



# **The importance of Networks in strengthening the integration of newcomers**



**Want to know  
more? Let's  
network!**

Hanna Turpeinen, Talent  
Hub Manager

[hanna.turpeinen@uwasa.fi](mailto:hanna.turpeinen@uwasa.fi)

Mia Smedlund,  
International HR Specialist

[mia.smedlund@uwasa.fi](mailto:mia.smedlund@uwasa.fi)

Lukumanu Iddrisu, VSP  
Project manager

[lukumanu.iddrisu@uwasa.fi](mailto:lukumanu.iddrisu@uwasa.fi)



**Irantzu Garces**

International HR Specialist  
[irantzu.garcesmunarriz@oulu.fi](mailto:irantzu.garcesmunarriz@oulu.fi)

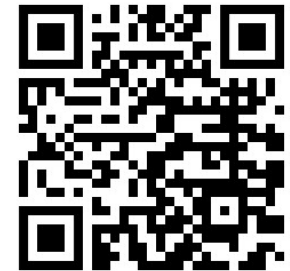
**Anniina Koukognon**

International HR Specialist  
[anniina.koukognon@oulu.fi](mailto:anniina.koukognon@oulu.fi)



**LET'S CONNECT!**

- Adam Pratchett
- [adam.pratchett@helsinki.fi](mailto:adam.pratchett@helsinki.fi)
- [www.linkedin.com/in/adampratchett/](http://www.linkedin.com/in/adampratchett/)



HELSINGIN YLIOPISTO  
HELSINGFORS UNIVERSITET  
UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI



Vaasan yliopisto  
UNIVERSITY OF VAASA

# The importance of Networks to strengthen the integration of newcomers

Experiences from Vaasa Spouse programme

# The need for a spouse programme in Vaasa region

- ▶ Recognised as one of the key factors in successful international recruitment – attracting good candidates and especially retaining them.
- ▶ The spouse community and individual needs are heterogenous. We need enough volume to be able to start a continuously running programme.
- ▶ Considerable added value in **a regional programme that is created in cooperation with relevant actors from the whole region**. A truly international spouse community, a possibility to build up e.g. a 2-track programme where the participants could join flexibly.
- ▶ The VSP was planned and launched in close cooperation with:
  - ▶ Talent Coastline Employment –project
  - ▶ TE Services
  - ▶ ELY center
  - ▶ The City of Vaasa
  - ▶ The University of Vaasa International HR team & the SIMHE team

# Networks were an invaluable asset when planning the Vaasa Spouse Programme

- ▶ Euraxess network and especially TU Eindhoven
- ▶ University of Copenhagen
- ▶ The Finnish Universities International HR Network FAMO
- ▶ City of Helsinki Spouse Programme
- ▶ City of Espoo Career Club
  
- ▶ *The power of networks: "Copy with pride" all that we estimated could work in our region.*

## Overview of the session

'Spouse support, commitment from the municipality therein, and how they mutually enhance one another'

1. The 'Get in Touch' social support program for accompanying spouses  
*Megha Vaidya, coordinator, Audrey Fournier and Nikita Agrawal, participants*
2. The Living In program  
*Ed Heerschap, coordinator 'Living In', municipality of Eindhoven*
3. The Expat Spouses Initiative (ESI), career support by spouses and for spouses  
*Saumya Paliwal and Mays AlBawwab, core team members*
4. 'Women for Women', a successful program and an example of cooperation  
*Ed Heerschap, Saumya Paliwal and Mays AlBawwab*
5. Discussion, Q&A



Talent Attraction & Retention - Case Eindhoven



# Vaasa Spouse Programme

2-track programme where the participants can join flexibly, according to their life situation.

<b>Living in Vaasa: networking &amp; social inclusion, the whole family in focus</b>	<b>Working in Vaasa: Career and professional development in focus</b>
Trips and excursions, cultural events, meet & greet events	Introduction of career club
Presenting existing associations and clubs in the region, free-time activities, hobbies	Regularly running initiative with each cohort running for 8 weeks.
Flexible programme, which is built in cooperation with the participating spouses	Contents include Finnish working life and culture, networking and personal branding, HR process
Monthly informal Coffee and Chat meetings	Company workshops/visits

# The regional spouse programme working group

Wärtsilä	Heli Pakkanen, HR Manager
VAMK	Sirpa Rutanen, Head of Communications and Marketing
Pohjanmaan Kauppakamari	Maijastiina Jokitalo, Training Manager
City of Vaasa	Anne Lindell, Recruitment Manager
TE-Services	Anna Korsbäck, International TE-Services Specialist
UWASA	Mia Smedlund, International HR expert
UWASA	Sini Heinoja, MarComm Specialist
UWASA	Lukumanu Iddrisu, Project Manager spouse programme
Talent Hub	Hanna Turpeinen, Manager Talent Hub.



# Strong support from City of Vaasa





# Company collaboration in the Career Club

Joint workshop provided by Hitachi Energy and Danfoss



Workshop provided by Wärtsilä



# Collaborators from the Energy Academy



VAMK AMMATTI-EDUKAUSI  
UNIVERSITY OF APPLIED SCIENCES



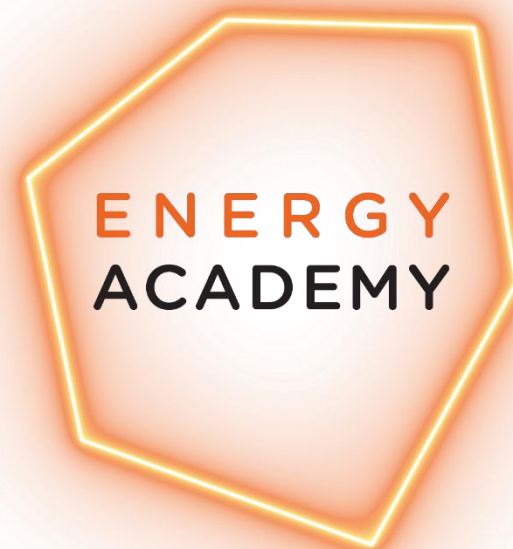
Centre for Economic Development,  
Transport and the Environment



Vaasan yliopisto  
UNIVERSITY OF VAASA



POHJANMAAN  
KAUPPAKAMARI



Vaasan yliopisto  
UNIVERSITY OF VAASA



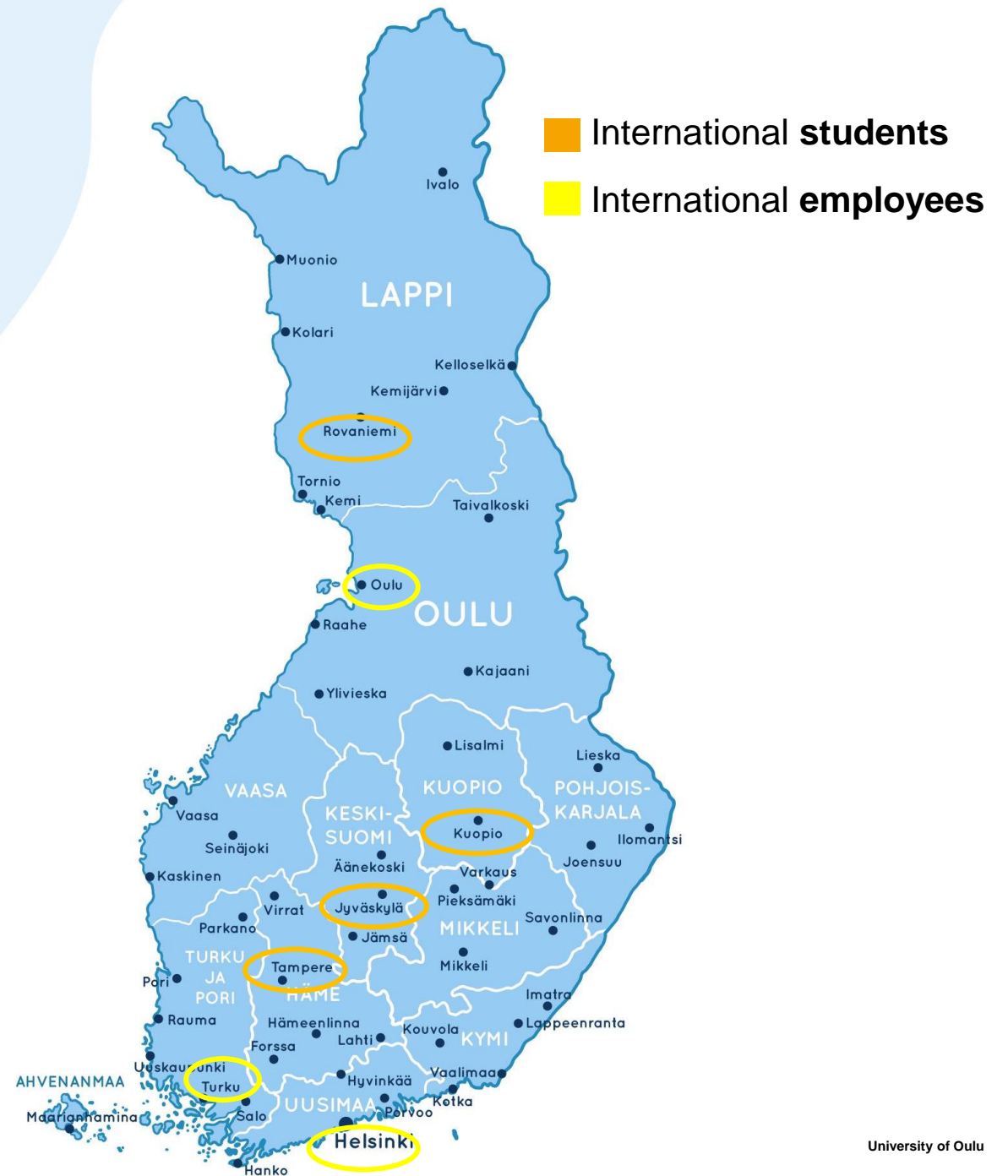
# UniOulu Buddy Programme

**HR-lead service to strengthen the integration of newcomers**

May 16 2024, Irantzu Garces



# Buddy or Friendship Programmes are popular types of networks in Finland





# A strong network needs strong pillars

## New employee

- Welcome email
- Free lunch with the assigned buddy
- Monthly activities
- Feedback collection

## Buddy

- Matching based on interests
- Training material
- Strong communication and ongoing support
- Monthly activities

## University

- A process owner: Talent Boost HR
- Resources
- Performance KPIs





# and meaningful outcomes

## New employee (foreign)

- ❑ Smoother transition into the new culture inside and outside of work
- ❑ Increased sense of belonging and acceptance, and decreased sense of isolation
- ❑ More satisfied employees and a greater perception of wellbeing at work

## Buddy

- ❑ Takes an active role in creating an inclusive community and facilitating newcomers' integration process
- ❑ Building relationships with people from different cultural backgrounds
- ❑ Develop intercultural and global competences

## University of Oulu

- ❑ More satisfied employees leads to higher retention of new recruits
- ❑ Contribute to the internationalisations of UniOulu
- ❑ A more engaged, inclusive and cohesive university community



# In January 2023 the programme is launched





**Our mission is to warmly welcome international researchers and other staff members, as well as long-term visitors, and help them to settle in at the University of Oulu and in Finland**



**1,5 years**

**161 participants**

**14 get-togethers**



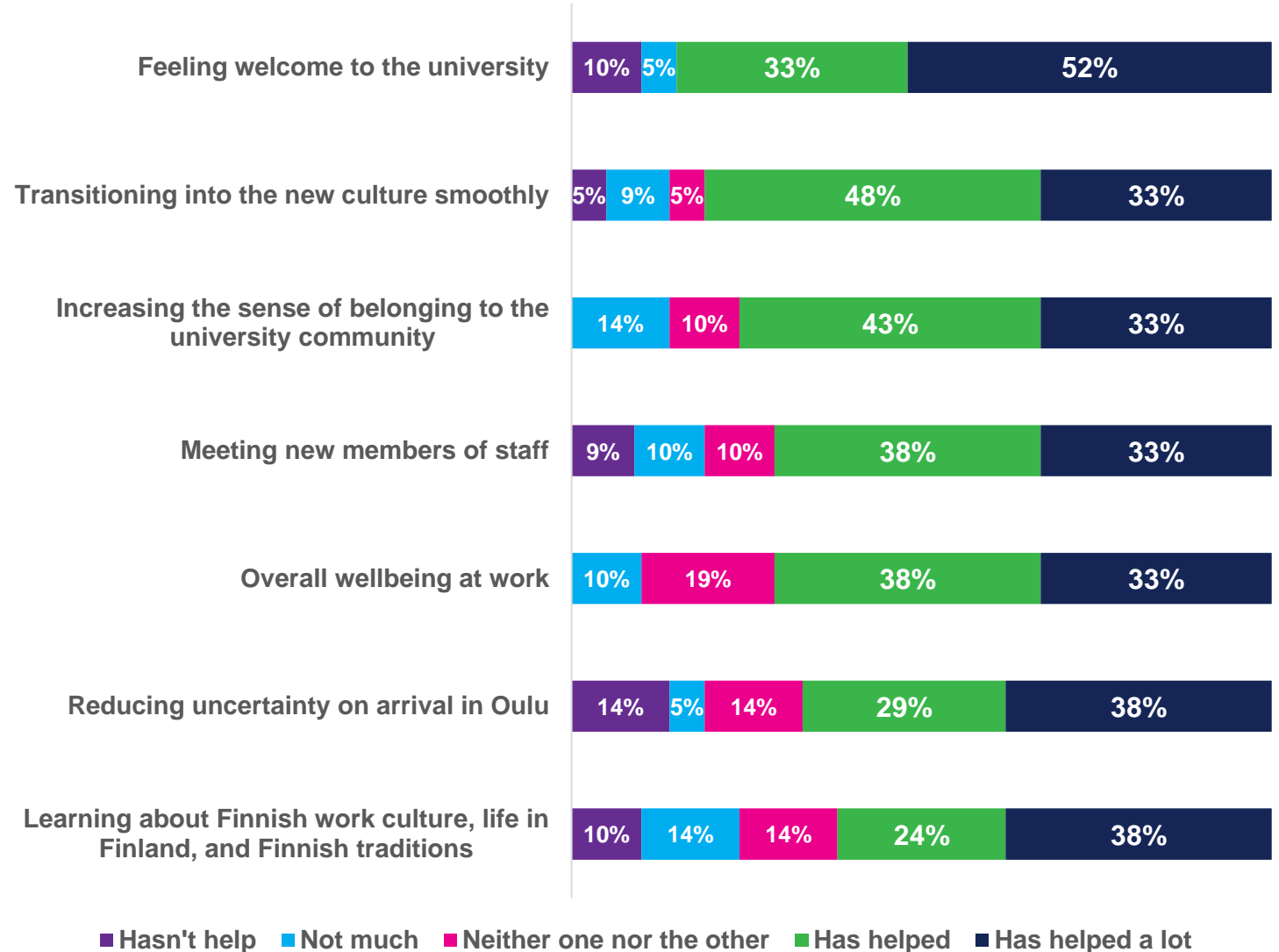






**86% of the newcomers that joined us feel welcome to the university**

## Newcomers





# What have they enjoyed the most?

It helped feel less intimidating in a new culture, it was a good to know that there's a person who is there to chat with and talk to about working in a new environment. It helped reduce the feeling of culture shock by a lot.

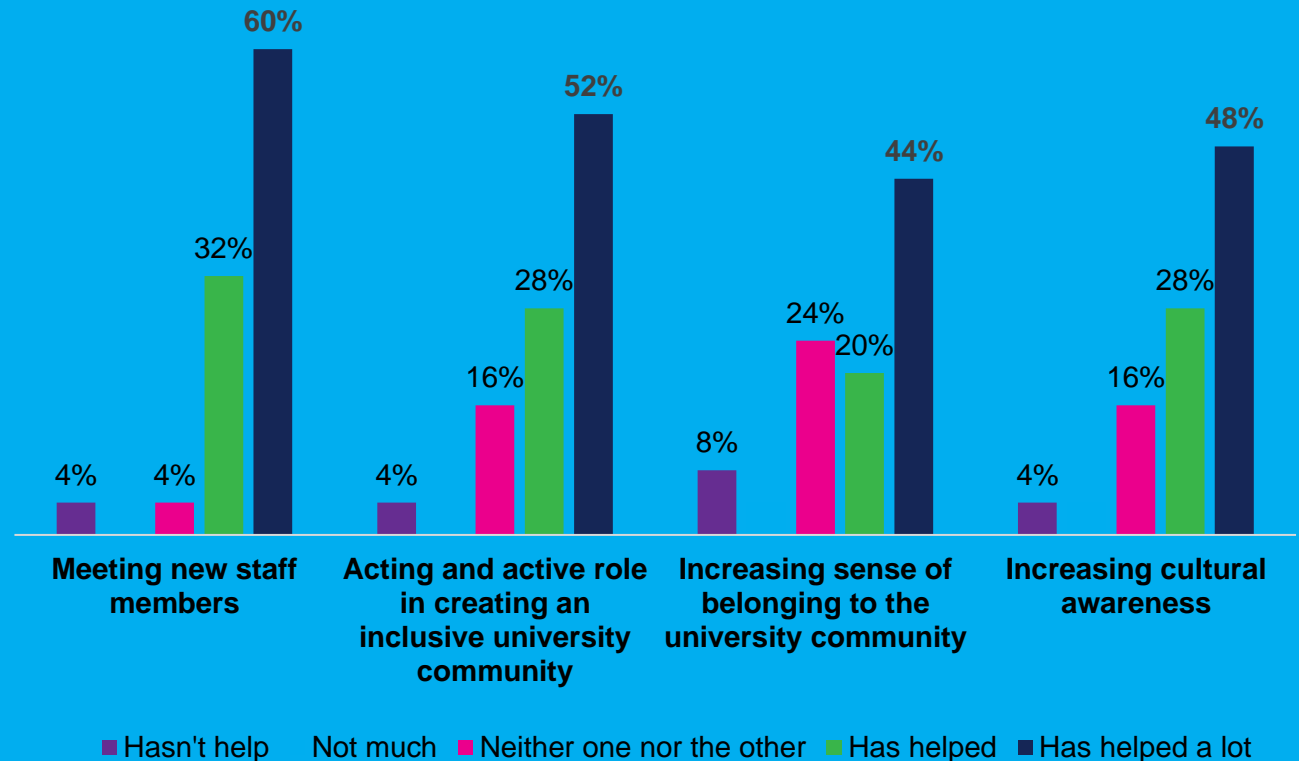
Meeting the other buddies and buddies, enjoying sauna together

Having someone from my research unit as a buddy, which made it easier to get information about working life



**90% of buddies  
expanded  
networks  
meeting new  
staff members**

## Buddies



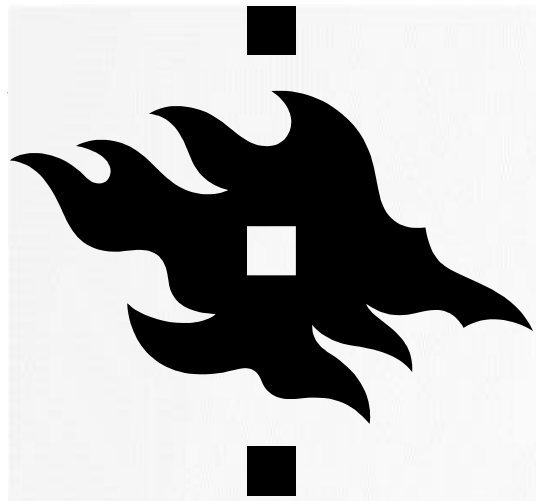


# What have they enjoyed the most?

I enjoyed that there were activities organized for us to participate in

I was paired with a person who I have tons in common with, and we became good friends. I've been learning tons about a new (to me) culture from them.

New friends \ Cultural exchange.

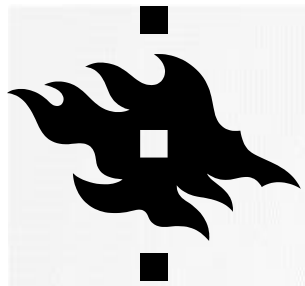


# INTERNATIONAL STAFF NETWORK

**Supporting employee-led initiatives to strengthen the integration of newcomers**

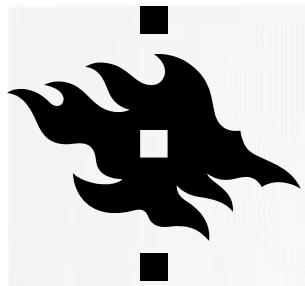
University of Helsinki





# ABOUT ME

- Originally from the UK
- Joined the University of Helsinki in 2020
  - The first non-Finnish speaker in a 70-person department
- Co-founded the university's International Staff Network in 2021



# TODAY'S PRESENTATION

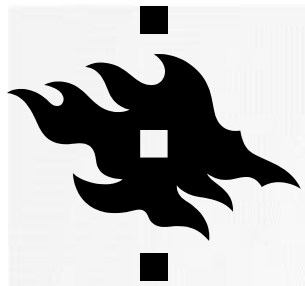


How we turned an idea



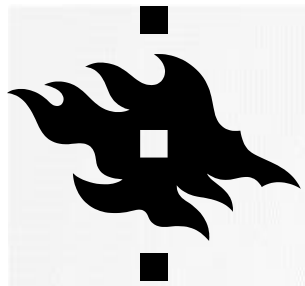
into an award-winning network

**With 0€ in funding**



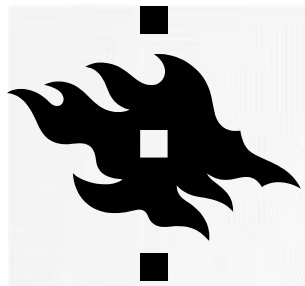
# GETTING CONNECTED IN 2020

- Three international employees met online at an HR induction in August 2020
  - We kept in touch afterwards via Teams and added other internationals we met over time
  - Regularly met up for lunch/after work
- We quickly identified international staff had very **varied experiences** (positive and negative) across the university
  - Many international staff were incredibly isolated and lacked support
  - **We wanted to work together to improve the consistency of experience, identify solutions and connect with other internationals at the university**

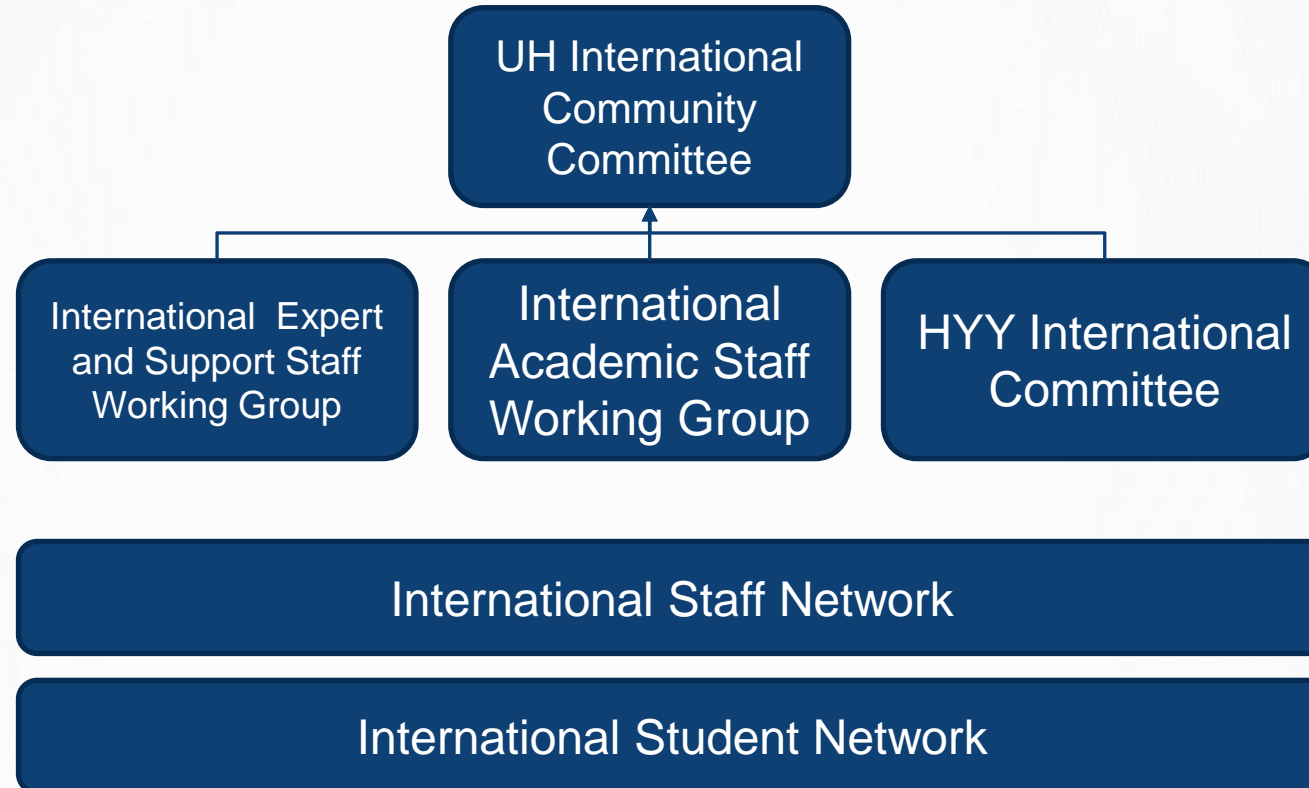


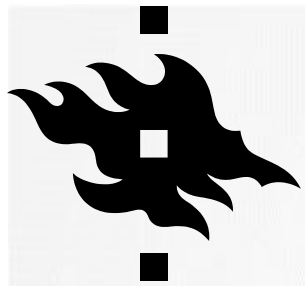
# IDENTIFYING CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS IN 2021

- We began to share our experiences with different departments at the university
  - The key was always to have **solutions-oriented discussions**
- **Chicken or the Egg:**
  - **Should we have a formal representative structure first or a grass-roots community network first?**
- Autumn 2021 we started talking with HR about how to better support international staff.
  - HR listened to and validated our concerns/experiences
  - They helped to identify solutions and put time towards working on them themselves
  - They also **gave us the space lead our own initiatives**, while also providing support



# THE ORIGINAL IDEA

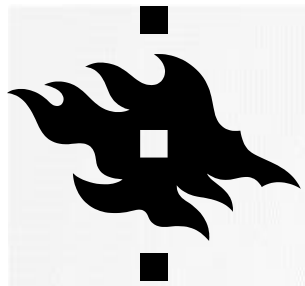




# FORMING THE NETWORK IN 2022

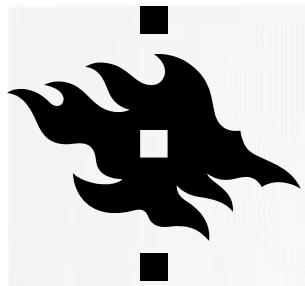
- **We decided to first focus on building a grass-roots community/network**
  - In 2022 we “officially” created the university’s International Staff Network
  - We formed a “leadership group” with 10 volunteers who are all international employees at the university
- The network is open to **all staff at the university (including unfunded PhD students) who identify as international or are internationally minded**
- **The Network consists of three main parts:**
  - An online Microsoft Teams Community
  - Monthly in-person social events
  - Advocacy initiatives





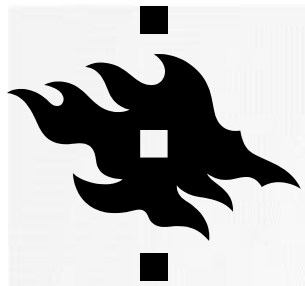
# TEAMS COMMUNITY – MAY 2022

- A forum for international staff to informally **interact, share experiences, explore opportunities and get support**
  - International HR colleagues are part of the group and can answer any relevant questions
- We originally has specific channels for different staff groups – now we have campus channels (which hasn't really worked)
- Currently we have **over 600 members** on Teams
- **Challenges:** Academics don't use Teams, so it's difficult to engage them.



# MONTHLY IN-PERSON SOCIAL EVENTS

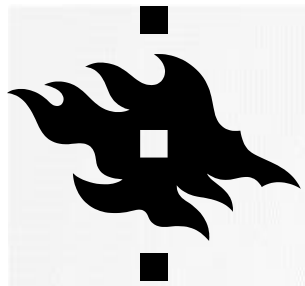
- **Open to all staff** who identify as international or are internationally minded (we also **allow plus 1s** who don't need to be international)
  - The socials **rotate around each university campus**
  - We usually have an average of 20-25 people at each event
- We now use Lyyti sign up forms to better understand who is interested in our events and to allow people to easily **join the university's alumni community**
- **Challenges:** Finding suitable and more inclusive venues, as we don't have funding.



# ANNUAL PIKKUJOULU

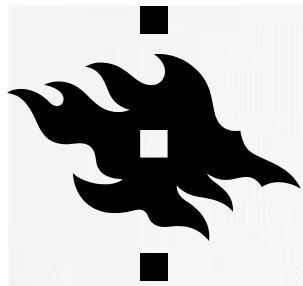
- Our most successful event concept
  - Book a free room on campus
  - We don't have funding- so **we ask people to bring their own food/drinks**
- In 2022- approximately 30 people
- In 2023- over 80 people
- **Challenges:** Finding a bigger and free venue





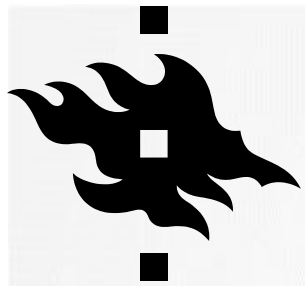
# ADVOCACY

- **As a network, we don't claim to be representatives of international staff.**
- We are continuing to meet with the university's leadership and others to **raise awareness** of the challenges international staff face and to **offer solutions**.
- We are currently working with the **Vice Rector** to create a group for international students and staff as part of the university's EDI committee.
- **Challenges:** Creating a new type of representative organisation in the university's rigid bureaucratic structures.



# NEWSLETTER

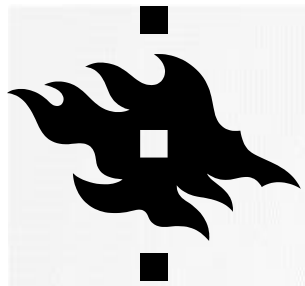
- In 2024 we launched a newsletter for international staff in collaboration with HR
  - We identified that **international staff struggle to find relevant news on the university's internal communications platform** (Flamma)
  - We know that academics don't use our Teams Community and we also wanted to directly advertise our events via email
- We send the newsletter 4 times a year and include **curated information**, such as:
  - International Staff Network News/Events
  - University News/Events
  - Information for International Newcomers



# HOW DOES HR SUPPORT THE NETWORK?

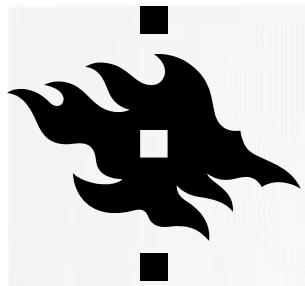
- HR have given us the **space, time and support** to allow us to build the network ourselves
- One International HR member has allocated a **very small amount of working time** to supporting the network
  - Answering any HR related questions in the Teams Community
  - Informing international newcomers about the network in their HR inductions
  - Suggesting relevant news items for our newsletter
- HR has paid for the **Mailchimp License** for our newsletter, which they also use for their other networks (approx. 250e/year)





# FUTURE HOPES AND PLANS

- **Formalise the network** within the university's official decision-making/democratic structures
  - We are working on a proposal with the Vice Rector, which would create a group for international students and staff as **part of the university's EDI committee**
- Continue to advocate for the **equitable inclusion and representation** of international staff at the university
- Expand our activities and **increase the awareness of the network** within international staff community



# BEFORE YOU REPLICATE THE IDEA AT YOUR ORGANISATION

- **Ask your internationals what they want and need** to improve their experience and strengthen their integration in your organisation!
- Consider how your organisation **improve the formal representation of internationals in the decision-making bodies** of your organisation.
- How can you **empower international employees** to create and lead their own initiatives, which your organisation can then support? Especially with **funding**
- Integration is a two-way street. How can you **bring your “international” and “finnish” employees together** to jointly create an inclusive and supportive organisation community?

# Group discussion

Smart ways to maintain  
important networks with  
minimum resources