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**Indicators used:** Hoda Saastamoinen

Angela Dimisca

Heli Lehto

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**Other notations:** (-) Omitted word or part of word

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[brackets] Transcriber’s comment

**Comments:** --

Kuuntelet Laumapodia, jossa kysymme, miten rakennetaan kaikille toimiva yhteiskunta, ja jossa pääsemme näköalapaikalle tulevaisuuteen. Podcast on Humanistisen ammattikorkeakoulun tuottama 25-vuotisjuhlapodi, jossa 25 jakson verran pohditaan, mitä tarvitaan yhteisöllisyyden vahvistamiseksi, osallisuuden kasvattamiseksi, saavutettavamman yhteiskunnan tai kestävämmän maailman rakentamiseksi. Millaisia ratkaisuja pienellä korkeakoululla on pirullisiin ongelmiin? Laumapodi – näköalapaikalla tulevaisuuteen.

[Music]

Hoda Saastamoinen: In this episode, we will discuss how to enter the Finnish labour market successfully as a graduated international degree student. Finland is right now facing labour shortage in all fields. Attracting international talents is seen as the cure. Currently, 10 percent of our higher education degree students are coming from abroad. Now, the question is, how can we make our talented international students not to leave but to rather stay in Finland after they graduate? In the studio, I have here with me discussing about this interesting topic a dynamic trio, our international degree student Angela Dimisca, representing the employer side, development manager, Heli Lehto, and an expert in business and entrepreneurship Kaisa Välivehmas. Warmly welcome all. My name is Hoda Saastamoinen, I am education and work-based immigration specialist in Humak and I'll be hosting the discussion. Angela, you are studying outdoor and adventure education in Humak University of Applied Science. I think you are a great example of an international degree student, since you have succeeded in learning Finnish, making local friends, and worked already in several places. Now you're writing your thesis and planning to stay and work in Finland after you graduate. How have you managed to do all this and what is the key, in your opinion, in settling in a new country?

Angela Dimisca: Thank you, Hoda. In my opinion, settling in a new country, it's really important to connect with the local community. So, find the interest that you like and then find the right groups or places where to do that, and also, participate to the local events, try to get any chance to actually meet the people where you are living. And of course, get to know the culture in all the way possible.

Hoda: Great, sounds really like you found yourself many interesting people and communities. What has helped you to find and succeed in your search?

Angela: What helped me a lot, it was to be curious about the new place. Because when you move in another country, definitely you get the cultural shock and there are new customs, new things, new people. So, what helped me a lot was actually to meet people who were very welcoming and also who were open to share with me the surroundings or different things, to kind of introduce me into the Finnish culture.

Hoda: Kaisa, you teach business and entrepreneurship for higher education and coach and train employers in recruitment and entrepreneurship through your own company. You are one of the authors of the newly published *International Jobseeker’s Guide*. You worked previously in the employment, TE office, helping both employers and job seekers. So, it can be said that you have quite a good understanding of both sides. And in this sense, you are a bridge between the employers and the job seekers. What do you see is the biggest obstacle for Finnish employers in hiring international talents? Or in our case, graduated international degree students.

Kaisa Välivehmas: I think it's a lack of time and lack of information, more like. It means that the lack of information is that the employers maybe don't always think about the benefits to hire international talent, according to the business strategy and plan and the whole vision of the company or non-profit organisation or the organisation anyway. So I think it's that they don't think about the benefits of hiring international talent, and also, for the small employers, they don't maybe have their own HR and they don't have people to think about those things, the benefits. And also, time, many times the recruitment process is made in hurry, and then you don't think about that you make it in the easiest way and did the old way, and you don't think about how maybe you could modify the job descriptions in a new way, so that you can also have the international talent, even maybe they don't speak Finnish or they have not worked in a certain way, in a Finnish organisation way before.

Hoda: So there's a lack of kind of understanding of the real benefits.

Kaisa: Yeah, I think employers need help for that.

Hoda: Heli, you have a multicultural team that you lead in the Villa Elba youth centre in Kokkola. What kind of place is Villa Elba, first of all, and how has your workplace transformed throughout the years towards such a multicultural place?

Heli Lehto: Well, Villa Elba is a beautiful place on the seaside. And over 30 years’ time, we have been doing international youth work, and also some other things, but when discussing this topic today. I think this, that we have chosen international youth work, it has been the key to that that we are so open for international workers today. Because it means that we have been open for other cultures and we have been interested and curious about other cultures already then. It's kind of easier maybe that way because it has been in our policy and our strategies already then. But yes, did you ask also how we developed throughout the years?

Hoda: Yes, yes.

Heli: I think, of course, always when you start, everything is smaller and now it's bigger. And of course, it was not as easy in the beginning that it is today, to have all the stuff, everybody in the same boat of thinking in the same way about these things.

Hoda: Right, right. I really liked when you said about curiosity, definitely, I think that is needed. When I think of Kokkola as a place, I think of it, when I travel with train to up north to Oulu where I was born, in the middle of the way, it always stops in Kokkola, and I think of it as this little nice slumbering city up there. Well, we know that Finland as a whole country is currently facing skill shortage in all fields. Isn't it difficult to find skilled professionals in Kokkola?

Heli: I think it's in the same way than in all other this size cities in Finland, but I don't think Kokkola is so much slumbering that you can see it when you stop with the train, because Kokkola has always been a big harbour city. There is a lot of international things going on, actually all the time, and people are somehow connected in this international work, anyway. But yes, I think it's hard to find people to various jobs. The hardest part has been not only for us as a youth centre, but also we hear from other sides, that it is both cleaning and kitchen people, has been the thing that we are lacking for.

Hoda: Right, so you have somewhat difficulties in finding skilled professionals. What do you think is the mentality with the employers up there? Have they started to look for international talents who are already living in Finland, or from abroad?

Heli: Yes, absolutely. There are always, in companies, there are people who are very aware of this, that we don't have people enough in Kokkola and nearby cities, but maybe not in that scale that it should be. I think we are a little bit behind, and we are searching people and I think we are always a little bit in a hurry. We notice that, oh, now we should have a person here, and then there's this rush when hiring.

Hoda: It's quite nice that you say that your company is also, I think maybe your values are quite open since you said that you have already this international perspective in your focus what you do, so you're maybe in that sense more open in hiring also internationals. What kind of skills do international talents bring to the workplace? Heli, and maybe if Kaisa can also comment.

Heli: Yes, we were talking about values and this, and I think not only the task the international people is coming to fulfil, but also all the soft skills that person has is a valuable thing for us. And always, when we can have people from abroad, from different cultures, we are always learning, and not only getting the job done that she or he is coming to do. I think this is very important. And of course, if we get a really, really good person with contacts in their home countries and networks, so, usually we benefit a lot on different stages and different levels of our work in youth centre.

Hoda: I'm sure. Kaisa, go ahead.

Kaisa: Yes, I think it's showing the skills. So, I think that the skills what are from the international skills and the language skills and, yes, the cultural skills and different kind of ways to work. Also, understanding of the international cultural habits and the network abroad, maybe. Also the education what they have got from the other country and the international education, international job experience. And also, how they have their education Finland. It might be different to mix the education in Finland to maybe the previous education what they might have. So, they bring a totally new unique mix of the skills to the Finnish labour market, so it might be very innovative to have an international talent.

Hoda: Angela, what do you think about these ideas? Are you an interesting mix of new talents?

Angela: Well, that's the employer’s job to say. I think what's really important is, of course, to know yourself and to learn, and then of course, to see if you are a good match with the place where you want to work. Because I think it's really important that both sides know exactly what they are looking for, so then it's much easier to actually get the right person to the place. And definitely I think having different cultural background can be a big plus sometimes, as long as you are open to integrate and learn the new ways of doing and just combine the two of them, because I think it's really important to also respect the new working culture. Might be different or dissimilar with the one that you are used to, but also try to see what you can bring extra to what it is already. And of course, doing in a way that to integrate, or not that okay, I know better, we can do in this way. But, hey, let's see how we can do it this better all together because we actually want the same thing, to have maybe more innovation, new creative products or new programmes into outdoors and so on.

Hoda: So bringing maybe some different perspectives. Well, there are always pros and cons for things, right? What are some of the challenges and benefits of employing an international talent, Heli?

Heli: Well, we are working with the youth field and that is not in Finland very well-paid profession, so that is for us always… We would like to have really good professionals but our salaries are low, because our customers are also quite poor. So, we can't have so high expenses here. But of course, it depends from which country you're coming from, how the salary feels for you as an employee. So, that is the challenge, and challenge is also when you come to Kokkola, there is no local transport, so you need to have your own car or you need to have your own bicycle to take you from place A to B, and these kind of things. Just normal things in starting life in a new place. And of course, when you are a foreigner, it would be even harder. Those are the challenges I think we have met and try to of course help people with those things.

Hoda: In Finland, there are currently around 20,000 international degree students. That means that some 10 percent of our students are coming from other countries. That is a bit higher than the OECD average. Kaisa, what is the role of higher education institutions and how can we contribute in supporting the employment of foreign students?

Kaisa: It's a very big role. The higher education institutions can help student to understand the meaning of the studies from the first day when they start to study in the school. And to understand that it's more widely about the skills what they get. They get the substance skills, of course, understanding information about the subject area what they're studying, for example financials or technique or creative area in higher level. But also, to help students to understand that what kind of skills they get every day in the school. They work and study in the teams, they make projects, they are managing the projects, they are planning, they are organising and they have to plan the timetable and whatever. They are using and developing the same skills what they need in the working life. And that's very important to help students to understand that and finding words for those skills. And also, to respect and to be proud of the area what they are studying, and to be a half professional from the first day, and to be part of the professional group of that area, even when they are still students. Then they also can help students to connect the skills to the working life so that they courage the students to get a network for their employers, to get to explain how these skills are used in the labour market, what kind of employers needs these. And in a widely way to courage students to be proud of the area and courage to have a network, courage to be, that it is not only that you are in the school, you are all the time in the school or at school, and all the time, you know, inside the labour market. So it's not either or, it's both. And to be proud, and then ask references, ask recommendations from the teachers, and also, use teachers as a help in a widely way.

Hoda: Interesting, so sounds like both the students and the teachers need to be aware that, have this kind of mindset that what they are learning is for the working life and how to connect it to that.

Kaisa: Absolutely. And from the first day, so even you are the first-year student, it’s important to be proud of that. And also, I have noticed when I have guided people, students to make, for example, their CVs, many times they don't maybe so much describe about what they have done during the first fall, for example, in the CV. So, it's more like, they are waiting for that they have a degree and then they describe something. But it's more important to be aware of every single school day. If the employer would pay that fee for the worker, for to be one day in the education, it would be so expensive. So, to understand how great is every day and how must they learn every day and every week.

Hoda: So, really, not about just the degree, but describing all the different competences and skills that you gained. Excellent. Angela, tell us what kind of experiences you've already gained, which you think can be of a benefit in finding a job after you graduate?

Angela: During my studies, I had lots of practical trainings which connect me definitely with working life and future employers. Then also through my studies, I had many experiences that involved working experiences, like working with schools, doing activities for youth centres or being involved to facilitate a workshop for conferences, so there were lots of opportunities, actually, that helped us to expand our network. Also, to meet people and also to get the understanding that, yes, we are future professionals and this is also part of the studies. So, lots of practical things that involved also people who are working already in the field, so, that helps us to project who we want to be, what kind of future adventure educators, and also, how we can get there, what skills do we still need to work on, so we can work in the field. And definitely, I had the chance to do lots of volunteering through my studies and offer different services and skills that I gained before starting my studies, like photography or planning different things. It's really important to take any opportunity to use and develop your competencies.

Hoda: Would you say that in your studies in Humak, there was this awareness and this connection to the working life?

Angela: Definitely, yes, many times. Lots of homeworks or things that we needed to do for the studies were connected to the field. For example, for understanding better the youth field, we needed to connect with people that are actually working in youth sector or in this field, so we get a better understanding of how it actually looks in Finland and how we can be involved in the future and also during our studies.

Hoda: Let's discuss about what kind of steps international degree students could take in order to integrate. We know that learning Finnish language is perhaps one of the most important and most challenging things that an international student need to take on, because without a good knowledge of the local language, it is quite difficult to get employed. How have you, Angela, learned this very strange and difficult language? Please share your secret.

Angela: I think it's a very beautiful language. It takes some time to adapt to the sound of it or to the new ways that Finnish language brings, but it's a really beautiful way to connect with people. So, for me, the desire to be able to talk with different people was my main motivation to learn the language. And of course, anything can be learned. So, if there is a will, there is a way also.

Hoda: Tell us, what kind of places were you able to use the language and what kind of surroundings you were involved in?

Angela: I always lived in very small communities, like Nurmes, Iisalmi, then here I’m in Kuusamo at the moment. So, that meant for me that maybe not everyone was speaking English, so then I needed to find a way how to actually communicate with people, which was a huge advantage for me, because that means being exposed a lot to the language and being in the situation that you need to use it. Then, of course, definitely it helps you. So, through my volunteering to the scouts group, I could talk a lot with kids, for example, or visiting schools, that also gave me the chance to hear more the language. I have been also really lucky to live in a Finnish family, which helped me a lot to develop my language skills. I tried kind of always to find ways to speak the language and hear it more, and of course, reading books and so on. So, there are many ways that you can actually learn the language, and it's actually a fun process. Once you understand that, that gives you lots of new ways of also understanding the culture, then, I think the motivation comes itself. So, if we put the label that Finnish language is a hard language, then it will be very hard to actually get rid of that. But if you say, hey, this is the way how actually I can meet new people, or of course, getting more job opportunities, then it's really easy, in a way, to find how you are learning and then do it also with the language.

Hoda: I like the way you said that how you've been practising Finnish with kids. They say that it's one of the best ways to learn a new language, going to the kindergarten and speaking with the kids or in general, because the language is so kind of simple in that level.

Angela: And also, with the kids, even if you have the language barrier, you still find ways to communicate with them and they will explain and explain until you understand what they want to say.

Hoda: So you get a lot of this natural repetition that you need in learning a language, too.

Heli: We have also noticed the same thing about our international talents here, with the children's groups. Because children, they really like when adults can't do anything, if there is, they don't understand Finnish language or Swedish language, so they are so happy to help them and they feel so good when they are like I'm learning this adult person something. It’s really a good way of learning a different language, to do it with children.

Hoda: I hear many times, that for international students or foreign people, they say that many times, they start with Finnish language and then the Finnish people switch it very quickly into English because they want to practise English, they're so excited that there's a newcomer and they can practise their English language. Have you had these kind of situations, Angela, and how did you tackle them?

Angela: I had many situations, but it's just easy to say, hey, puhutaan suomea, and then people would switch and be nice, and yes, communicate with you also in Finnish, even though I do lots of mistakes sometimes, or maybe I don't understand the whole thing. But I think they are very understanding, the people, so then definitely, they will help you to practise the language.

Hoda: Sounds like you're very brave also and you don't fear to fail, in that sense, it's very important skill when you're learning a new language. Excellent command of Finnish language is often expected by most open job positions in Finland. This is also something that has been criticised. Heli, as a Finnish recruiter, what are your language demands when international talents apply to your company?

Heli: Well, this is absolutely and totally depending on what kind of work you are applying for. We have many different works, and for example, if you're working with our customers that come to nature school or camp schools, and they're coming from Finnish or Swedish speaking organisations or schools, then of course, yes, we would like to serve them in the language that they want to be served. But then, if we’re looking for a chef to the kitchen or maintenance people or cleaning persons, it's important that they understand one of the three languages that we are using every day, Finnish, Swedish, or English, so that we can give the instructions and communicate somehow, but it's totally up to the work position what is needed.

Hoda: You have many languages that you operate with. How do you communicate with all of these languages at your workplace?

Heli: Very well, we communicate very well. I think this is so… Also, when we are here on the coastline, and we are almost the last outpost of Swedish language in the coastal Finland, so, we are so used to use both Finnish and Swedish in our everyday life, so, just to put one more language like English, we are just so used that people speak different languages and we change languages, in the same table there can be, it's a mix, yes.

Hoda: Networks can play an important role in finding a suitable job. However, in general, international students do not have previous contacts in Finland. So, networking has to start from scratch for them. Kaisa, what is networking and what are the benefits of networking for foreign students?

Kaisa: It's very important, the network. If you think it from the work aspect, networks are, that you are connected, that you know and you're connected to the employers and to the people who have a connection to the work. Then you understand your own field, your own area, that how the work is done, what kind of employers there are in that area. It's important to develop the network from the beginning when you are in Finland, too. Work-wise it means that you create the social media, for example LinkedIn profile, and then you start to follow certain kind of employers or companies you connect. You try to find organisations and networks who have same interests than you have, and when you create your network, it's important that it's win-win, that maybe you can give and share information and ask and then you can answer and be also for help. But anyway to know and understand more. It's not about the numbers, how many connections you have, it's more that you have a network what you can use and you can be part of, and you feel better to be in Finland that you are some way inside, that you are not lonely. And then also the school is network, your colleagues, your other students, your teachers, everything is part of your network.

Hoda: How have you, Angela, made new contacts in Finland?

Angela: Through my studies I had many opportunities to do the practical training, so that meant that I had the chance to do internship in the field or even work. And then also, of course, throughout conferences, then students from the upper years. So, there are many ways, and of course, also through our teachers and try to kind of narrow down what kind of path do you want to choose and then it's easier to look for the right people. And then of course, following different events online or on LinkedIn, so, in that way.

Hoda: How about hobbies and voluntary work? What do you think about those, Angela?

Angela: I think they are also really important part, to integrate, also meet people, and expand your network. For me, it was also really helpful to have the belonging feeling, as Kaisa was saying, that you feel you are part of the community. So, while you are volunteering, you get to use your skills and then also have the sense that you are contributing and also doing something for the community, which helps you definitely to feel better about being in a new place.

Hoda: I believe outdoor and adventure education, your field is quite small and the circles must be also quite small. How do you feel, are you getting inside the circle, so to say?

Angela: That is a tough question. I definitely feel that I'm part of the field, because I get to understand better, for example, how the youth work works in Finland. Then of course, I have previous knowledge about all the international projects and working in an NGO in my own country. So then, here, I could just relate with the Finnish working field. I think also, meeting people or knowing that, hey, look, I have these skills from my previous experience but also the ones that I gained through my studies definitely help me to get into the circles. You know, if you feel like you are not into the circles, then you create your own circles, that you can actually get involved into the field because there are many ways to work. Even though it's a relatively small one, but it's quite large and important, I would say, in Finland, because nature is such an important part of the culture. Also, adventure and outdoor education, it expands quite largely, and also being a community educator, so there are many ways in which you can get involved.

Hoda: Have you had, Angela, any spontaneous job offers through knowing some people?

Angela: Definitely, yes. My first job was through a recommendation from a friend. She said, hey, I think you’ll like this place, have a look and then go for that one. So yeah, definitely, once you meet people and they know what you can do, then it's much easier to see if you are fit for that job position.

Hoda: So, your networks in Finland are starting to work for you, in that sense.

Angela: I can say that, yes. I think if you do a good job, no matter where you are, then that will be known, so you don't need to kind of… Of course, it's important to also promote yourself, but then your work can speak for itself.

Hoda: I think that's a good advice in general. Heli, let's talk about attitudes and prejudices. According to *Kotona Suomessa* research done by ELY centre, prejudices and even racist attitudes towards immigrants were found existing among many employers in Finland, especially, companies that have earlier experienced in hiring immigrants only some 62 percent thought that immigrant workers can be as competent as Finnish workers. On the other hand, companies where there wasn't any previous experience of hiring international talents saw internationals as less competent. What kind of attitude challenges or prejudices can employers face?

Heli: I'm sure there is a lot, still. I think one of the first one is the language barrier. People are afraid that they are not able to be communicating in their working place. Of course, cultural differences, how are they going to adapt, do they know how we are doing and are they okay, what kind of habits do they have. And of course, how good are they networking and socialising and these kind of things. And stereotypes, even if we think we are very open minded, I think if we are really clear and open to ourselves also, so everybody can find some stereotyped thinking. But I think those would be the challenges and things, and also, even if we are a harbour city, Kokkola, it's a very old agricultural area, and we don't have so many international people coming and living in our villages. So there is a lot of places and communities that don't meet international people from different cultures and that's very understandable that it can be frightening and you are a bit scared for the unknown. Just a natural thing, yeah.

Hoda: Well, how are new employers then, especially those with the immigrant background, introduced to the customs and working culture of your workplace?

Heli: In Villa Elba, we are so used to this, but of course, we need to get better, also. But we usually have the same kind of introduction that we have for everybody. Of course, the normal things that we have to go through. We should be working more on a mentorship thing, that a new employee would have their own named mentor. But still, we are a little bit working on this, and instead, we are taking the vol-, not the volunteer, we have so many volunteers, so I speak about them, but employee from abroad or from a different culture, we take them into a team. You're working in a team of international youth work, or you are working in an environmental education team, and the team is having their own system. They have their own meetings where everybody has their say, they have weekly meetings, and then with the bigger team, we have monthly meetings. Also, we are having an informal way of having our Facebook group for our crew where we put funny things to do together, like bingo on Fridays, please join. Just to take people into this every day, really easy things. And one of, I think it's also very nice way of sharing information, so that we are not only working together, but we are also giving something extra from ourselves as a team to the new employee, is that we have a folder with hobbies. I have put my own page there, hello, this is Heli, I like riding and I go to ice hockey games. And when a new employee comes, you can check this through and find is there somebody who likes the same kind of things that I do. We call this Activity Tinder.

Hoda: I like that, so kind of, for the newcomer, it's not only the job that is new, but it's the whole culture and the surrounding and what to do outside your work and how to find places and people there.

Heli: Yes, I think this is really, really important that you get into the team and you feel involved. And also, always when I, as an employer, hear that one of our newcomers has found a community inside Kokkola, for example, a football team or a choir or something, yes, now, this is going to be okay. Because then I know it's not only the work that is keeping him or her here. It is so, so important that you feel connected to the local community and you feel part of it.

Hoda: Yes, we all need roots, and roots are spread. How would you encourage other employers who are considering employing international talents but haven't done so yet?

Heli: I would say that do it. Be brave. We have been doing it 30 years, and if we didn't find that successful, we have had many opportunities to stop it already for many years. But we are not doing it, we are doing more and more, and we want to enlarge this. We want to be one step ahead what is coming, so, it's really important that we get all the cultures we just can get into our organisation, because we are learning so much.

Hoda: Kaisa, what would you like to say?

Kaisa: I think it's important to help employers to think a new way the recruitment, in all way. I mean that the thing that what jobs are so, that you really need to have an excellent or perfect, for example, Finnish or Swedish skill. And can you modify the job descriptions in a new way, so that we benefit from the international skills. And also, to be curious and think, as an employer, and maybe, once make the job description also in English or in other language, and then invite for the interview also international talents. And maybe hire, for example, for the small project, for the part time job, for something. Be curious and not only think that it's about the Finnish skills or, just think it as a chance, not as you have to do something.

Hoda: Well, in the end of the day, the question for international students is that whether they are motivated to stay in Finland or leave. Angela, what kind of things motivate you to stay in Finland?

Angela: What motivated me the most is that I could recognise my life values in the culture that I got to meet. For me, I saw the way of how people live here something that is within myself. It was a very intrinsic motivation for me. And definitely, because I'm a nature lover, for me, just being in the forest, having the forest and access to the surroundings so easy, really played an important role in getting me staying here.

Hoda: I think that was really nicely described. Because we all want to be a part of a community, we all need friends, we need roots, our friends, family, the place where we live, and our job, they all create together these kind of spaces for being part of a community. I think here is something to keep in mind when we talk about integration and how to attract and keep also international talents, because it is really people, in the end of the day, and these human contacts and also our capacity to support in creating these kind of environments and communities which include, and not to exclude. And this will benefit us all in the end, whether we are Finnish or internationals or so. Thank you very much, Angela, Heli, and Kaisa for this wonderful discussion. As final words, could you, Angela, share some tips for other international students who try to integrate, and they're maybe a little bit struggling still? I mean, how to settle in and then find a job.

Angela: The most important tip, I think, is just connect to the local community in any ways you can. Just joining a reading club or football team, anything that brings you joy, and then also use any opportunity during your studies to get to know your field or future employers and learn and use these opportunities to develop yourself and also integrate into the new country.

Hoda: Thank you.

[Music.]

Laumapodi – näköalapaikalla tulevaisuuteen.