Foreign-born Teachers' Experiences of Adaptation to Higher Education and Finnish Society[1]

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on foreign-born teaching staff in higher education institutions and their experiences of cultural learning, as well as their psychological and sociocultural adaptation to their workplaces and to the Finnish society. Among highly skilled migrants, the area of foreign-born teaching staff in higher education is under-researched. This study is based on a qualitative thematic analysis of interviews of 13 foreign-born teachers. The findings showed that in the adaptation process, the place of living was particularly significant for the informants. Support from social and professional communities, as well as the informants' own positive attitudes, fostered adaptation. Fluency in the local language promoted the informants' social and professional adaptation and career development in higher education.

KEYWORDS

Finland / foreign-born teacher / higher education / psychological adaptation / sociocultural adaptation / sociocultural learning / work environment / workplace

Introduction

While the internationalization of higher education (HE) has been a widely examined topic both internationally and in the Nordic countries in the last decades, there has been less research on the composition and career paths of foreign-born staff (Khattab & Fenton 2015; Pietilä et al. 2021; Silander & Pietilä 2023) and their integration in higher education institutions (HEIs, Lee 2021). In the Nordic countries, the share of foreign-born staff HE increased in the 2010s particularly in Sweden and in Norway at the lower career levels, but the increase was modest at the higher levels, such as in professorships (Pietilä et al. 2021). The results of the study by Pietilä et al. (2021) showed that foreign-born women were underrepresented in the staff of Finnish HEIs, especially at higher positions. In Norway, Norwegian-born researchers with immigrant parents were marginalized in the HE (Steine 2023).

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Prior studies on foreign-born staff in HEIs have highlighted the importance of internalizing local teaching practices and norms (Lee 2021), feelings of marginalization from administrative positions (Larbi & Ashraf 2020), and the lack of recognition for teaching and work experience gained abroad (Bilecen & Van Mol 2017). Moreover, international staff was less satisfied than host country's staff with spousal employment opportunities and in general to their job (Kim et al. 2012). While Brotherhood and Spencer Patterson (2024) revealed the importance of on-campus support to overall integration to the host society, there is the need for sensitivity in cultural adaptation support so that it is not perceived as a threat (Pherali 2011). Non-work related factors often supported foreign-born staff's decision to remain in their current institutions despite having experienced challenges in adjusting to local organizational cultures (Chen & Chen 2023). The acculturation of foreign-born academic staff is often a slow, ongoing process, and they need to continuously adjust their emotions in challenging situations in the new cultural contexts (Antoniadou & Quinlan 2018). Moreover, everyday matters and cultural differences outside work environments affect the integration of foreign-born staff and their ability to work (Antoniadou & Quinlan 2018).

In the literature on internationalization in HE, there is considerably less research on staff members with migrant backgrounds than on international students (Tight 2021) and more studies on foreign-born researchers (e.g., Bilecen & Van Mol 2017; Greek & Jonsmoen 2021; Khattab & Fenton 2015) than teaching staff with similar histories. As the experiences of foreign-born teaching staff (FBT) may have similarities with those of international students and researchers, we introduce some results regarding these other groups. Language barriers often complicate interactions between foreign-born scholars and natives and hamper foreign-born researchers' access to work-related information (Greek & Jonsmoen 2021). Concerning migrant researchers, transnational social contacts can foster their career development and integration into their new host societies (Fernando & Cohen 2016). Regarding international students, social support from local friends often promotes sociocultural and psychological adaptation (Ng et al. 2017).

While earlier studies have showed underrepresentation of both foreign-born staff and those born to foreign-born parents in the Nordic HEIs (Pietilä et al. 2021; Silander & Pietilä 2023; Steine 2023), the reasons behind this remain to be examined. To our knowledge, there has been few research examining specifically integration of foreign-born HE teaching staff in the Nordic countries. We focus particularly on the factors affecting the adaptation experiences of FBTs in their work environments in Finnish universities of applied sciences (UASes) and in the Finnish society.

The foreign-born population in Finland amounts to 11% of the overall population (Statistics Finland 2025). Although immigration has increased in recent years, there is still a need to further accelerate it due to Finland's aging population and low fertility rate (Alho et al. 2023). In Finland, the largest groups of immigrants are from the former Soviet Union and Russia (125,000), Estonia (52,000), Iraq (30,000), and Somalia (27,000) (Statistics Finland 2025). The key reasons for immigration to Finland are work-related and family ties (Sutela & Larja 2015).

UASes, along with research-oriented universities, form a part of the Finnish HE system (Ministry of Education and Culture 2024). The 22 Finnish UASes are publicly funded institutions which offer tuition-free education for local and EU/EEA citizens, while tuition fees have been required from non-EEA citizens since 2017 (Ministry of Education and Culture 2024). The Finnish UASes provide working life oriented HE

(Law on UASes 2014). The majority of students in UAS study at Bachelor level: 84 % of them in Finnish programs, 12% in English-language, and 4% in Swedish-language Bachelor programs (Education Statistics Finland 2023). The working cultures in the Finnish UASes are strongly oriented toward teaching and less on other activities (Salomaa & Caputo 2021). Although research has been a legislative requirement since 2003, UASes have focused on fostering contacts with local stakeholders and supporting regional development and innovation activities (Friman et al. 2022; Melin et al. 2015).

Concerning teaching staff in Finnish UASes, principal lecturers are required to hold either a licentiate or a doctoral degree and lecturers a Master's degree, and both need at least 3 years of work experience (Government Decree on UASes 2014). According to the survey targeted to staff members of Finnish HEIs, those belonging to ethnic minorities in UASes reported having more temporary contracts (36%) than ethnic Finns (23%) and considered themselves to be more vulnerable to discrimination than the majority (Jousilahti et al. 2022). There is no exact statistical information on the share of foreign-born staff in Finnish UASes: the information on nationality is missing from 8% of all staff members; yet approx. 90% of staff have Finnish nationality (Education Statistics Finland 2023). Moreover, a part of those having Finnish nationality may have obtained it after immigration to Finland. In the Finnish HE context, there has been prior research on, for example, UAS teaching staff's self-assessed cultural intelligence (Laitinen et al. 2015), the intercultural expertise of polytechnic teachers (Lasonen 2010), and the supervisor–student relationship in international master's degree programs (Filippou et al. 2017). According to our understanding, our study is the first to focus on the integration of FBT in Finnish UASes.

The purpose of this research was to examine foreign-born UAS teachers' psychological and sociocultural experiences of adaptation to Finland and to their HE working environment. Answers were sought to the following research questions: (1) How have FBT experienced adaptation to their new working and living environments? (2) What factors facilitate or hinder their psychological and sociocultural adaptation?

Exploring immigrants' adaptation processes

In the adaptation of immigrants, psychological and sociocultural adaptation are often distinguished (Ward et al. 2001). Psychological adaptation refers, among other things, to personal coping with conceptual and emotional challenges related to adaptation (Kuo 2014). Sociocultural adaptation encompasses social and cultural processes such as adopting the host culture's customs and practices, maintaining positive relationships with others, and dealing with everyday tasks in the host society (Frankenberg et al. 2013). Various adaptation outcomes, both psychological and sociocultural, are often interconnected (Demes & Geeraert 2014; Masgoret & Ward 2006; Ward 1996; Ward & Chang 1997). Ward et al. (2001) argued that despite psychological adaptation being linked to personality, life changes, and social support, sociocultural adaptation is influenced by individuals' expectations and perceived cultural distances. Personality traits such as extraversion, agreeableness, and conscientiousness have been perceived to support sociocultural adaptation (Wilson et al. 2013).

The key factors in immigrants' psychological and sociocultural adaption are length of residence in the host society, legal immigration status, and perceived discrimination

(Ward et al. 2001; Wilson et al. 2013; Zlobina et al. 2006). To comprehend the adaptation experiences of newly arrived immigrants, it is useful to attain information on their reasons for leaving, professional backgrounds, and predeparture experiences, for example, in education (Gibson 2001). Premigration experiences may affect both the psychological and sociocultural adaptation processes of migrants (Tabor & Milfont 2011). Post-migratory difficulties in re-establishment of daily routines, learning a new language or finding a job, as well as the ways in which the host community receives individuals, can cause psychological suffering (Brunnet et al. 2022; Tabor & Milfont 2011).

Prior research has often portrayed cultures as being separate and adaptation as having specific stages that migrants go through. For example, Sue and Sue (1990) formulated a five-step framework of adaptation from the conformity stage, when newcomers admire the dominant culture higher than their own culture, to the integrative awareness stage, when migrants understand that all cultures have acceptable and unacceptable practices. It is often stated that cultural distance plays a role in an individual's ability to adapt to a new host culture; the more similar a culture is between their country of origin and the host country, the easier it is for a newcomer to adapt (e.g., Masgoret & Ward 2006; Tabor & Milfont 2011; Wilson et al. 2013). However, this study adopts a nonessentialist understanding of cultures. Cultures are not unified, monolithic entities in hybrid societies but rather are interpreted and renegotiated over time (Panjwani 2016; Virkama 2010). Moreover, cultures can be described as heterogeneous, being in interaction with others, and with blurred boundaries (Nathan 2015). This approach to culture is in contrast with the essentialist view that all members of a cultural group are perceived to share the same culture and that the boundaries between cultures are clear (e.g., Hofstede 1991).

Sociocultural adaptation refers to immigrants' efficacy in their culture learning process when they adapt to the new host culture (Bierwiaczonek & Waldzus 2016). Learning culture-specific knowledge and skills in a new context is essential for successful sociocultural adaptation (Berry 2006). According to Ward et al. (2001), 'culture learning is the process whereby sojourners acquire culturally relevant social knowledge and skills in order to survive and thrive in their new society' (p. 51). Language proficiency and communication competence are key factors in immigrants' sociocultural adaptation (Masgoret & Ward 2006). Learning the host language is important for communication in the workplace (Behtoui & Leivestad 2019) and socializing with colleagues in informal interaction (Greek & Jonsmoen 2021). The host language gives access to culture, networks, and resources, such as job opportunities (Yağmur & Van de Vijver 2012) and using social media, which positively affect acculturation (Kizgin et al. 2018). Foreign-born employees in HE often experience exclusion due to the language barrier in their workplaces (Maximova-Mentzoni & Egeland 2019). A lack of working language proficiency and the inability to master sociocultural codes (Aure 2013) foster migrants' feelings of social marginalization (Van Riemsdijk et al. 2016).

Sociocultural learning theories, particularly the situated learning approach (e.g., Säljö 2009), underline how people—both migrants and non-migrants—adopt new practices and conceptions through engagement in, for example, work communities (e.g., Alenius 2016; Hughes et al. 2007). From a sociocultural perspective (Korhonen 2010), culture is seen as a shared meaning system and, in its collective nature, refers to a common language, symbols, and codes that construct the thinking and actions of community members. Migrants' adaptation as a sociocultural learning process arises

through their social interactions and experiences in various social groups in the host society. Participation in the daily activities of work communities enables individuals to learn tacit knowledge, and engagement in these communities also affects their identity construction (Aure 2013; Contu & Willmott 2003). Local 'knowing' is obtained by engaging in situated social practices (e.g., the practices of a work team), and broader 'knowledgeability' is obtained through a person's relations with a multiplicity of social practices (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner 2015). In other words, a migrant cannot directly participate in 'the culture of the host country'; instead, new cultural practices can be observed, analyzed, and internalized through participation in various social groups. Moreover, migrants can act as transnational brokers by conveying work-related ideas and practices across national borders (Alenius 2016).

Concerning immigrants' adaptation to host societies, leisure environments such as urban parks and forests support both sociocultural and psychological adaptation: the former by providing opportunity to observe local traditions and practices and the latter by improving immigrants' psychological well-being (Stodolska et al. 2017). In the area of psychology, the attachment theory created by Bowlby (1982) stresses the various forms of behavior that a person engages in throughout the life cycle (especially in emergencies) to maintain or obtain the desired proximity—thus, the inner need to be physically and emotionally close to trusted others who are in times of hardship the source of support (Sochos & Diniz 2012). In the case of immigrant adaptation and attachment, the disruption of earlier interpersonal relationships occurs when one moves to another country. When immigrants experience social isolation or difficulties understanding the local culture, the secure attachment style gives them protection from psychological distress (Sochos & Diniz 2012). Moreover, in connection with negative situations in the host culture, Hong et al. (2013) found that protection against feelings of offense and discrimination arose from the security of one's own native culture.

Migrants' emotional attachment to their city of residence and, more broadly, to their living environment fosters their social integration (Toruńczyk-Ruiz & Brunarska 2020). Hidalgo and Hernandez (2001) defined place attachment as 'an affective bond or link between people and specific places' (p. 274), and their study of non-migrants revealed that social attachment to one's house and to the city were more significant than one's bond to the neighborhood. Leisure environments, such as urban parks and forests, supported both sociocultural and psychological adaptation of immigrants and improved their mental well-being (Stodolska et al. 2017).

Migrants' everyday encounters with host nationals and, more broadly, national politics can shape their feelings of belonging in culturally diverse societies (Huttunen et al. 2005). Berry and Hou (2016) stressed that such multicultural policies of the host country, which foster engagement with both the new society and the heritage society, support immigrants' well-being. In sum, the political orientation (Yağmur & Van de Vijver 2012) and attitudinal climate in the host society are important factors that may either promote or hinder the adaptation of migrants.

While so far only a few studies have examined foreign-born HE staff member's adaptation broadly, off-campus (Brotherhood & Spencer Patterson 2024), this study aims to fill in this gap by examining FBTs' adaptation not only at work but also more widely in the Finnish society. In addition, earlier research on foreign-born staff in HE has underlined the importance of non-work related factors for their adaptation (Antoniadou & Quinlan 2018) and the decision to stay at their current workplaces (Chen & Chen

2023). Consequently, it is important to explore various factors affecting FBTs' psychological and sociocultural adaptation.

Data and methods

Methodologically, research can be considered phenomenological in nature, focusing on the study of participants' lived experiences (Groenewald 2004). However, we have also included an interpretative level to aid in understanding authentic experiences, where efforts have been made to structure adaptation experiences in relation to the psychological or sociocultural nature of these experiences. In this case, it was considered to provide the necessary conceptual interpretation for the nature of experiences. This took the analysis toward interpretative phenomenological analysis direction. Moreover, it introduced a level of abductive reasoning in addition to inductive reasoning in the analysis of experiences (Lipscomb 2012).

The data is related to a longer-term study initiated by the first author on the professional development of foreign-born UAS teachers. Originally, the first author contacted all Finnish UASes by e-mail sending the research permit application, a short summary of the research and the participant's research request. Those who were born abroad, had moved to Finland from another country, worked in a teaching position in a Finnish UAS, and were willing to participate in the study were selected as informants. Regarding the second phase of the study, the informants were contacted by e-mail and asked whether they would be willing to continue their participation in this follow-up study. The messages included, in addition to the aim and nature of the study, information on the languages that could be used in the narrative interviews (English/Finnish), and the ethical perspectives and guidelines of the study, such as informed consent.

The data was collected in a data-driven manner from foreign-born UAS teachers about their experiences related to their psychological and sociocultural experiences of adaptation to the Finnish society and to their work in the UAS context. To reach an authentic first-person perspective of adaptation experiences, we applied narrative interviewing as a data-driven methodological solution (Jovchelovitch & Bauer 2000) to gain a comprehensive overview of the interviewees' situation and experiences.

Narrative interviews (Jovchelovitch & Bauer 2000) were conducted by the first author, and the interviewees were prompted to narrate their stories relatively freely. Opening questions were employed, such as, 'Looking back on your life, could you describe your experience of moving to Finland?' The subsequent interview questions focused on the informants' experiences. In addition, the informants' drawings were discussed in relation to their migratory and integration paths. The face-to-face interviews were carried out in the informants' homes, workplaces, or company premises. All interviews were tape-recorded after verbal consent from the interviewees and transcribed. The average duration of each interview was around 1 hour. Two interviews were conducted in Finnish. The first author who conducted the interviews is a Finn, a middle-aged female, who had earlier worked at a UAS in an administrative position, but who did not work anymore at the UAS at the time of the interviews. As the interviewer was not a colleague of any of the informants, they had opportunities to freely explain their experiences.

Besides interviews and earlier background data, the memory protocol data was used (60 pages in total) written down straight after each interview (Jovchelovitch & Bauer 2000) and informants' voluntary drawings about their adaptation paths and significant incidents. Voluntary drawings were used for the warm-up phase of the interview in order to relax and orient the interviewee for the interview. In addition, memory protocol data was used to support the first author's memory in making data more familiar for analysis phase. This part of the material was used as additional material to assist the analysis. The background information on the informants was also collected (e.g., gender, education, teaching years in the country of origin and in Finland, and nationality).

Table 1 Background information on the informants

Informant	Gender	Age	Teaching years in Finland	Teaching years before Finland	Education
1	Female	45	3.5	0	Master's degree
2	Female	46	10	10	Master's degree
3	Female	46	15	0	Master's degree
4	Male	40	14	1	Master's degree
5	Female	33	10	0	Master's degree
6	Female	46	10	5	Master's degree
7	Male	29	2	0	Master's degree
8	Male	51	20	0,5	Master's degree
9	Female	46	17	0	Master's degree
10	Male	66	34	9	Master's degree
11	Female	54	7	7	Master's degree
12	Male	50	22	3	PhD
13	Female	57	7	12	Master's degree

A total of 13 FBTs agreed to participate in the research (see Table 1). The group of informants included eight women and five men. They represented foreign-born persons originally from different continents—namely, Africa, America, Asia, and Europe. The reasons for moving to Finland varied from family-, study-, and work-related reasons to pursuing an interesting life in a new country. A part of the informants had married a Finn, and one informant had moved to Finland due to marriage with a spouse from the country of origin. Family reasons also related to emphasizing family's interest to rise and educate children in Finland. Some informants migrated due to work either in UAS or in another workplace or wanting to deepen own's professional development. One of the informants had moved to Finland due to studies in UAS. Ten of the interviewees had kept their original citizenship, two had dual citizenship (country of origin and Finnish), and one had only Finnish citizenship. The years lived in Finland ranged from 8 to 34.

The data revealed heterogeneity in the informants' educational paths in HE. For example, some of the informants had obtained bachelor's degrees in Finland and master's degrees abroad, some had obtained both bachelor's and master's degrees in Finland, and some had obtained only master's degrees in Finland. The informants' fields

of teaching included business, administration and law, engineering, manufacturing and construction, health and welfare, services and social sciences, journalism, and information. Additionally, the heterogeneity of the interviewees was emphasized in terms of years of teaching (see Table 1). Before moving to Finland, the teaching years varied revealing that some of the interviewees had no teaching experience, while others had up to 12 years of teaching experience. Furthermore, teaching years in Finland ranged from 2 to 34. In addition, 12 interviewees had a permanent employment contract and one had a part-time contract.

The main aim of the analysis was to identify themes and meanings related to adaptation experiences, how the psychological or sociocultural perspectives are reflected in the experiences, and further to identify features within the themes that facilitate or hinder adaptation. We applied a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke 2006; also Riessman 2007) to the data on FBT teachers' adaptation experiences, utilizing both inductive and abductive analysis phases. The thematic analysis of the data was conducted in a data-driven inductive manner based on the contents of the interview narratives (see Riessman 2007). The complementary and conceptual interpretative phase of the analysis also introduced abductive reasoning into the analysis (Lipscomb 2012), which provided the necessary complementary interpretation for the results and their connection to the concepts and perspectives presented in the theoretical part.

Thus, the main themes, sub-themes, and meaning contents were generated, revealing relevant responses from the data in relation to the research questions. The overall thematic analysis of the data included five stages, following Castleberry and Nolen (2018): (1) compiling (transcribing interviews to become familiar with the data); (2) disassembling (creating meaningful groupings through coding); (3) reassembling (gathering data into themes); (4) interpreting (making analytical conclusions from the data with the theories and concepts); and (5) concluding (gathering interpretations from the thematic constellations). The inductive phases 1–3 of the thematic interpretation were conducted by the first author and focused particularly on the idiographic and specific perspectives of participants' experiences, where the researcher's own pre-understanding was more consciously set aside, and engagement with the authentic descriptions and experiences presented by the participants was essential (see Hopkins et al. 2017). The interpretative, abductive phases 4–5 of the thematic analysis were compiled by the article's author group, aiming to construct a theoretical-conceptual overview of adaptation experiences and to elevate the interpretation to a general and reflexive level (Hopkins et al. 2017). These phases were primarily guided by the researchers' identification of connections between participants' experiences and chosen theoretical foundations. The Atlas.ti program was used in the data processing to support the systematic analysis of the data.

Findings

In general, the informants explained having adapted quite well to their new working and living environments, although they had also experienced challenges in adaptation. The main themes arising from the interview accounts were *language*, *place and environment*, and *social support* (see Table 2).

Table 2 Main themes, subthemes, and connected meaning contents

Language	Place and environment	Social support
Impact of language on relationships - Increase in social contacts - Increase in self-confidence and communication	Experienced similarities to the country of origin - Lakes - Nature - Forests - Suitable city size	Socially related - Family (spouses, in-laws) - Friends - Neighbors
Change in own cultural communication style - Negative reaction from family in the country of origin - Increased use of Finnish language	Experiences intertwined with place and environment - Pace of life - Safety - Fairness	Work-related - Colleagues - Teams - Superiors - Students
Impact of attitude and personality - Desire to learn - Personality traits - Making a conscious choice to adapt	Voluntary, personal choices - Choice of where to belong - Home ownership	Professionally related - Collaboration with colleagues - Work atmosphere - Tolerance at work community
		Attitude and experienced trust - Trust by the employer - Personal choice

Table 2 summarizes the three main themes identified in the data, the related sub-themes, and their meaning contents. The identified main themes and sub-themes have been formed by combining psychological and sociocultural adaptation perspectives in the interpretation of the data, as these two aspects have often been intertwined in various ways in the adaptation experiences described by the interviewees. The sub-themes and their meaning contents provide a deeper understanding of the nature of the interviewees' experiences.

The local language as a key to smooth adaptation

The desire to learn the language of the host country by taking language courses, reading newspapers, and speaking the language was considered important for the smooth adaptation of some informants. They described having a flexible attitude, seeing moving as an exciting experience and providing many possibilities.

> I'm very content here. I don't speak perfect Finnish, but I manage, and I can read a newspaper. I've been listening to the TV. I don't have problems that way. (Interview 11, female)

The impact of language on relationships highlights the interconnectedness of sociocultural and psychological adaptation. One of the interviewees stressed that inability to speak Finnish would have caused difficulties in communicating with family members

and relatives, and through Finnish, informant was more self-reliant and able to socialize, for example, with in-laws. Moreover, as one interviewee emphasized, it was important to hear encouragement when speaking Finnish, although it was not perfect. Learning the local language strengthened the social contacts of the informants, especially with native Finns in their inner circle, and fostered their sociocultural adaptation by providing opportunities to learn more about the local practices and norms. Regarding the psychological adaptation process, the informants stressed the importance of positive attitude, desire to learn, and personality traits, which supported adopting the local language.

The informants' accounts revealed the importance of fluency in the local language for social interaction and employment (also OECD 2018). Especially in assisting integration to local communities and familiarizing with the culture of the host country, learning the Finnish language was significant for the interviewees, as the following quotation shows:

> When you learn the language, you also learn the culture—why people behave the way they do and why people speak the way they do. (Interview 6, female)

> For example, they wouldn't get into the Finnish language and kind of live a constant life of, "hey, speak to me in English" or "hey, I'm a stranger; I'm something." . . . I just need to be normally involved. (Interview 8, male)

The latter extract shows an example of 'role distancing' (Alho & Sippola 2019), where the interviewee aims to distance himself from other migrants who do not want to learn Finnish and thus, in the informant's view, do not want to fully integrate into the Finnish society.

Especially at the beginning, if the person only speaks English, access to information about the organization, such as at meetings, may be hampered by language barriers. In addition, these newcomers may face difficulties in participating in everyday encounters and discussions at workplaces due to their inability to understand the local language. It is worth noting that through social interaction, informants noticed a change in their own cultural communication style. However, one informant expressed that when they communicated very directly, as Finns normally did, their Finnish colleagues were shocked, having expected them to follow the communication patterns of their ethnic group. According to an informant, Finns may expect FBT not to contribute the same amount at a meeting and to have a quiet and reserved communication style. Moreover, as one interviewee described, FBTs are sometimes seen only as language experts and not teachers of certain disciplines.

Because the majority of informants had been in Finland for more than a decade, their integration experiences were often connected to the period when there was a relatively small number of immigrants in Finland. They had to often learn the Finnish language independently because there was no language training for the immigrants. One interviewee explained that social life was hard to establish at the beginning due to a lack of fluency in the Finnish language, although she was willing to learn and socialize. The following quotation reveals the situation:

> I didn't speak any other languages, and I didn't know how to learn another language, so the first thing that we tried to do was find a Finnish course for me. . . . There were no courses available for me. (Interview 11, female)

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However, regarding language learning, the informants had various experiences. For example, one of the interviewees already spoke the Finnish language at the time of moving to Finland. The informant's fluency in Finnish was due to prior seasonal work experience and Finnish language studies in Finland through earlier summer work and study. Thus, the informant had established a social network in Finland before moving there permanently.

Adapting to the Finnish culture brought conflicting feelings to some interviewees, especially regarding their encounters with family members in their country of origin. This was due to the interviewees' communication styles having changed through embracing the Finnish culture which caused feelings of alienation from the interviewees' families in their countries of origin. This was felt contradictory, as support for living in the new country came both from the relatives in the countries of origin and the families in Finland. However, this finding emphasizes the ways in which the communicative changes in people's lives are associated with immigration and language. As Helliwell et al. (2018) point out, migrants' decision to move affects not only themselves but also people in the host societies and countries of origin.

> I get confused sometimes. . . . Family members struggle to understand me sometimes because I tend to be too direct in their eyes, or I tend to be quite quiet in a way. (Interview 13, female)

Interestingly, the importance of silence in the Finnish communication style was presented in the interviews as factual. According to Olbertz-Siitonen and Siitonen (2015), the silence of Finns is without empirical proof and an academic myth which has influenced general discussion.

Importance of the place and environment

Most participants emphasized the importance of the place for their adaptation. Successful adaptation grew from being able to choose a place where to stay, and similarity in environment to the country of origin. Informants stressed, for example, that the international or Finnish atmosphere of their city or its suitable size for social networking facilitated their adaptation. The informants emphasized the nature, safety, and slow pace of life in their place of residence. In addition, the informants described that there was a certain fairness in Finland that guaranteed opportunities for all.

> I'm a very positive person, and now the green nature helps me to be more positive even and more optimistic about things. . . . Everything's how you make it yourself, and I have the support of all the people I know here. (Interview 3, female)

> I find that perhaps my attitude made it easier to me. . . . If I look at other people who manage less well or something, maybe they can't let go of the place they come from. I get on with people. (Interview 8, male)

Psychological adaptation emerged in relation to *place and environment*. Home ownership was a particularly predictor of positive psychological adaptation. In addition,

some of the interviewees reflected that adaptation was a matter of choosing where one belonged. One's voluntary, personal choices had a positive impact on the adaptation process. However, the ways in which the informants stressed their own positive attitudes toward adaptation could be connected to their willingness to distance themselves from 'other immigrants' who are portrayed as 'non-adapting'. Similarly, Alho and Sippola (2019) showed the ways in which Estonian migrants residing in Finland aimed to distance themselves from other migrants with undesirable attributes.

Only some of the informants had experienced discrimination. This was often related to colleagues' unwillingness to assist them. One interviewee stressed that Finns sometimes assumed that foreigners could not understand Finnish at all. Thus, the Finns did not understand that the rudeness they expressed was actually understood by a foreigner. The informants also explained about discrimination experienced by other foreign-born persons in Finland. As the majority of the informants were white, they might have been privileged in terms of their racial background. Discrimination faced by others or by themselves did not usually affect informants' adaptation, which was perceived to be mostly positive in nature. Only one interviewee viewed discrimination as an obstacle to adaptation. Despite these negative experiences, the informant stressed that it was primarily her duty to adapt to the new environment.

> It's your responsibility as a non-Finn to integrate into society. It's not Finnish society that needs to work at integrating you. (Interview 11, female)

> At that time, I thought to myself, if I'm gonna stay here, I have to change my attitude to one that I want to be here—that I wanna take root. (Interview 4, male)

Support from social and work-related communities

The informants' accounts revealed that social support from spouses, family members, neighbors, students, and colleagues was significant for their sociocultural adaptation. Some stressed the importance of social contacts with neighbors: for example, childcare assistance, invitations to parties, and close connections between families in the neighborhood. One interviewee stressed that it was an advantage to have atypical Finnish friends who had not traveled abroad, did not speak English, and saw the informant as an individual and not as a foreigner. Moreover, as the following quotation shows, having friendships with local people from the very beginning of one's stay in the host society promotes psychological adaptation by creating the desire to learn the language.

> When I started learning the Finnish language, I would say it was after this one week, because when I met these friends, . . . so I started learning with them and then every day. (Interview 7, male)

Regarding sociocultural adaptation, the informants considered that everyday encounters with students supported their cultural learning. One of the overseas-trained teachers

stressed that learning Finnish culture while using English occurred by being a teacher in a very student-centered environment. Although the participant did not need to use Finnish, the exposure to students from different parts of Finland and conversations with them assisted the informant to understand the values of Finnish society, such as openness and trust. In this way, teaching in the Finnish educational environment enabled participants to understand the richness of Finnish culture and to challenge and explore stereotypes. Thus, the learning of local cultural practices took place while using a foreign language (English) in the teacher's profession.

The following quotation emphasizes the role of cultural learning:

> The weather is important, but why is the weather important? . . . I learned about this here with the other students and with my professors . . . I mean the master's degree that I studied for. (Interview 7, male)

> They have been talking about weather every day, and for me, it's not the main thing. . . . I have been checking the weather forecast, but . . . if it's warm, it's warm. . . . It is challenging for me as a foreigner or minority here. (Interview 13, female)

This latter quotation, from an overseas-trained teacher, reveals the difference in cultural learning compared to the former interviewee, who had received vocational training and a professional teaching qualification at a Finnish UAS. For the former, an understanding of the characteristics of Finnish culture had already taken place during his studies in Finland. After graduating, the social support from coworkers, as well as getting to know them and even their spouses, was significant for the informant at both professional and personal levels and fostered informants' learning of local culture.

Regarding sociocultural adaptation, support from social and work-related communities was meaningful for the informants. One teacher stressed that working in a UAS was really a positive thing, both professionally and personally, because it offered opportunities to make new contacts and be a part of a dynamic teaching team in which one could learn new teaching methods. However, as the following quotation shows, the level of professional support varied and depended on colleagues' willingness to assist foreign newcomers revealing that everyone's attitude affected the functioning of the work community and the FBTs' adaptation to working life:

> Where I've been working, and perhaps also in some other places, colleagues have maybe not been so eager to help out if I've had difficulties—for example, in writing or making language mistakes. (Interview 10, male)

Concerning psychological adaptation, several interviewees stressed the importance of having a positive attitude toward their adaptation process. They highlighted their inherent positive disposition, personal choice, and focus on making a conscious choice in adapting to the Finnish society. Psychological adaptation was connected partly to social support. As one interviewee pointed out, the attitude toward managing one's adaptation arises from one's own decision and from the employer's belief in the informant's success at work. Trust shown by the employer and obtaining work in Finland contributed to the informant's adaptation to the Finnish society.

Discussion

The study findings revealed three main themes connected to the FBTs' adaptation to their new working and living environments: language, place and environment, and social support. Within these main themes, the adaptation experiences were also further conceptualized through psychological and sociocultural adaptation. Psychological adaptation emerged particularly through various forms of emotional experiences or experiences related to changes in one's personality, which seemed to underpin the formation of social relationships and interaction with locals which promoted cultural learning and sociocultural adaptation. For example, regarding one of the main themes, that is, language, attitude, and personality influenced the learning and acquisition of a new language, which in turn had an impact on relationships and also possibly changing one's own cultural communication style which also created challenges in international faculty's social and academic experiences (Glass et al. 2022). Thus, psychological and sociocultural adaptations were often intertwined within the identified main themes.

Of the three identified main themes, language appears to be very central from the perspective of adaptation to work and society. Informants' positive attitude toward adopting a new language, in addition to emotional experiences, fostered their psychological adaptation. Developing fluency in the local language further promoted the informants' social and professional integration and career development in HE. Thus, the Finnish language was central, especially in social life, and it supported the informants' career advancement and deepened their knowledge of Finnish culture. These findings are in line with earlier studies (Greek & Jonsmoen 2021; Van Riemsdijk et al. 2016; Yağmur & Van de Vijver 2012). Language and communication skills are crucial to successful intercultural interaction and interpersonal relationships (Masgoret & Ward 2006; Pitkänen & Raunio 2011). A lack of knowledge of the local language complicates internalizing the rules of the workplace and may impede access to essential work-related information (Greek & Jonsmoen 2021; Maximova-Mentzoni & Egeland 2019). In general, learning the host language gives access to culture, social networks, and resources—for example, regarding job opportunities (Yağmur & Van de Vijver 2012).

Similarly, within the theme of place and environment, the emotional experiences related to the features of the new culture (pace of life, safety, fairness) and the opportunities for voluntary choices and perceived similarities to the country of origin supported psychological adaptation to the new environment. The present study also showed the importance of the place and environment and quality of the host country's national connectedness in cross-cultural transitions. FBT face the coexisting occurrence of several transitions, such as crossing cultural boundaries and transitions between educational systems, country of origin, and host country, during their cross-cultural transitions. Like Finney et al. (2019), the majority of the informants emphasized the importance of the place and local environment for their successful adaptation. In line with Stodolska et al. (2017), the accounts of the informants showed the importance of developing bonds and emotional attachment to the local surroundings for their psychological adaptation.

As a third key theme, the various forms of perceived social support influenced the development of trust and positive attitude to integration. Based on these participants'

experiences, a balance between psychological and sociocultural adaptation seems to promote long-term adaptation and commitment to new cultural and work environments. Similarly, it can be stated that if a sufficient balance between psychological and sociocultural adaptation is not achieved within these main identified themes, it can act as a hindering and obstructive factor for the long-term adaptation. As Ward and Kus (2012) underline, sociocultural contexts can affect whether immigrants adopt integration as their acculturation approach. In this study, social support in various forms was essential for sociocultural adaptation of FBT.

The residential areas where immigrants and host country nationals live and recreation areas have an impact on the formation of social ties. Concerning social relations in the nonwork lives of highly skilled migrants, Povrzanović Frykman and Mozetič(2020) emphasized the importance of friendships. In their study, the difficulty of forming new neighborhood contacts in the host country was acknowledged. In contrast to the study of Povrzanović Frykman and Mozetič (2020), the social interaction with neighbors was significant for the informants' integration. Participation in friendship networks created contentment and high levels of satisfaction (also Hendrickson et al. 2011) supporting psychological adaptation of the informants.

Regarding the theme of social support, particularly the role of work-related communities for FBT's adaptation was highlighted. Our findings show that support from social and work-related communities, as well as the informants' dispositions, fostered the informants' sociocultural integration. Everyday encounters with students and teachers supported, for example, learning new teaching methods and former FBT's cultural learning. Additionally, the findings concerning support from the family are in line with Fernando and Cohen (2016); informants stressed that their families—both in their country of origin and in Finland—provided significant support for their psychological adaptation (also Ward & Rana-Deuba 2000). As highlighted in the study, one's own decision and positive attitude to integrate as well as the employer's belief in the informant's success at work promotes adaptation process. The trust shown by the employer and obtaining work in Finland fostered the informants' adaptation to the Finnish society. It is noteworthy that findings revealed a lack of formal integration process and mentoring programs especially intended for FBT. Lack of support from leadership can cause social isolation (Lee 2021).

Several interviewees stressed the importance of having a positive attitude toward their adaptation process. They highlighted their inherent positive disposition, particular personality traits, such as 'strong character', and focus on making a conscious, personal choice in adapting to the Finnish society and working life. The importance of one's own attitude emerged from the data to explain positive attitudes toward adaptation, although the findings showed that the informants considered it to be their own duty to adapt. Thus, adaptation is felt to be a one-way, not a two-way, street in which an individual's positive attitude supports psychological and sociocultural adaptation. This study finding is in line with Helliwell et al. (2018), who stressed the importance of immigrants' willingness to form contacts with local populations. Yet, one can reflect on whether the interview situation and the topic (adaptation) may have affected the ways in which the informants narrated their adaptation experiences—that is, did they want to portray themselves in a positive light and distance themselves from other, nonadapting migrants, as Alho and Sippola (2019) showed regarding Estonian migrants' interview accounts.

This study examined the experiences of FBT in Finnish UAS, highlighting their working-life adaptation and exploring their adaptation to the social sphere. The interviewees, with one exception, intended to continue staying in Finland in the future. This can be interpreted as indicating a certain level of satisfaction with one's own life, for example, due to the stability of one's working life through having obtained a permanent job (also Baas & Yeoh 2019). The interviewees had also been in Finland for quite a long time, so the difficulties experienced over the years, for example, about belonging to Finland, may have already been partially forgotten.

In the future, one could examine foreign-born persons who remigrate to another country and explore the success and pitfalls of immigration policy and integration actions. Moreover, research on foreign-born's returning to home countries could provide additional information about their prior experiences with host nationals. Additionally, concerning more broadly working-life organizations, further studies could examine human relations practices, for example, in job interviews with foreign-born people. Thus, an examination of human relations practices could reveal whether working-life organizations aim to promote diversity in their work environments.

Conclusion

The study showed that the participants' adaptation experiences were conceptualized through psychological and sociocultural adaptation and those are intertwined within the identified main themes, language, place and environment, and social support. The findings of this qualitative study showed that learning the local language is an essential element for immigrants' sociocultural adaptation to the host society and to the new working environments. The results show that social support from professional and other communities is essential for foreign-born staff members' adaptation. However, the leadership showed no interest in foreign-born staff's integration experiences, and there were no formal support structures for their integration. According to the results, adaptation was perceived to be primarily the duty of foreign-born staff in work communities. Consequently, there is a need to develop inclusion strategies of the Nordic HEIs to foster the integration of foreign-born staff.

There are some limitations to this research. In the future, the use of a longitudinal approach could be more fruitful for examining the adaptation of FBT. In this study, the informants' accounts of their adaptation experiences and the ways in which they reflected on these were connected to the specific timing of the interviews (cf. Rubin & Rubin 2005). Moreover, the data collection for this article took a long time due to difficulties recruiting participants. This could be related to the perceived sensitive nature of this topic, which hampered some FBT from participating in this study to avoid difficulties at work.

Other limitations relate to the generalizability of its findings to other immigrant groups, for example, expatriates and refugees. In the first case, their arrival in the country is more systematized and arranged by employers, a channel referred to by Sandoz (2020) as company-oriented migration. In the second case, the refugees have to flee from their country of origin unlike the informants who had voluntarily migrated. Moreover, the small number of respondents diminishes the generalizability of this study.

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