

ENTERING FINNISH PROFESSIONAL LIFE





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INTRODUCTION

In international, cross-cultural context the basic question is “How do people understand one another when they do not share a common cultural experience”. One definition for culture is “the learned and shared patterns of beliefs, behaviours, and values of groups of interacting people”. Each culture has formed its own ways of organizing its life which is seen as rules, regulations and behaviour codes.

This guide, Entering Finnish Professional Life, aims at giving some insights into Finnish culture related to studying and working. It explains the principles of how to behave in different situations at UAS, generally in Finland and in Finnish workplaces.

In addition to this guide, FUAS Universities have different instructions and guidelines in connection with specific themes (e.g. environment, ethics) that also direct our operations and behaviour.

At FUAS, our students have freedom to carry out their work and studies, however, this freedom also entails considerable personal responsibility. It is crucial that we all apply the same high ethical standards wherever we operate.

We hope this guide will also help you to understand why certain things are approached as they are in Finland. Hopefully it makes it easier for you to adjust to our life.

FUAS - Federation of Universities of Applied Sciences is a strategic alliance formed by HAMK, Lahti and Laurea Universities of Applied Sciences.



Rules are made to be obeyed

Cultures differ on how we judge other people's behaviour. There are two alternative types of judgement: universalism (a rule-based) and particularism (relationship-based).

Universalism sees that all persons falling under the rule should be treated the same, without any exceptions related to relationships or circumstances. This rule-based conduct has a tendency to resist exceptions that might weaken the rule and thus cause the system to collapse.

Particularism judgements focus on the exceptional nature of circumstances. Particularism sees that relationships and circumstances are important; people will help their friends, family members or a person of importance no matter what the rules say.

The culture you come from, your personality, religion and the bonds with those concerned lead you to favour one approach over the other.

Finnish culture is a universalist culture, and therefore we are very committed to follow all laws and regulations without exceptions. This is also an important sign of equal treatment. We find it very important that every student and every employee is aware of the laws and regulations related to one's studies or work. Sometimes all this bureaucracy and strictness may seem frustrating, but remember, that even weird rules may be based on reasons that are not familiar to you.

Furthermore, in Finland, written guidelines and information are the primary and most trusted source of information; information packages are widely used and adhered to. It is expected that students read written guidelines and instructions before asking questions.

REAL LIFE EXAMPLE FROM INTERNATIONAL ALUMNI:

When I found my first job in Finland, I was impressed with the working environment as every person at the organization understands and applies the rules and regulations carefully, including the employer. I noticed that in Finland the decision to recruit and fire personnel are not tied to personal relationships and thus I felt safe. In my home country the employer can take decisions based on personal issues.



Treat others with respect and dignity

Respect is shown in different ways depending on a culture. Respect can be shown in communication by using titles, using a formal communication style, turn-taking in communication, eye contact, respecting personal space and respecting gender equality, etc.

In Finland, respect is shown in low voice, not violating personal space by touching people you do not know, or standing or sitting too close to somebody. We believe, that leaving people “in peace” is a sign of respect. We also think that interrupting one’s talk is disrespectful. It is advisable to listen and wait until someone finishes saying something before taking your turn.

Since we appreciate silence we expect that all communication devices are set on silent mode and are not used in classrooms or meetings.

At FUAS, we respect each other as well as different cultures in all of our operations. Everyone is treated equally and fairly. Your colleagues and classmates appreciate courtesy. Gender equality and non-discrimination is a norm; nobody may be discriminated against on the basis of age, ethnic or national origin, nationality, language, religion, belief, opinion, health, disability, sexual orientation or other personal characteristics.

REAL LIFE EXAMPLE FROM INTERNATIONAL ALUMNI:

At the beginning, when I came to Finland, I was very shocked that people do not necessarily show their emotions when greeting each other. For instance in Spain it is very common that people get close to each other, greet with a hug or men handshake each other even if they have met recently.

One of the things I really found totally different compared to my home culture is that hierarchy in Finland is rather flat and at the beginning I struggled to understand that not everything has to necessarily go through my direct superior as sometimes it might be the case that I have to deal directly with other people in higher positions.



Observe and adapt to the local culture

Communication is culturally patterned, and speaking rules are different in cultures. The following presents special features of Finnish communication that you should know:

Direct-indirect communication style

In direct communication style, both parties, the speaker or writer and the listener or reader, expect explicit verbal expression of intentions, wishes, hopes, etc. (e.g., "I am hungry", "I love you"). In indirect communication style the speaker or writer expresses his/her thoughts implicitly, or using hints or modifiers (e.g. "perhaps", "maybe"). The listener or reader is expected to monitor the nonverbal communication, to read contextual cues, to relate what has been stated to all information available about the speaker or writer and the situation at hand in order to read the real meaning.

Finns prefer a direct communication style, in other words they "say what they mean" and the listener or reader does not need to look for the cues or hints. In meetings this means that Finns go straight to business with a very little small-talk.

Taking turns and silence

There are two mainstream communication styles on turn taking: one approach is that interrupting someone is considered rude – you are expected to listen and wait until someone finishes saying something before expressing own opinion (like in Finland). Another approach is that it is ok to start speaking when someone is still speaking.

In addition, Finns tolerate silence unlike many others. This silence might make you feel uncomfortable, but you will learn to tolerate it. Modesty is also appreciated in Finland and drawing too much attention to oneself is considered impolite. Shouting loudly or making a scene is considered inappropriate behaviour.

Politeness

Politeness is one of the central features of communication. It is a human phenomenon, yet expressed differently in different cultures. Politeness is communicated both verbally and nonverbally. The core of politeness, in all cultures, is to take other people into consideration. This can, however, be done in different ways.

Formal communication with the use of titles and formal body language is one way of showing politeness. In some cultures informal communications with humour, the use of first names and relax body language is not a sign of impoliteness or disrespect. Finns usually use first names and don't use titles unless there are big differences in age or rank or it is a very formal setting. In study and work context you may call your teachers and your supervisors with their first name.

In the Finnish social context, leaving somebody in peace, respecting privacy may be considered as polite in certain contexts (e.g., in times of sorrow or illness). In some other cultures, this kind of behaviour could be judged as impolite, or even rude.

Formal-informal communication

Person-centered communication style is informal and emphasizes the individual and equalitarian relationships. The person-centeredness is reflected, for instance, by the use of the pronoun "I". The contextual style (formal) is status and role oriented. Formality and asymmetrical power distance is often emphasized. Finland is individualistic and equalitarian culture and therefore emphasizes informal communication.

Finns are very minimalistic in giving compliments. After some time, a foreigner may feel that compliments are almost non-existent. On getting compliments, Finns just say thank you ("kiitos") and do not dwell on it. If you do not get any feedback it normally means that everything went well.

REAL LIFE EXAMPLE FROM INTERNATIONAL ALUMNI:

I came to study to Finland two years ago from Vietnam, and the differences in culture were clear. Even if I had Vietnamese friends here in Finland, who have been longer and who have introduced me to the local culture, it took at least a year for me to start getting used to it. For example, in Vietnam it is very common to talk and ask questions from the teacher as this shows that you care about the class. But in Finland students work very independently and everything is usually clearly explained in the instructions. Besides my studies, I am also working as a graphic designer. One of the things I found different is that I was never given feedback from my boss, so I never knew if I was doing the right thing.

In my home country it is very common to give feedback in order to have some sense of direction.



Be punctual, be on time, be present

Cultures differ on how they manage time. Time can be seen as a social construct enabling members of a culture to co-ordinate their activities. This has important implications in study and work life; the time allocated to complete a task may be vitally important or merely a guide. The time for a lecture or a meeting may be precise or approximate.

Cultures can be categorized as sequential and synchronic cultures. Sequential people tend to schedule very tightly with thin divisions between time slots; it is rude to be even a few minutes late because the whole day's schedule of events is affected. Synchronic cultures are less insistent upon punctuality; not that the passage of time is unimportant, but that several other cultural values draw attention; it is often necessary to "give time" to people with whom you have a particular relation. The schedule is not an excuse for passing them by.

Finland's culture is a sequential one. Punctuality is valued highly in Finnish culture. Finns generally adhere to planned schedules and deadlines since punctuality is taken seriously and meetings are very structured. In case you are late (for a very good reason), call or send a message apologizing and give the time when you will arrive. Following deadlines are vital at school and at work. Pay attention in planning your work to meet the given deadlines.

Lesson time is reserved for studying and work time is reserved for working. Issues, not related to studies or work, are dealt with during breaks. Breaks are often at a defined time and they last for a defined amount of time.

If you get sick or you have to be absent from work for any other reason, it is extremely important to inform your employer immediately. The employer might need some time to redelegate your duties or hire a substitute. It is equally important to inform your study colleagues if you are for some reason unable to participate in an appointed group work meeting. If you come late to work regularly or you do not inform your employer about your sick leave, it is possible for your employer to discharge you of your duties, after warnings.

REAL LIFE EXAMPLE FROM INTERNATIONAL ALUMNI:

For French people it is normal to be late for 5 to 10 minutes, but in Finland the punctuality is very important. If you are late even for few minutes from a meeting, it's negative. When I was working in France it was sometimes common to be absent in an event. You could easily explain later why you were not present. But in Finland it is very important to inform that you are not attending before the event takes place, so that no one is actually wondering where you are. If you don't do that during working events, it might have consequences.



Be honest

Honesty is a very complex concept. It can vary from following literally correct rules and regulations to and pulling strings under special circumstances or from not lying to stretching the truth.

Honesty can also be linked with eye contact. In Finland, lack of eye contact is interpreted as a sign of dishonesty and untrustworthiness. It is therefore advisable to maintain eye contact even though in your culture it may be a sign of disrespect.

IN STUDY AND WORK LIFE THE FOLLOWING ELEMENTS OF HONESTY ARE IMPORTANT:

Confidential matters:

Companies are committed to safeguarding the confidentiality of their own and business partners' trade secrets as well as all other confidential business-related matters. Also, students shall have an obligation to secrecy regarding the company's business and customer relationships when doing cooperation with companies.

Cheating:

Cheating is unacceptable in Finland. For example, clocking your friend in or out at work or cheating on an exam can cause you serious problems such as being discharged from work or expulsion from school. If you get caught from cheating, it is really hard to get a permanent workplace later because your background is often checked before being recruited.

Plagiarism:

It is not allowed to use other people's text or ideas without referring to the original source. Therefore, follow carefully the guidelines of references of your UAS. At workplace, this situation may arise when you work in teams, write reports or give presentations.

Business conduct:

Giving gifts of high monetary value or bribery is not acceptable. Participation in an external event organized by a supplier or another business partner is acceptable, provided that there is a sound business reason for the participation. Many companies nowadays limit the value of hospitality accepted from a supplier. Lecturers at FUAS are not allowed to accept any gifts whatsoever from students.

REAL LIFE EXAMPLE FROM INTERNATIONAL ALUMNI:

During my studies I had a part time job at a Nokia shop, where I needed to sign a contract of confidentiality. At first I was thinking, that this is totally unnecessary, because I was not working directly with decision makers at Nokia. But later on I realized, that actually I was coming across with many situations that were confidential, such as seen and testing early phone prototypes.



Have the right aptitude and attitude

Cultures can be divided into “doing” and “being” cultures. In doing cultures status is earned (e.g. the work you do in your job). It is not merely a function of who you are (e.g. birth, age, and seniority).

In doing culture emphasis is placed on deadlines and schedules and tasks take precedence over personal relationships in most cases. People are supposed to have a personal opinion, which they are expected to verbalise. Great emphasis is put on people being productive.

In being cultures status is built into who a person is. It is automatic and therefore difficult to lose. Titles are important and should always be used in order to show appropriate respect for someone’s status. Harmony should be maintained and therefore direct confrontation or disagreement is to be avoided. Saving face is highly valued. Relationships often take precedence over tasks.

In Finland we have a “doing” culture. Therefore, it is expected that students and employees work independently, take care of assigned duties and have the courage to ask for advice or guidance when they are uncertain about something. It is important to show that you are active, motivated and willing to learn as your grade may depend on your activity. Precise and responsible attitude and proactivity is respected at work. Being active in your classes is also important and it may affect the assessment of your courses.

Not knowing something is not a reason to leave your work undone. Try to look for information by yourself and, if needed, ask for clarification. It’s not seen as losing your face.

Stating your opinion and giving development ideas in a polite way is respected. It does not matter if you are in a lower position than the person you are talking with or if your language skills are poor. However, remember that corporate cultures differ within Finland and around the world – be sensitive to the situation at hand and interpret the corporate culture with regard to opinions and development ideas.

REAL LIFE EXAMPLE FROM INTERNATIONAL ALUMNI:

In my current job I had the situation, that I was recruiting for an open position and one of the candidates was a former classmate of mine. From my experience I recognized that this person does not always have the right attitude towards work and thus I ended up recruiting another person instead. For that reason, I would recommend to always be active and to show your best side as you never know who you might meet as your future employer.

Remember, that all what you do will have an effect later on.



Appearance counts

Each workplace has its' own safety instructions also with regard to clothing. For example, in workplaces where employees must operate machines or prevent the spread of infections, a certain kind of clothing is required and body piercings and jewelry must be removed. Use personal protective equipment as defined in instructions and adhere to safe working practices during any laboratory / practical work.

It is strongly recommended that employees should not wear heavy makeup or a lot of perfume. Taking care of personal hygiene is very important. Strong odours can cause health problems for customers or colleagues if they suffer from asthma or an allergy. Visible piercings and tattoos do not give a very professional image.

Employees also wear rather subdued clothes (conservative clothing, everyday clothing). Hats and jackets must not be worn inside the building. Taking your hat off indoors is a way to show respect towards other people - this is a cultural norm in Finland. However, dress code variations are common in many Finnish companies. In other cultures dress codes can be very different.

When entering a job interview in Finland, find out how people in the organisation usually dress and aim to dress one level higher. Be carefully choosing what you wear, you will be saying to the employer, "I understand your culture. I belong and I fit in."

REAL LIFE EXAMPLE FROM INTERNATIONAL ALUMNI:

My personal experience is that the dressing code is not as strict as what I was used to before coming to Finland, at least in the non-service sector, as comfort and ergonomics at work are more valued than visual appearance. However, in the service sector your dressing code must be in line to what the regulations specifies.



Develop yourself and proceed in your career

An academic degree does not guarantee a high level position right away. In Finland, it is common to start from the bottom and get promotions as working years and work experience accumulates. Motivation to improve your expertise constantly through more and more responsible tasks is highly valued.

Any working experience during studies is valuable: project work, part-time jobs, summer jobs, work placement. Every time that you are changing the workplace try to find a bit challenging work than the previous one was. Work experience and networks are essential in finding employment after graduation.

REAL LIFE EXAMPLE FROM INTERNATIONAL ALUMNI:

Finding a job in Finland as an international student has its challenges. However, if you have the right mind and attitude, you can start with a basic level job and find your way up in the organization. When I started working in my current job, I was first offered a temporary contract for two and a half years. I knew, that this was a very unique opportunity, and therefore I have done my very best since I started. My efforts paid back after one year and a half already as I was offered a little promotion and a permanent contract even before my temporary contract had expired.



Learn Finnish

Even though most of the Finns speak English, most of the Finnish employers find it hard to employ people who can not speak Finnish. Thus, it's highly recommended that you start to learn professional Finnish in the early days of your studies. Almost every employer requires that you know at least some basic Finnish. For example, understanding the safety instructions and internal communication is essential.

One of the reasons why Finnish is so valuable in the job market is that Finnish customers expect service to be in Finnish language in Finland. Having even basic Finnish skills and trying to at least begin the conversation in Finnish can make a big difference. Ability to communicate in Finnish is also very helpful in everyday coffee break discussions with your colleagues. Generally, knowing a few words of the local language portrays interest and respect towards the local culture and the people.

If applying for a position which is advertised in Finnish, writing a CV in Finnish is highly recommended. It shows the applicant has some basic knowledge of the language and that he/she is willing to adapt in the Finnish world of work. It is though not allowed to misguide the employer with a Finnish CV, if you do not actually speak Finnish at all. In your CV, describe your language skills honestly and accurately.

REAL LIFE EXAMPLE FROM INTERNATIONAL ALUMNI:

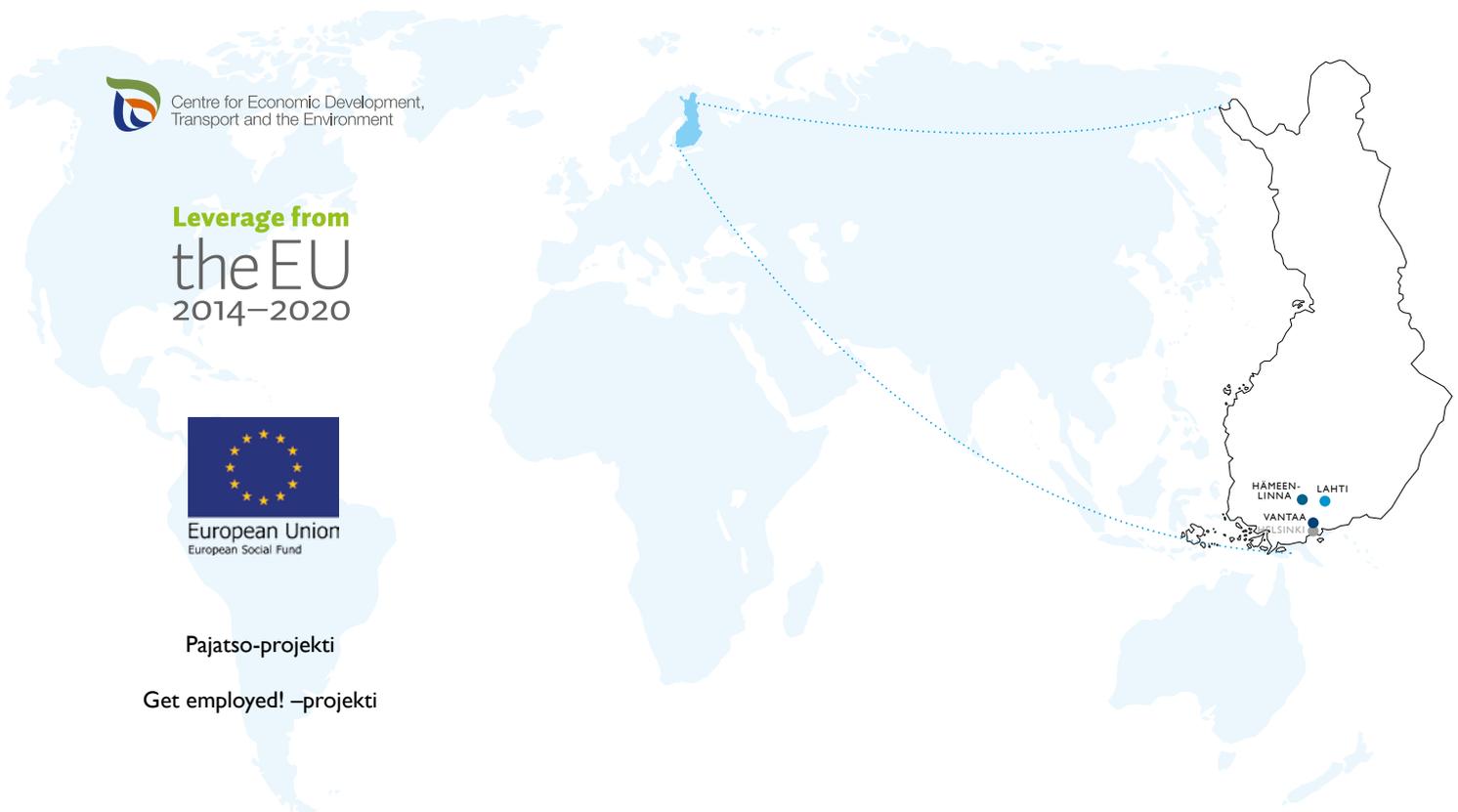
During my work placement, I was happy to notice, that I was able to participate in coffee break discussions in Finnish. This helped me to build a relationship with my colleagues.

However, I discovered, that I still need to practice my language skills to be able to participate in the meetings and to write for example memos in Finnish, which seems to be required even in international Finnish companies.

Why is it important to know about Finnish laws, regulations and cultural aspects? In Finland, rules are made to be observed and it is assumed that they are.

In various surveys, the Finnish employers point out that too often foreign employees have weak knowledge of the Finnish work culture. They emphasize that hiring and orientation to the workplace would be much easier if the prospective employees are familiar with the basics of Finnish work culture. Thus it is beneficial to demonstrate to the employer that at least you, a FUAS student with a Finnish higher education degree, have done your homework and can operate according to the rules and norms in the Finnish workplace.

Entering Finnish Professional Life is a guide that explains the principles of how to behave in different situations and hence act successfully and gain acceptance in your study and work environment in Finland at university, generally in Finland and in Finnish workplaces.



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