was a major barrier for integrating. They felt isolated and unable to bond with Finns.**
Limited opportunities for integration into local community	**There were little interactions with locals, and students felt disconnected from the local community. This affected both personal and professional integration.**

Difficulty connecting with people with similar interests	**Difficulty finding centralized platforms or spaces for hobbies and interests. This makes it harder for students to meet people with similar interests which is crucial for social integration.**
Perceived lack of local awareness about study programs	**Students felt programs were not well known in Mikkeli, hence hindering local engagement and professional networking.**
Limited professional integration	**Disconnect between student life and employability.**
Visa & immigration challenges	**The bureaucracy and policy changes created uncertainty about long-term stay and work opportunities, affecting integration.**

Table 2: integration issues identified in study

Overall, this table identifies the need for improved social programs and increased support in language learning as well as more opportunities for professional development to help international students integrate into academic and local communities.

4.2 Theme 2: Job market integration and accessibility

When asked what would make students stay in Mikkeli, every interviewed student said that they would consider staying if it was easier to find employment. This was also recognized by interviewees from Miksei Mikkeli and the city of Mikkeli – if there are structural factors like job possibilities and social factors like a good attitude towards hiring internationals, people are more likely to stay. It aligns with the push and pull theory discussed in the literature review, were pull factors like economic opportunity and social acceptance influence migration. In agreement with Mathies and Karhunen (2020), if the student gets a job after graduation, they are more likely to stay.

When asked what would make the student more likely to stay in Mikkeli and Finland, student 5 answered:

> *"I guess the only factor is the job availability and the attitude towards internationals. I feel like if there are opportunities, people will come. But if there aren't, then there's no point staying."*

The phrase “if there are opportunities, people will come” indicates that people are willing to stay and contribute. This quote also shows that the students want the host society to prove that there is question for international talent and indirectly criticizes the expectations of the host society to stay without structural support like job availability and a supportive attitude from employers and locals towards internationals. This aligns with the idea of integration as a two-way street (Bourhis et al., 1997) where both the host society and the individual adapt to eachother, simultaneously.

4.2.1 Challenges - Perceptions of limited job opportunities

Students expressed perceptions of limited job opportunities. There exists many challenges finding what they are looking for career-wise in Mikkeli. The following table analyses what perspectives were discussed by the students that contribute to a perception of limited job opportunities.

Challenge	Quote	Context and analysis	Extent of evidence
Harder to find a job than initially expected	**“But to be honest, I expected to find a job. I couldn't find a job in Mikkeli. But I am working right now, working on distance remotely [from home country].” – Student 4**	**When asked about the initial expectations about Mikkeli and student life, Student 4 expressed that they had expected to find work in Mikkeli and work during their studies in Finland. Since the student could not find a job in Mikkeli, Student 4 now works remotely on distance from their home country.**	**Medium**
Limited number of companies that could employ internationals	**"In Mikkeli, it’s not that easy to find. It’s basically five or four companies." – Student 2**	**It became apparent in the interviews that since the job market in Mikkeli is small, with only**	**High**

		a few companies offering permanent employment to international students. It makes searching for a job even more difficult.	
Distance of job opportunities	***And then also like the, um, like distance where the job would be. Like sometimes they're having some openings that are kind of far and I'd have to like, it'd be, if I walked like an hour or two one way. So, then I'm like, actually, I don't think it's like feasible. – Student 6***	**Even when jobs do exist, they may not be physically accessible to students without cars or flexible schedules. The issue is not only availability of jobs, but also how accessible they are. The quote also identifies a absence of convenient transportation, like access to public transportation.**	**Low**
Strict school attendance and schedule affecting job possibilities	**"Last year, I've been looking for a job very actively, but I couldn't find good options… because of the time schedule at the university."** **- Student 4**	**Students cannot physically be at work while having lectures, the academic commitments limit possibilities. The comment highlights a need for stronger flexibility and coordination from both the university's side as well as the employer.**	**Low**
Difficulty finding companies	***"Good job opportunities with long term financial***	**Mikkeli lacks career paths with long-term**	**High**

that could contribute to career progression.	***development potential. Like basically being able to have a career path that I can see myself climbing the ladder of… The only company that I think has that sort of financial like long term work potential in South Savo is those big conglomerates that are buying up everything because they give you the opportunity to move into higher management positions in Helsinki or in the regional management positions etc."*** ***– Student 1***	**professional growth, where students see themselves "climbing the ladder". The dominance of small businesses and franchises limits demand for high-skill positions and this results in brain drain to larger cities like Helsinki. Student 1 is essentially saying that Mikkeli feels like a place where careers start but rarely progress and this makes it a temporary stop for young people who seek growth possibilities. Similar to what Nikou and Luukkonen (2023) found, students are looking for professional growth.**	
Mismatch between field of studies, skills, fields of interest and what jobs the regional industry could offer.	***"In the job fairs I've been to last semester, I couldn't find like any company that works specifically in the field I like." – Student 7*** ***"Because there's no way that, for example, FinTech industry will hire English-speaking***	**A mismatch between field of studies, skills, fields of interest and what jobs the regional industry could offer. Students are seeking roles that align with their studies and career**	**Medium**

	employees in Mikkeli. It might be somehow possible in Helsinki or other bigger cities, but probably not in Mikkeli." – Student 4	**goals but are not able to locate employers in South Savo. Student 7 noted that there is absence of industry-specific companies at job fairs and Student 4 discussed how unlikely it is to find an English-speaking job in specific industries like FinTech in Mikkeli. There is a clear gap in high-skilled, industry-specific roles, especially for English-speaking employees.**	
Perception of internalized prejudice and discrimination towards internationals	**"So, I've been thinking like, I know that there exists a lot of prejudice internally… How much of that is impacting the international integration? For example, if those people are working in companies and are employing people?"** **- Student 5** **"But even I myself have the privilege of having a Swedish name, so people think I'm Finnish in the application process. But even so, I still haven't had any success. So, I just**	**Employers are nice but there is a perception that some internalized prejudice or racism exists. This quote indicates that it impacts the hiring processes. Student 1 also assumes that there is a better chance on the job market if you have a Finnish name. There is a perception that discrimination based on names exists in the hiring process.**	**High**

	think it's indicative of how hard the job market is right now." – Student 1		
Economic recession and tough job market	**"Yeah, but I think regardless of your educational background or even if you're Finnish, you still have a hard time in today's job market. Everyone I've spoken to has had maybe 100 rejection letters already, and maybe they get one interview, and even then it doesn't go anywhere. – Student 1** **"It's just that the current economic situation is so challenging that there aren't a huge number of open positions available."** **- Employee at Miksei Mikkeli**	**It's difficult for students in general to find a job, no matter background or language. Finns also struggle with finding a job and this reflects a highly competitive or stagnant job market. The issue is not only about employability or integration but also about a tough local job market. This can lead to migration away from the region for both Finns and international students.**	**High**
Confusion about employment criteria	**"I think I've applied to more than 100 but let's say 100 and I think I didn't get any interviews although to be honest I think I stand out from the crowd, and I have no clue why I got no interviews... I have a lot of projects and I have skills that the jobs require me to so I don't really know what they're like hiring for**	**Even if students have the right skills, it is difficult to get a job, this underscores that there is a disconnect between qualifications and employer response and a tough job market. It causes confusion for the job seekers since**	**High**

	because if they hire you for this position they like list the skills that I have." – Student 2	**it makes them unsure of what the employer is seeking. It can also be indicators of non-transparent hiring practices or a bias and a preference for Finnish candidates. This causes confusion for the job seekers since it makes them unsure of what the employer is seeking and emphasizes that there is a lack of feedback mechanisms.**	
Language barrier	**"Every job posting is Finnish. You're expected to speak Finnish. Or at least that's the publicly available postings. I don't know so much about the informal, internal hiring." – Student 5** ***"Even in international jobs, they still want you to have some kind of Finnish language. That's kind of demotivating." – Student 2***	**In all interviews conducted with students, one of the first challenges people expressed when asked about barriers was the language barrier and the dominance of the Finnish language in job descriptions and workplaces.**	**Very High**

Table 3 -challenges students face when trying to enter the job market in Mikkeli contributing to perception of limited possibilities.

In the table above, it is shown that the job seeking experiences of international students are influenced by structural limitations such as the small economy and limited sectors in the region, logistical challenges with

transport and schedules, as well as sociocultural factors like language barriers and discrimination.

Some of the challenges could be labelled as national since they are rooted in national policies, economy or cultural norms. The economic situation resulting in a competitive job market, the confusion about hiring criteria, the perception of prejudice and the language barrier could all be rooted broader than just in the South-Savo region. The language barrier was the most discussed challenge when trying to get a job, and all of the interviewees also identified it as such.

Other frequently mentioned challenges on a more regional level include the limited number of companies to employ English-speakers in Mikkeli, the limited opportunities for long term career progression, the distance of job opportunities, and the mismatch between field of study and job possibilities. All of these challenges contribute to an attitude of limited job opportunities in Mikkeli, which pushes people to move out of the region. Mikkeli is seen as a temporary stop rather than a place to build a future career.

4.2.2 Helsinki – the place for better opportunities

The findings of this study match the data from Etelä-Savo Ennakoi (2025), they also described the challenges with the retention power to be due to more employment opportunities offered around Finland and Europe. In the interviews with students, Helsinki along with other bigger cities were frequently mentioned as places with better opportunities compared to Mikkeli. It was highlighted as a repetition since it was brought up in almost all the interviews as an opportunity. Due to their size, more international demographics, and the availability of English-speaking jobs, the job options were perceived to be easier to navigate with limited Finnish skills.

When asked where they would go if they were to leave Mikkeli, the Uusimaa region or Helsinki were mentioned in almost all responses. However, some students only saw the Helsinki area as a temporary place to kick-start their careers or finish their education and did not want to be tied to one place long-term, because they were interested in gaining different cultural experiences. If leaving Finland was part of the response, most students had an intention to stay in Europe. Still, Helsinki area was seen as an attractive place to move back to in the future.

Responding to the question of where the student would go if they were to leave Mikkeli, student 7 answered:

> *"Probably Helsinki, that it's bigger. I imagine that there I would have more opportunity."*

4.3 Theme 3: Career support from university, the city and others

York and Knight (2004) emphasize that higher educational institutes play a big role in supporting the promotion of employability. Logically, when asked about how students are supported in looking for a job, students generally recognized efforts made by the university. Still, many did not really know what types of activities or services are provided. Students also talked about potential support from the city, however there was a clear language barrier since most communication was being done in Finnish. Therefore, the international students would assume student events or job fairs were intended for Finnish speaking people and did not attend those at all. Students highlighted that multilingual communication would be beneficial for including international student in events organized by the municipality.

4.3.1 Career Services

When asked about support for finding a job in Mikkeli, students expressed some uncertainty regarding the usefulness and information provided by the career services. Even if most of the students acknowledged the availability of the university's career services, there was a lack of engagement. Many students had not taken any steps to benefit from the opportunities that the career services offer, and this shows both too little clarity in offer as well as lack of effort from the students' side about learning and considering the potential value of the service. This could point to a need for better communication and clearer understanding of the benefits. Others found the career services at the university to be helpful and acknowledged the effort that the university was making to support students and the value gained from the existing opportunities, especially with alumni and local companies.

However, many felt that it was not sufficient, weighting on the frequency and quality of the opportunities. The career fairs were also directed more to the Finnish-speaking students since employers at the networking events were mostly looking for Finnish speakers. The responses imply that the universities could improve the networking initiatives by addressing the language issue by including job opportunities where English is the working language and offering more frequent events.

On the other hand, students also see other stakeholders to play a role in providing career guidance. According to student 5, the information about services from the municipality's side was not accessible. The absence of information about the career services outside of the university aimed towards internationals is seen as a missed opportunity for students.

4.3.2 Importance of Networking

Many students acknowledged that in Finland, building a social network was essential for finding a job, but it was found to be challenging. Even though there seemed to be support from the university's side and availability of

career services, students expressed difficulty in getting in touch with companies.

Student 5 expressed their frustration with the networking events they had previously attended. The student critiques the fact that there are usually a very little amount of employers present for a big number of students, and this makes the events ineffective in facilitating employment opportunities. Like in basic economic theory, the supply (employers) does not match the demand (students seeking jobs).

> *"The whole purpose of the networking event is for students to get jobs, right? But if there's like 5 employers and like 80 students, it doesn't seem... You get my point."*

When asked about if it was easy to get in touch with employers, *Student 5* also reflected on how Finland has a strong commitment to equality, and this is seen in the formal recruitment processes. The student said that in Finland, companies try to be fair and treat people equally when hiring and as a result the jobs are publicly posted. However, most recruiters might already have someone in mind since a large portion of jobs are filled through word-of-mouth recommendations. Hence, the student concludes that networking plays a big role when looking for a job and this student is realizing that after graduation, it might be easier to find a job by networking. This shows how important networking can be for the future and for finding a job in Finland.

Student 1 discussed how Finnish-speaking individuals found jobs easily in Mikkeli through internal recommendations. The student reflects on the tendency of employers to rely on referrals from previous employees and this makes a pattern of Finnish people being favoured, since international students usually don't know Finnish and come to Finland without a social network. Tsishuk (2024) also came to the same result and concluded that it can be difficult for international students to get in touch with the right people or employers.

4.3.3 Role of Internships

York and Knight (2008) concluded that internships enhance employability because they provide practical experience. Brooks and Youngson (2016) also found that work experiences during studies benefits employment outcomes and gives better grades. Students in this study reflected on the role of internships for gaining employment and students had positive views on the opportunities that internships can create.

Some students had already done an internship through school, most of them Xamk students since it was part of their study plan, and they were encouraged to part-take. However, there was evidence of interest and demand from students in other programs as well.

On the other hand, Miksei Mikkeli expressed another point of view – the mediator. It was not only the students who expressed interest in internships, Employee 3 at Miksei Mikkeli claimed that there have been

companies inquiring about possible interns for job positions. This way, Miksei Mikkeli have collaborated with schools to find interns for companies. They describe the process with the following example: a business seeks expertise for entering a market, Miksei and Xamk tries to find them a student with the relevant language skills and knowledge about that specific target market. Through their networks, Miksei tries to facilitate those connections.

However, there exists a certain disconnect between employers and students who are looking for internships. It sometimes does not occur to the employer that they could hire an intern for the positions available at their companies. Miksei Mikkeli tells the example of a company that had had a position open for two years without realizing that they could hire a student. This shows a gap in information and coordination within the employment system. It also reenforces the ideas mentioned in earlier findings about how unaware employers and locals are about the university programs in Mikkeli as well as how students are not considered a source of talent, but as more of a way of giving Mikkeli a more youthful image.

When asked if it is easy to find companies interested in providing internships, Employee 4 at Miksei Mikkeli answered:

> *"No, it's not easy. They probably genuinely would like to do it, and companies do understand that for their future, it would be beneficial to have someone already looking into this and the opportunity to get to know potential employees.*
> *But then comes the everyday reality… they feel that they are so busy that no one has the time to spare for supervising an intern, which is also really stupid."*

According to Employee 4 at Miksei, companies see the long-term value of hiring interns. However, even if internships could provide them for example early access to future employees, there is not enough time and resources to properly supervise interns. The employee's comment about this as "really stupid" signals frustration and that there might be a broader cultural or structural pattern. Based on the comment, providing internships is undervalued.

The comment made by Miksei Mikkeli aligns with the experiences of Student 2, who also described how it would have been beneficial to receive more guidance during the internship. The student reflects on a challenging experience and says that they would have needed more guidance since it was the student's first job. There was poor communication, feedback and the assigned mentor was often unavailable, hence the interns had to navigate the job independently. This ultimately led to misunderstandings that caused personal issues with the employer. The student thinks more guidance would also have made the experience better for the employer too.

Additionally, students with previous internship experience expressed the need for clearer communication from the employer's side about future outlooks within the company and attitudes that the companies have towards hiring students after the internship has ended. Student 2 argues that more

transparency from the employer's side would make interns more motivated and give them a sense of direction.

Student 5 backs this up by saying that it seems the internships are done out of obligation and not seen as an opportunity to find potential long-term benefits. The internships at Xamk sometimes lack alignment with the student's actual skills.

4.4 Theme 4: Language Barrier and language-based discrimination

Similar to previous research (Back and Piekkari, 2024), in all interviews conducted with students, one of the first challenges people expressed when asked about barriers was the language barrier and the dominance of the Finnish language in job descriptions and workplaces. Many job opportunities require Finnish proficiency, making it difficult for international students to find employment.

For example, student 5 described how they often found jobs that seemed relevant but that the requirements to speak fluent Finnish immediately disqualified them. Student 2 echoed this and noted that even for roles that do not necessarily require Finnish, employers still prioritized Finnish speakers.

Several students described how job descriptions were usually in Finnish, and this made it difficult for international students to identify which roles could suit them. Even if the job is advertised in English, the application still needs to be done in Finnish. Finnish speakers are clearly preferred on the job market.

4.4.1 Reasons for not hiring English speakers

Students said there were different reasons for why English-speakers were not hired. One of the reasons was that most of the jobs available for students were in the service industry. When asked if employers are open to hiring international students, Student 1 responded that especially in the service industry non-Finnish speakers are more likely to be employed in non-customer-facing roles. The student suggests that this is mainly because employers do not want to break the norms of customer service in Finnish, particularly in smaller town like Mikkeli where older populations might have limited English language skills. The everyday interactions are seen as valuable, and this reinforces the bias of Finnish speakers in customer service. This argument is backed by interviewees at Miksei Mikkeli who also suggest that there is a general belief in the area from the companies' side that Finnish is required in customer service jobs.

It's not only the service industry that require Finnish. When working with company clients, Finnish language proficiency can suddenly be very important. This is why other fields might require Finnish skills too. Student 2 explains that in their field many companies have startup orgins and the

customers are often Finnish speaking. Therefore, without Finnish skills, work becomes complicated since there is a need for translation, and this might affect the customer connections. The Finnish skills required that the student is describing are operational and that can then lead to companies preferring to have a Finnish speaking team because of the customer focused business models.

4.4.2 Language discrimination and unclear language requirements

According to the students' answers, people acknowledge that the language question limits the employment options. There is a clear pattern of international students thinking that because they don't speak Finnish, they cannot apply for the job.

On the other hand, there exists a lot of confusion about how much Finnish is required for the jobs. Applications that require any Finnish skills at all are seen as automatically disqualifying students, even if the student has basic knowledge of Finnish. Students mentioned that job postings often list the Finnish language requirement as a "plus". In the hiring processes, the language requirements are often not clearly stated, and this further complicates the job search for non-Finnish speakers. Since the expected Finnish proficiency is thought to be high, students do not apply for the Finnish speaking jobs and said that they often solely focus on the English-speaking jobs available.

Student 5 reflects on the ambiguity of the Finnish requirements. They would like to see a standardized framework for assessing fluency because there were doubts about what the requirements are based on. Are they actual workplace needs or just cultural expectations? How much Finnish do you actually need to be able to work a customer service job? Are the efforts of trying to learn the language appreciated by society? The student notes that there is an increasing number of companies that operate in English, yet they still require fluency in Finnish. Interviews with the other students also confirmed a perception that Finnish language requirements are put on the job postings, even if the language is not used for doing the job. Lu and Härkälä (2024) recorded the same issue.

When asked what the biggest barriers that they have faced in trying to find a job, student 5 responded:

> *I would say language barrier, and to what extent you make that also a nationality thing…*
> *And I guess if they find a Finnish candidate with the same skills, or even a little bit comparatively, like objectively, with less qualifications or experience, they would still pick the Finnish candidate for some reason. I'm not saying it's racism. I don't think it's that big. Prejudice, probably.*

In this quote, the student reflects on how linguistic expectations are not purely about communication, it also could be a question of nationality which could translate to identity, belonging and trust. When the student makes a distinction between racist behavior and prejudice, they acknowledge that the behavior does not originate from conscious ill will, but from implicit bias. There might be a preference for a familiar working culture or ease of integration, and while this might be natural for the employers, it leads to exclusion.

At the interview with Miksei Mikkeli there was also a discussion about the unnecessary language requirements by companies. The employees recognized the tension between being inclusive versus preferring comfort in hiring practices. One Employee stated that companies claim that there are practical reasons, like safety, used as excuses for being reluctant to change. Safety can be used as an accepted excuse for not really having to make the workplaces more accessible for non-Finnish speakers.

One of the employees claimed that especially older generations of Finns have a fear of making mistakes when speaking English and forget that the other party might not be a native speaker either. It is suggested by the employer that younger generations are more used to learning languages and don't see making mistakes as bad. The problem of older generations thinking they have to be perfect when speaking the English language was reasoned with the Finnish educational system teaching people to avoid making mistakes.

Another employee thinks the core issue with changing the working language is the existing big threshold for people to change the working language of a group when they are used to operating in Finnish. It is more about disrupting the emotional and cultural comfort of the group than the communication according to the employee.

There is a desire for comfort, and that makes employers not wanting to step into the discomfort zone where familiar routines would need to change. Even though it could be an asset to the work community to have people from other cultures or those who think a bit differently, people tend to prefer routine, even at cost of missing out on diversity. Therefore, the discussion with Miksei Mikkeli also indicates that the language requirements often are less about necessity and more about avoiding discomfort.

Miksei also said that part of what they do is aiming to change employer mindsets by trying to get companies to hire their first international employees. However, Miksei pointed out that the employees are often so focused on running and growing the business that they don't want to spend time on initiatives to improve inclusion in hiring. These initiatives often attract those who are already open to hiring international talent. Hence, the challenge is not the lack of resources, but convincing people to take time to act.

4.4.3 Language learning motivation and support

This study found that international students' motivation towards the Finnish language differs and were affected by plans of staying in the country. Some of the students expressed motivation in learning and thought that the effort will be awarded in the long run, even if the goal is not to be fluent.

Instead of seeing Finnish something that blocks opportunities, student 5 thought about it more like a key to unlock them.

> *"It's not to me a barrier. It's to me more like an enabler. It allows me to engage in daily conversations with Finns, understand Finns, the culture. Thus, helping me stay, like more likely to stay. It also helps me in recruiting. If I could speak Finnish, there would be a lot more opportunities for me. So, it is an enabler."*

Here, the student flips the narrative from a barrier to an enabler that can be a way to connect with locals, understanding the culture and feel a sense of belonging. The student sees learning Finnish as an investment that will increase opportunities. This shows that for students planning to stay in Finland, learning the language is seen as critical in building a future in the country.

Student 2 also expressed that the decision of enhancing their Finnish vocabulary depends on if they plan on staying in Finland or not. Currently they were not sure. It was expressed by the student that that the experience of learning Finnish had been difficult and led to them burning out. The international environments that the students find themselves in, can make it harder to learn the language and feel less necessary to learn the language altogether.

At the universities, all students had participated in Finnish language courses. Students found the support provided by universities accessible and helpful for immersing oneself in the Finnish culture. However, they had a hard time seeing how organisations and the municipality support them in learning the language. While refugees may have access to language courses, student do not, and this highlights a disconnect between university efforts and broader community level integration strategies. Student 5 thinks that there is a clear need for internationals to get more support from the city of Mikkeli and that students could really benefit from the support provided by the city in Finnish language learning.

Student 1 expressed discontent with the Finnish course they attended through university and said that it was more motivating and effective to learn Finnish through everyday social interactions. Their ability to bartend in Finnish came from the everyday interactions through friends and work. This shows how big an impact engagement with the local community and real jobs settings can have on language learning.

4.5 Theme 5: Solutions discussed by interviewees

The interviews revealed that students were not only aware of the structural barriers they face when searching for a job in Mikkeli, but they also were proposing actionable solutions. The ideas proposed are aimed to increase transparency, expand local job opportunities and reduce prejudice through both local and national initiatives. This table presents an overview of the solutions proposed in the interviews.

Theme	Solution	Suggested by	Why/Purpose	Target Audience
Trans-parency	**Standardize language requirements using CERF levels**	**Student 5**	**Would help clarify what level of Finnish is needed, helps immigrants work towards a concrete goal, reduces bias.**	**Employer, Policy-makers**
Incentivized hiring	**Policies that encourage companies to hire international students**	**Student 4 Student 5**	**Could help shift employer mindsets over time and create job opportunities.**	**Policy-makers, Employers**
A comparative model	**Encourage businesses to hire both a Finn and an International simultaneously**	**Student 5**	**Allows employers to compare performance and value of international talent.**	**Employers**
Awareness campaigns	**Billboard campaign about the value of immigration in an aging city, led by the municipality**	**Student 5**	**Aims to make the population more accepting of immigration and highlights economic benefit.**	**Munici-palities, General Public**

Inviting foreign investment	**Attracting international companies and increasing foreign investment.**	**Student 1**	**Brings new English-speaking corporate job opportunities to the region**	**Municipalities, Regional Developers**
Economic incentives	**Offer tax breaks to businesses willing to move to the region**	**Student 5**	**Makes the region more attractive to employers and expands job market.**	**Municipalities, Policy-makers**
Internships	**More English-speaking internships at startups and small companies**	**Student 1 Student 2 Student 3 Student 5**	**Helps students gain Finnish job experience and improve chances of employment after graduation.**	**Employer, Educational Institutions**
Start-up support	**Promote tech or startup jobs for international students where language matters less**	**Miksei Mikkeli**	**Startups often value innovation over language, they are more inclusive and open to hiring international talent.**	**Employers, Startup Ecosystem**
Entrepreneurship	**Offer entrepreneurship training and support for immigrants**	**Student 4 Student 5**	**Helps internationals create own opportunities and stay in the region.**	**Municipalities, Startup Ecosystem**
Teach students to take personal initiative	**Bridge cultural and generational gap: Encourage students to actively approach employers in person or by phone.**	**Miksei Mikkeli**	**Employers expect face-to-face or phone interactions to showcase interest in jobs, not only internet applications.**	**Universities, Career services, Local Employers, Students**

Table 4: Solutions discussed by interviewees

When looking at the solutions proposed, the main belief is that changing the mindsets of employers and increasing job opportunities requires initiatives and collaboration from the municipalities, businesses and policymakers. The insights highlight the importance of involving all stakeholders to enhance the employability of international students in the South Savo region.

5 Discussion

This study explored the experiences and employment challenges that international students face in Mikkeli, Finland. **Q1:** International students perceive the job market in Mikkeli as difficult to navigate, small and stagnant. The job market is hard to access because of a bias towards Finnish speakers, it has limited job opportunities and does not offer clear career development paths. As outlined in Table 3 and discussed in the Findings chapter, the key challenges students face when attempting to enter the job market include structural limitations like the competitive job market, logistical challenges with transport and schedule, and most notably sociocultural challenges like language barriers, language discrimination and prejudice.

Q2: In accordance with the Push and Pull theory (Lee,1966), this study highlighted both pull factors that bring students to the region to study as well as push factors that hinder long-term retention. The decision to stay or leave Mikkeli is shaped by a complex interplay of structural, collective and individual level factors and aligns with the multilayered theory developed by Garcés-Mascareñas and Penninx (2016). The findings suggest that students feel integrated on an institutional level through their participation in education, but not on a collective or individual level within the broader society. Although some students feel a deep sense of belonging within their academic programs on a collective level, difficulties forming deeper relationships with Finns, minimal engagement with the local community, and a weak connection to the city of Mikkeli all contribute to a feeling of exclusion and social outsideness. Challenges with employment, a sense of limited career opportunities, the language barrier, and the perception of political uncertainty all point to structural issues that hinder the integration into society on an economic level. Based on the Garcés-Mascareñas and Penninx (2016) framework, both the institutional (in this case economic) and individual level integration is weak since the students despite having skills and experience, were unable to enter the labor market in Mikkeli. As Ager and Strang (2008) noted, both social connections and success in areas like employment should be measured for successful integration. The social connections (getting to know locals), language and cultural knowledge (language barrier) as well as safety and stability (policy changes) are all interlinked and affect employment integration.

The perceived absence of of openness to employ international students points to issues in integration as a two-way process (Bourhis et al.,1997), since it is not only the individual that adapts to the host culture, but also the host culture that adapts to the individual. This study collected evidence of

students being willing to stay in Mikkeli, provided that structural factors like job possibilities and social factors like a good attitude towards hiring internationals, are seen as sustainable and supportive. If students see a stable and welcoming future path, both professionally and personally, they are more likely to stay. Hence a broader shift of mindset in the Finnish society is vital for retention and the economy of small cities like Mikkeli.

Q3: The study identified several ways to improve integration and retention based on concrete suggestions made by interviewees as well as analysis of the findings. The following table summarizes possible initiatives that could improve the retention rates in smaller regions for each stakeholder group:

Stakeholder	Focus Area	Recommended Action
Educational Institutions	University studies	• Increase program visibility in local community • Consider programs provided in the region based on needs of employers • Embed integration into programs, e.g. community-based projects and internships • Promote language learning and cultural awareness for students
	Career services	• Improve communications and marketing of services • Offer personalized support for students • Increase collaborations with employers to align services with what is needed in the job market • Facilitate networking events with local employees, and tailor them towards international students
	Internships	• Provide supervision and mentorship during internships • Expand possibilities for English-speaking internships aligned with studies.
Municipalities	Community Engagement	• Promote local study programs and local international student contributions • Create platforms for interactions between students and locals
	Language support	• Provide accessible Finnish language learning

		• Promote informal learning through community initiatives
	Social Integration	• Establish physical and digital platforms for hobbies and interests to connect students and locals
	Diversifying the economy	• Encourage entrepreneurship and offering start-up support • Attract foreign investment to diversifying the job market in English-speaking sectors
Employers	Hiring Practices	• Clarify job requirements and language skills, using standardized frameworks like CERF
	Talent Utilization	• Recognize students as a source of talent and possible resources for the business • When providing internships, actively engage with the interns and offer adequate mentorship for students
	Inclusivity	• Provide DEI training for staff and hiring managers • Expand possibilities for English-speaking internships
Students	Proactive Engagement	• Reach out to potential employers directly with a low barrier (e.g. email, face-to-face or phone call) • Actively search for information about career services and reach out to them with a low barrier
	Language & Reciliance	• Focus on language as an enabler rather than a barrier. • Try to embrace language as a long-term investment for social and employment integration • Stay resilient in navigating job market challenges

Table 5: Suggested initiatives for stakeholders improving retention

This table highlights all the different stakeholders' roles and the coordinated actions to improve the international student integration and access to the job market in Mikkeli. It also reflects on how the multiple actors influence retention: higher education plays a key role in supporting

employability (like also discussed by Yorke and Knight, 2004), municipalities and policymakers help facilitate the broader integration process (Bourhis et al.,1997), implicit bias amongst employers can hinder employability (like Lu and Härkälä, 2024) and the student's own intentions and behaviors affect the choice of whether they choose to remain in the area (Ajzen, 1991.).

5.1 The "mindset" problem

The importance of the Finnish language on the Finnish labour market has been widely recognized previous research (Back and Piekkari, 2024). In this study the interviewees indicated that one reason for the language barrier is a perception that employing an English-speaking worker might lead to a change of company culture. There is a widespread fear of interrupting the Finnish-speaking environment of companies which is explained as a generational issue of especially older workers being insecure about their English proficiency. This leads to a lot of employers putting unnecessary Finnish requirements on job postings that don't necessarily require that much or even any Finnish language knowledge. Thus, the internalized prejudice could be hidden behind explanations about for example poor English language skills among workers. Subsequently, it takes form as Finnish language discrimination on the job market. The same phenomenon was documented by Lu and Härkälä (2024).

However, this mindset is not only adapted by the employers. Many English-speakers also abandon job searching due to a perception that it is not possible to find a job or that they might disturb the company culture and abstain from applying altogether when noticing that the job has a Finnish language requirement.

This is a clear issue from both sides and causes a direct conflict between the host society and the international student in accordance with the Bourhis et al. (1997) theory of integration as a two-way process. Following the interactive acculturation model (IAM), it is not only the individual that adapts to the host culture, but also the host culture that adapts to the individual.

The existing prejudice and language discrimination on the job market should be seen as alarming for both the city of Mikkeli and the country of Finland. It is crucial for the area as well as the host country to change the mindset of the employers since the population is getting older and the nativity is low (Statistics Finland). Immigration will positively impact the host country's GDP per capita (Hsu and Chen, 2020), hence it is also in companies' interest to make sure people stay in Finland after graduation. Student retention should be viewed as a valuable source of talent (Becker, 1993), since many companies in South Savo will need lots of educated workers in the future (Tilastokeskus, 2024).

According to (Maakuntaliitto, 2025), the most positive signal for the population development of the South Savo region is the positive net immigration and these gains have been thanks to immigrants. By increasing efforts to support the immigration and integration of immigrants, South Savo can increase the retention power of the area (Lu, Härkälä, 2024). Since the challenge is both the pull and retention power, efforts in tackling prejudice in the hiring and the issue of language discrimination on the job market should be of immediate interest of the South Savo region and city of Mikkeli.

5.2 Internships – obligation or opportunity?

In this study, interviewees see internships as valuable for career development and job market integration, but many seem to think that internships are done out of necessity. Findings suggest that employers may not fully recognize the potential of interns as future employees.

There is a clear benefit for both students and employers. Students gain valuable work experience that supports their learning (Brooks and Youngson, 2016), and like stated by Miksei Mikkeli, the employer could potentially get a worker who could grow into the role and one day even take over the business since a trend of more people retiring is apparent (statistics Finland). For the company, it might also be cheaper to hire a student since they usually don't have that much working experience and are looking for ways to enter the job market.

Additionally, companies can gain a competitive edge when hiring international talent if they aim to expand and maintain international partnerships. Like discussed by Solheim and Fitjar (2016), diversity of ideas and perspectives that international talent brings are associated with innovation. Students bring unique cultural and language knowledge that could potentially benefit companies highly (Lu and Härkälä, 2024). Like employee 1 at Miksei Mikkeli pointed out, this could save entrepreneurs a lot of money since they would not have to fly someone in from abroad, they already have experts on location.

However, the issues of mentorship pose problems for both students and employers. While students prefer getting proper guidance, employers struggle with supervising interns due to shortage of time. This influences both the employer's and the intern's experience as seen with the example provided by Student 2. The lack of communication and mentorship during their internship resulted in bad personal relations. Since gaining work experience also benefit academic performance (Brooks and Youngson,2016), universities could benefit from taking a bigger role in guiding the student throughout the internship.

A challenge also persists with the gap in communication and networks between students and employers. The example provided by Miksei Mikkeli of companies not hiring interns, despite having open positions for years shows that the entrepreneurs have limited amount of information about the higher education institutions and internship possibilities in the area. The

other side of it is that when there is employer demand for interns, students are not always aware of the available opportunities.

Therefore, it would be in everyone's interest to establish better networks. Career services, universities and the city should make sure that employers are aware of the local higher education programs the talent that the universities bring to the region. Organizations like Miksei Mikkeli should continue to collaborate with career services, but also establish partnerships with student unions or entrepreneurship societies to be able to be in direct contact with students. Additionally, the municipality and educational institutions as well as student unions should make sure that employers know about internship programs, to encourage employers to take part of them.

5.3 Connection to the city of Mikkeli

The Findings suggest that Mikkeli is seen more as a temporary place to stay, not a long-term home. Many international students don't see Mikkeli as a place to build their future and the city is considered as aging and stagnant, with limited job opportunities and no clear career development paths. Even if there is a perspective that Mikkeli is a good place to settle down thanks to the safe environment, nature and the appreciation for Finnish culture, students do not feel enough connection to the city itself.

Similar to the findings of Nikou and Luukkonen (2023), the main reason for leaving Mikkeli is the lack of visible career progression and limited job opportunities. Helsinki is and other bigger cities are perceived to have better job, social and educational opportunities, hence it is expected that students would want to move to those cities.

Secondly, students seem to have a divided experience when it comes to student life. Students from Aalto loved their student life and felt that it helped them integrate, while others (especially LUT) students found it hard to connect to other students since there wasn't many social gatherings available. Additionally, Student 2 pointed out a the absence of a centralized platform for all the students to get in touch with people that have similar interests, making it harder to form social bonds. It is important for the city of Mikkeli to consider the student life of international students, since integration is multidimensional like highlighted by Garcés-Mascareñas and Penninx (2016). If students feel integrated socially their integration was more successful (Ager and Strang, 2008), and they are more likely to stay in the South Savo region.

Third, there is a perception of Mikkeli as a "retirement" city. Students see Mikkeli a place to settle later in life, not in their early career days. This indicates that the city lacks a professional scene for young people.

To change this narrative, integrating students into professional life is crucial. More collaboration between universities and businesses as well as efforts in English by the municipality need to be established. It is important that information is provided for these initiatives in both Finnish and English so that students feel invited and welcome. Additionally, more collaboration

between universities, different programs, and student unions could create a better sense of unity and make the Mikkeli better as a student city.

A few interviewees mentioned coming back to Mikkeli to start a business in the future. Based on the findings, investment in startup culture and entrepreneurship could help attract youth while fostering innovation. According to Miksei Mikkeli, start-up culture and especially tech-startups foster a more inclusive environment for international students and therefore it is easier to find employment. If entrepreneurship was encouraged, international students could create opportunities for themselves as well as other English-speakers and make Mikkeli's job market more diverse and youthful.

6 Conclusions

6.1 Main Findings

This thesis finds that international students in Mikkeli are open to staying long-term if they find employment. Positive attitudes from the host society and clear career growth opportunities are seen as most important factors for remaining in Mikkeli. However, bigger cities like Helsinki act as a big push factor since students find they can provide more professional, educational and social opportunities.

The main challenge for international students is the language barrier and the challenge is recognized by the students as well as the municipality and employees at Miksei Mikkeli. However, this study also finds that there exists a deeper issue of "mindset", since there is a perception that employing an English-speaking worker might lead to a change of company culture. This might result in employers communicating unnecessary Finnish requirements and students avoiding jobs with any type of Finnish requirement since its thought to immediately disqualify them.

Other challenges include limited job opportunities and perceptions of minimal possibilities for career growth as well as not feeling a connection to the local community. Therefore, Mikkeli is seen as more of a temporary stop than a long-term home.

To improve retention the study emphasizes the need for:

- More inclusive hiring practices, communication and transparency from employers.
- An increase in language support and career support in English from universities and the city.
- Stronger collaboration between educational institutions, employers, and student unions.
- A shift of societal attitudes towards international talent, recognizing them as a long-term necessity rather than temporary visitors.

6.2 Implications for International Business

In a globalized world, international talent is not only needed to address labor shortages and boosting Finland's economy (Hsu and Chen, 2020). Like concluded in the literature review, international talent brings a diverse skill sets, languages and cultural understanding that are assets for companies operating in global markets (Lu and Härkälä, 2024). By retaining international graduates and businesses employing them, companies can gain a competitive edge when they aim to expand and maintain international partnerships. Like discussed by Solheim and Fitjar (2016), the wider engagement in international relationships also led to higher levels of innovation. The same article also states that diversity of ideas and perspectives that international talent bring is associated with innovation. Many international students bring an entrepreneurial mindset and by

encouraging students to stay in Finland we can create jobs and boost the local economy through for example taxes and consumption. Additionally, countries that retain international talent are also seen as more attractive for foreign investment and multinational companies. Retaining international graduates makes Finland seem a more appealing country for international business headquarters and startups.

6.3 Suggestions for Further Research

Since this research focuses on the point of views of the municipality and international students, it does not directly address the employer point of view. For this reason, it would be interesting to conduct additional research of the employer needs and attitudes towards hiring international talent in smaller Finnish regions like South Savo and cities like Mikkeli. It would be beneficial to understand the point of view of the employers on a deeper level. Furthermore, it would be good to further evaluate how many companies are currently hiring international talent.

In addition, research in which industries Mikkeli lacks employees would also bring more clarity into what type of educational programs the universities should offer. It would help boost the talent retention since people would be more likely to stay in Mikkeli after graduation.

Additionally, considering the Nato base being built in Mikkeli which is expected to bring around 50 international families to Mikkeli it is important to further research what opportunities international talent can potentially benefit from in Mikkeli. The spouses of the soldiers will most likely also want to work, hence further research in this field is required to guarantee that Mikkeli can benefit from the opportunities that this Nato base brings.

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Appendices

Felicia Sahi - Interview questions.pdf