Building Social Capital by Improving Multicultural Competence in Higher Education and Labour Market – SOULBUS Project
(Work Package No. 2)

National Case Study Report – FINLAND - JAMK

Sanna Sihvonen, PhD
Hanna Hopia, PhD
JAMK University of Applied Sciences

1 Social demography

A group interview in JAMK, Jyväskylä, Finland was conducted in January 2014 including 2 clinical mentors (1 from nursing, 1 from social field), 3 teachers (2 nursing, 1 physiotherapy) and 3 students of whom 2 had participated in Erasmus student exchange programs and 1 foreign student who is studying in degree program in Finnish (all together 8 participants). The average age of respondents was 37,13 years; the youngest respondent was 23, the oldest 51. In terms of gender, the sample included 1 male and 7 female respondents. One respondent had a higher education diploma, 2 had a bachelor’s degree, 4 master’s degree and one was student (2 students had prior degrees; 1 bachelor and 1 master’s degree). All respondents were fluent and could write in English. Moreover, all respondents spoke Finnish, one was fluent in German (as second mother tongue) and one in Polish (mother tongue). In addition 3 respondents spoke Swedish and one German. In average, mentors had 9,5 years of experience with mentoring students (1 had 15 years and other 4 years of experience). The foreign language used in mentoring was English. Two student respondents participated Erasmus exchange program in UK and Germany with the aim of conducting clinical practice. Students in Erasmus programs were engaged one in one clinical setting and one in 2 clinical settings where they communicated in German and in English. The foreign student had been engaged in several clinical settings where communication language was Finnish.

2 Multiculturalism

Variety of approaches came up as talking about experiences and views of multiculturalism. Most participants described multiculturalism in connection to practical placements as part of studies but also broader views of multiculturalism were shared. Summary of raised issues and some quotes are presented here.
Three teachers participating the interview all shared the view that in their opinion working with students with a wide variety of cultural backgrounds is challenging but also enriching their work and has taught them to take into account many such factors that they do not even think of when they are teaching only local students. However, the number of students and clients with different cultural backgrounds is rising in general and their feel that it is important that their competence in multiculturalism is continually developed. Since many teachers in JAMK have long working history with international students they have learned that multiculturalism can mean really broad variety of issues such as culture, language, traditions, habits, religion, sense of time, daily rhythm, weather conditions etc.

Teachers also suggested that because of this broad variety of factors related to multiculturalism, which may have important effect on studying, it is really relevant that the international students (both short Erasmus students and degree students), either leaving or coming to JAMK, need to have a good orientation to be able to understand and take into account things that they may need to adjust to and be able to show respect when they are doing their exchange period.

Teacher: “The basic rule of Erasmus to show respect to the culture that you enter is really important and this is something that should always be told to all students.”

Three students agreed this and two of them said that when doing their own practical placements they did not feel that there was so much cultural differences within Western Europe. This was partly disagreed by supervisor who commented that even within Western Europe there are big differences for example in punctuality which is one example of typical issue often discussed with foreign students.

All participants agreed that it is important that when doing practical placement that whatever issue of multiculturalism may come up, it would be helpful if the student would always have somebody who she/he can turn to talk about it and solutions could be searched together.

One student also commented: “In the beginning when I started my studies I felt that there was so much information that I could not take all in and I did not realize what would have been the most important things.”

This was commented by mentor: “We should learn to guide the students in a way that they would not be afraid to ask questions and we would use such guidance methods which help the student to “digest” what are the really important rules and what issues may be negotiated.” She also emphasized that multiculturalism can mean that we all are willing and able to find ways overcome challenges such as language barrier or other cultural issues which may come across during the study process.
Language and issues around it was one of the issues that rose lots of opinions among participants. All shared the view that since most clients in social- and health care are not used to use foreign language while in care, there is high demand that students would learn Finnish (especially degree students) while studying in Finland.

**Mentor** commented: “It is absolutely necessary to emphasize to the degree students that they really must put effort to learn basics in Finnish. Learning the language will have such a huge impact how their study process, learning and life as a whole will be set off.”

**Teacher** commented: “We actually tell the foreign degree students from day one that if they plan to be employed in Finland they have to start learning the Finnish language immediately. In JAMK we offer 24 ct of Finnish language although only 4 is obligatory and even buy them books to make sure that it is possible for all to participate. However, when students are recruited to degree program taught in English, it is sometimes very hard to motivate them to simultaneously put effort in language studies. But we do our best all the time.”

**Student** with foreign origin contributed: “It was a good idea that foreign and local student are doing their practical placement in a same unit and local student can help the foreign student to adjust to practices and tasks. However, it is also important that this relationship is not too demanding for the local student and doesn’t have a hindering effect to her/his own learning process during practical placement.”

### 3 Cultural awareness, open-mindedness and empathy

The group discussed about practical meaning of cultural awareness, open-mindedness and empathy and brought up issues such as how well the international students are integrated among local students and how welcome the international students are to various social- and health care units in Central Finland.

**Teacher** commented: “We use many activities in class trying to facilitate the cooperation between international and local students but it seems that out of classroom, it is not so easy for international students to spend free time with local students. However, we also are active in organizing different kind of relaxed activities with international students to show them Finnish culture and traditions and also learn from their background cultures.”

It was also mentioned that JAMK has organized activities to raise cultural awareness and empathy such as local students working as tutors and international and local student working as a pair during practical placement. There is also a Family Friend program in which local families invite international student to their home and share typical Finnish traditions with family members meaning eating, doing outside activities like skiing, going to sauna etc.
Teachers also discussed about the level of cultural awareness among various labor market actors. In their opinion they have to be active to convince labor market actors to host international students and they encourage work places to do this.

**Mentor** commented: “*In my hospital only very few colleagues are committing to be the tutor because they are so afraid to speak English and take the responsibility. They welcome international students and say hello, but other than that they are often quite passive. Of course, it’s extra work taking the international student but in my opinion I also learn a lot from the students.*”

### 4 Cultural skills and knowledge

In JAMK there has been systematic work to internationalize both students, teachers and also provide education to supervisors working with international students. Teachers agreed that this kind of activities are important and continuous effort to develop these activities are necessary. Mentor opinion was also that it is important that the school offers them possibility to meet with each other and share good practices and ways how to improve the learning process for international students. It was also mentioned that in JAMK lots of material for supervisors has been developed (Guide in English, video materials, check lists).

**Student** commented: “*In Jyväskylä area we have this very nice multicultural centre but not all foreign students are aware of it. It is very good resource to learn about other cultures and this should be promoted more efficiently for all students.*”

All participants agreed that promoting cultural skills and knowledge among students, teachers and supervisors is a common goal. In their opinion activities to facilitate the development of student’s competence need to be in focus and this would further improve their integration to Finnish society and maybe later to be employed (especially the degree students).

### 5 Guiding process

Participants described a different point of views in terms of multiculturalism and internationalization in Finland and in Jyvaskyla region. First of all, their all agree that the foreign students are welcome to study and practice in Finland and especially teachers and mentors saw the foreign students as a resource to our region and also for their personal competence and growth. Despite that, some of the teachers pointed out that the foreign students should follow the rules and codes of the country where they conduct the training.

**Teacher**: “*When the foreign students come to do the practical placement they should, at least for some extend, follow the expression “when in Rome, do as the Romans do”.*”
In the interview students and mentors underlined that the foreign students have to be aware of clear rules and codes of how to work and act in typical situations in practical placements. This includes working hours like when the work shift starts and when it ends, and what are the students’ responsibilities and duties during the training period. Mentors emphasized that sometimes they need to illustrate like “step by step” all the new rules, customs and practices which are the fundamental element in Finnish working life environment. They also underlined that they have to repeat the crucial things and codes to the students many times during the training period. One mentor described the situation:

**Mentor:** “There are some rules and codes that student must follow and you have to make it clear to the foreign student for example this way: “this is an non-negotiable issue or situation” and “this is an negotiable issue/situation for some extend” and “this situation is negotiable”. This will help the students to understand what things are obligatory and what are optional regarding the theoretical studies and placement”.

Students described that especially the beginning of the training period is very confusing and chaotic time so the student needs very clear and understandable rules of how to act in different situation in the work place. It is a requirement that the foreign students follow the rules and codes of the Finnish (foreign) system but these codes and rules ought to be easily understandable and some of them are negotiable.

**Student:** “In the beginning of the practical placement I did not understand all the things that I must do in order to pass the practice. I figured out later on what I supposed to do and perform during the practice. It was quite confusing time.”

In the interview teachers described the Asian students whose culture involves the manner not revealing the fact that "I do not know”. This might cause safety problems when the student is taking care of the patients and does not tell that she/he does not know what to do. For this reason it is essential to make clear for the students that in Finland you must ask and demand an answer if you do not know how to do things with patient or in the clinic. An effective communication is required between the student and his/her mentor. **Mentors** also underlined the fact that “you must make clear to the students that it is totally acceptable to ask if you do not know even though it is not appropriate in student’s own country or culture”.

The issue of the language were brought up many times during the interview by all participants. Especially teachers and mentors came to an agreement that the degree students should pick up learning Finnish as soon as they arrive here. This is a major issue for them because without proper language skills they cannot get a job in Finland. Even though fluent Finnish is not required for students they all should be well prepared with health care terminology. JAMK’s Bachelor of Nursing degree students have an opportunity to study Finnish language for 24 credits from which four credits are compulsory and the rest are optional studies. JAMK provides the text books for free for the students. The
situation is different for the Erasmus students because their training period lasts typically from a few weeks till three months and it’s irrelevant to study and learn Finnish in such a short period of time.

It is quite difficult to find mentors for the foreign students. Teachers and mentors all agreed that main reason for this is lack of English skills on the mentors’ part. This burdens a few of the mentors that guide the foreign students in placements. On the other hand, this can be very enriching for the mentors but at the same time it can be demanding and exhausting. Mentors and teachers brought up that some kind of coaching programme is needed for the mentors to offer high quality guidance. This kind of programme could also offer a suitable environment for the mentors to share their guiding experiences among each other. To fulfil this demand, JAMK is offering the “Guide in English please” course for the mentors in order to recruit more trained mentors to guide the foreign students.

**Teacher:** "Many Finnish health care workers know English but for some reason they do not want to use it with the foreign people. This programme could help mentors to get over the language barrier and after the course they might have more courage to guide foreign students and be more talk-active with them".

Mentors stated that the language cannot become an insurmountable problem during the practical placement. Learning does not happen only by oral communicating, it happens also by watching, and by following one’s actions, and using non-verbal language.

**Mentor:** “Mentors should adopt different ways of communicating with foreign students and foreign patients and clients. There are so many methods and ways to use other than languages”.

**Teacher:** “There is an issue concerning the competence of the student. A student might be a very skillful and brilliant in his/her own country and culture. His/her competence might be disguised because of poor language skills. That is a sad situation”.

Teachers emphasized that the local student should not end up in a situation where he/she finds him/herself as language interpreter between the employees and the foreign student.

In the interview the teachers stated that while the mentor is guiding his/her foreign student the teacher should contact both of them on a regular bases. Contacting regularly could prevent problematic situations during the student’s training period. Teachers also indicated that they should be aware of the cultural gap between the foreign students and working unit and so it is part of the teacher’s role to help get through the possible misunderstandings and misinterpretations between the staff and foreign student.

**Teacher:** “Teachers are going to be some kind of culture interpreter between the foreign student and his/her mentor and other staff on the ward”.
Students highlighted that the practical placement abroad could be very tough. Therefore they raised a few issues that must be come true when guiding the foreign student: 1) mentors have to understand that the student needs more time to keep up and process the information during practice, 2) student needs at least one mentor who is taking care of the student’s learning process and competence building during the placement, 3) after each situation with the patient or client mentor should have enough time to discuss and reflect the situation with the student.

**Student:** “I was so lucky because my mentor went through with me several situations concerning the patients during the practice. I learned a lot from her”.

Teachers and mentors said that the foreign students are in a need of talking and reflecting their everyday situations and incidents on the ward. Students need time and a place to do this. One way of arranging this is to offer a mutual arrival event for all the students who are coming back from their exchange period abroad. JAMK is offering this kind of events for its students.

One way of better cultural understanding is that mentors would have an opportunity to visit countries where they foreign students are coming from. Mentors especially wish they could visit the hospitals of the aforementioned countries so they could understand cultural differences better and gain more suitable guiding skills. Mentors as well as teachers hoped that they could do the same with working life mentors.

**Mentor:** “The best way to do this is to together with the teacher and visit hospitals and other work places where most of our Erasmus students come from. This would increase my knowledge and understanding of their cultural habits and practices and to gain insight of their health care system overall.”

The evaluation of the practical placement varies a lot in different higher education institutions in Europe. For example physiotherapy programmes in the UK and Germany students are evaluated based on certain structure which means that every action is evaluated separately and it is graded by the numbers. In Finland the evaluation system is quite different. We focus on the “bigger picture” of the learning process with a pass/fail grading system. This causes lots of challenges for teachers, mentors and students and extra work with integrating one evaluating system into other. Currently JAMK’s teachers are composing a handbook on how to guide a foreign student in practical placement. The handbook consists of the roles of teachers, mentors and students regarding the training period. The book also includes different methods of how to guide with foreign students, and there also will be different ways to perform the evaluation of foreign student’s practice.

In the interview teachers stressed that the students should give feedback to the mentors too regarding the guidance process.
Teacher: “It is very important that the students will give feedback to the mentors about the guidance because this could empower the mentors and give them strength and power to keep up the good work with the foreign students”.

Student: “I gave feedback to my mentor regularly by expressing what would be the best way of guiding me during the practice. Our relationship was very honest, respectful and sincere. From my point of view this easy-going relationship between us was the crucial factor for my successful training period abroad.”

It is recommended by the teachers and mentors that the Erasmus students would do both practical period and theoretical studies during the exchange period abroad. This would benefit students because then they would get to know the local students and familiar themselves with local culture. While student is studying theoretical subjects the mentor would get a day-off from guiding and have an opportunity to focus on other issues at work.

Mentors and teachers should cooperate more regarding the student’s practical placement. In practice this cooperation could mean events between mentors and teachers where they can share information about forthcoming foreign students, share experiences and good practices of guiding and mentoring foreign students, discuss about evaluation of practical placement and their roles, tasks and other duties regarding the student’s training period.

Teacher: “Internationalization is our common aim but we as a higher education institution cannot do this work by ourselves. We need active and systematic cooperation between education institutions and working life partners and mentors and teachers.”