

Experiences of international members of the Tampere universities community

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Session 12: Towards inclusive and responsible language policies in higher
education institutions

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Research background

Sought to understand more about the **experiences** of international researchers, teachers, and staff at Tampere universities.

Focused on developing actionable understandings of the positions and needs of international members that can **inform policies and practices of the universities** and **improve how the interests of international members are represented by trade unions**.

Developed by Tampere University Association of Researchers and Teachers (TATTE) workgroup on international members in collaboration with the Professors' Union local chapter.

Survey responses collected 4.10.2021 - 31.10.2021

- 45 questions (10 open-ended)
- 74 completed responses

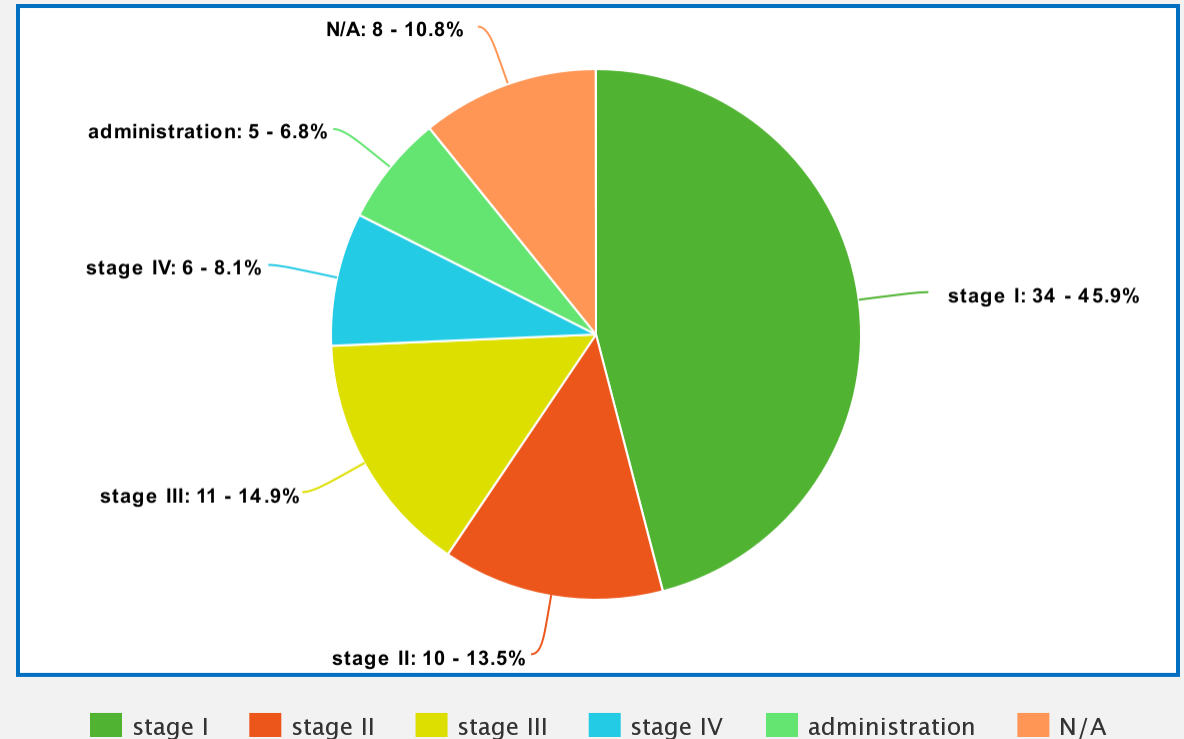
Interviews conducted May-June 2022

- 13 interviews



Methods and participants

- Exploratory mixed-methods study
- Descriptive statistics from survey responses & content analysis of open-ended survey questions and interview transcripts
- Early career researchers employed at the universities were the largest group of respondents
- Participants self-identified as international (not solely based on citizenship or language)
- TAU with much higher representation (n = 68; 95.77%) than TAMK (n = 2; 2.82%)



Findings

- Wide range of experiences – both positive and negative.
- Positive comments on **the immediate working environment** (e.g., research group), trust, autonomy, flexibility in the working life.
- Feeling of being an outsider in relation to **the higher organizational structures** (faculty and university level) and having limited access to information and rights, participation in the faculty activities and decision-making processes.
- **Uncertainties in the career progression** related to the precarious work conditions in academia, but also language practices, limited participation in the community, and being perceived as being temporarily in Finland.
- Other aspects mentioned: concerns related to **family ties & social network**; **unclear administrative processes** of relocation to Finland; accounts of **harassment and discrimination**.

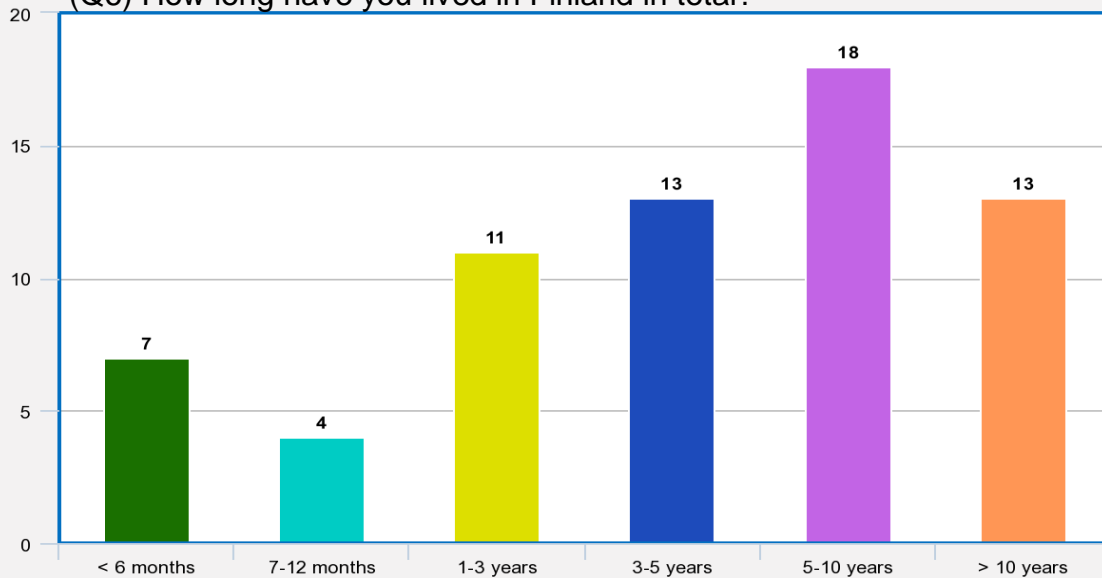
"With my immediate work community I feel that there is no problem, we hold all our meetings smoothly and I feel the communication is clear. However, sometimes I don't feel comfortable enough to participate in meetings and activities of the university/faculty because my Finnish level is elementary and I don't want to force people to switch to English."

"I also sometimes feel (though I can't usually know for sure) that people sometimes just assume that my stay in Finland will be temporary in way that might limit their interest in working with me or that might cause them to assume that I would be uninterested in being involved in certain ways at the university."

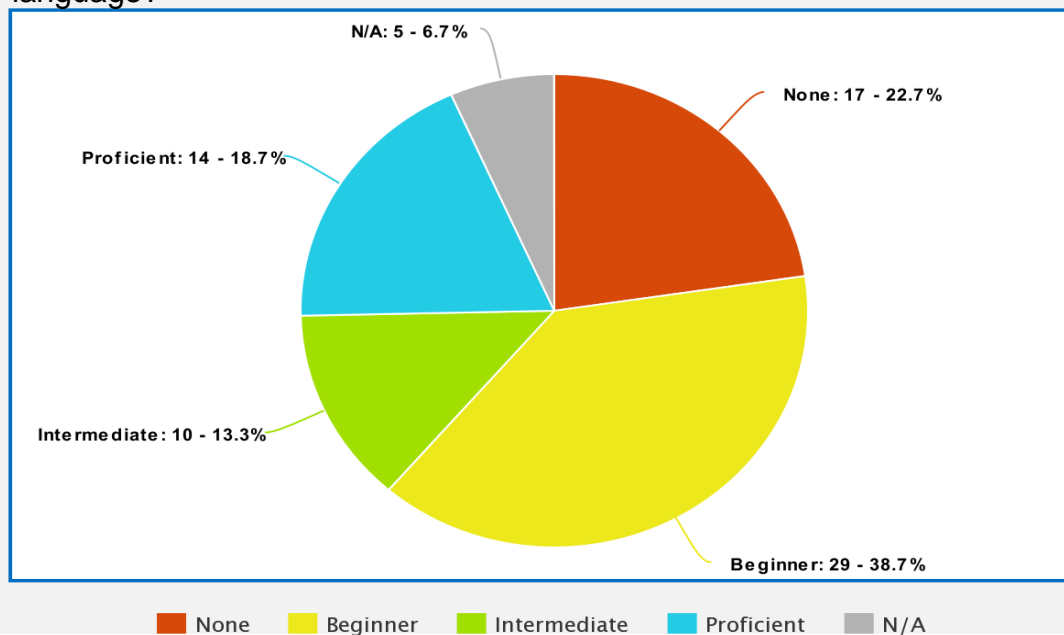
"I think there are no expectation on me, if not finish the phd and leave."



(Q6) How long have you lived in Finland in total?



(Q4) Which option best characterizes your level of proficiency with the Finnish language?



Living and working in Finnish?

- Over half of the survey respondents report that they have lived in Finland for at least 3 years -- over half of the survey respondents describe their Finnish language proficiency as "none" & "beginner".
- **Language is seen as a primary obstacle** for finding information, claiming rights, exerting influence within the institution, and career development. Only 22.7% survey respondents think that the university provides enough support in learning Finnish.
- **Respondents' partners** in Finland have often faced significant challenges in finding meaningful employment because of the language barrier.



Themes related to language

- Different experiences across faculties
- More flexibility in smaller communities (research groups)
- Language barriers in participation in university decision-making (working groups, committees, faculty and university academic governance)
- Lack of Finnish language as a challenge for career prospects/progression thus influencing wellbeing
- Desire to learn Finnish vs. obstacles; need for additional support in learning Finnish
- Need for more institutional resources for supporting flexible language practices



Dilemma

"Participation in higher-level function is effectively discouraged due to the language barrier."

VS

"I would like to follow the Finnish courses but I feel I need to focus more on my research."



TATTE's recommendations
for supporting international
researchers, teachers, and
other university staff



Support for language learning

- Inclusion of language learning in work plans—including corresponding reduction in workload in other areas
- Continual development and evaluation of university-arranged language course options, including support for attending language courses outside the university when needed
- BUT, until the sector's reliance on short, fixed-term contracts is addressed, this is always going to be an obstacle. Creating the conditions for people to envision a stable career and long-term future in Finland would likely encourage Finnish language learning significantly



Need for flexible, inclusive language principles and practices

- Emphasizing removing barriers, timely access to information, community dialogue, and flexible and experimental approaches to figure out what works
- With necessary protections for:
 - academic freedom
 - recognizing and valuing research conducted and communicated in a range of languages
 - students' linguistic rights
 - full and equal participation of all university staff and students in decision-making and community life



Provide resources required to make a multilingual, international university community work

- Investment in translation and interpretation services
- Evaluate and expand language support services (including services supporting the use of Finnish by non-native Finnish speakers)
- Better inclusion of non-Finnish (or not yet Finnish) speaking researchers in teaching, curriculum development, and societal interaction agendas
- Investment in dedicated 'international' expertise: 1) to support newly arriving international academics, 2) to follow and respond to changes in the university and broader environment, 3) to bring issues and obstacles to the attention of the university



Research reports and recommendations on TATTE's website

- Survey of international members of the Tampere universities community, conducted in October 2021: <https://tieteentekijat.fi/assets/uploads/2022/05/Experiences-of-international-members-survey-report-English.pdf>
- Qualitative interview research with international members, conducted May-June 2022: <https://tieteentekijat.fi/assets/uploads/2023/03/interview-report-EN.pdf>
- Published recommendations on the basis of this research (March 2023): <https://tieteentekijat.fi/assets/uploads/2023/03/Recommendations-to-Tampere-universities-for-supporting-international-researchers-teachers-and-staff.pdf>



Big picture findings

- The problems facing international members are inseparable from the broader structural problems of working in higher education sector
 - career precarity and short, fixed-term contracts
 - university democracy and decision making
- International members are a diverse group, and their experiences differ
- New arrival support AND a long-term future at the university



In conclusion and discussion

The study gives an overview of the situation at Tampere University in 2021-2022.

How do you see language practices in higher education institutions?

What challenges / good practices have you encountered?

How do we create inclusive language practices across higher education institutions?



Thank you!

Feel free to contact us at workgroup-international@tatte.fi

