

Supporting University Staff from Abroad -Perspectives from Denmark and Finland-

1) *From your experience, what are the most common challenges that university staff encounter when relocating from abroad?*

Vibeke (Aarhus): The most common challenges are difficulties finding accommodation and also issues relating to family members adjusting to their new life such as schooling for children. In many cases, spouses wish to find employment and establish their own network but this can be challenging to do in a foreign culture. There are many overwhelming practical issues when moving abroad so we try to minimize these challenges through our support services.

Kirsi (Helsinki): Starting life in a new location is always challenging. In Finland, some people struggle to fully integrate into Finnish society because they lack social networks and the language is difficult to master. Spouses often encounter challenges if they want to work because it is still not easy to find employment without Finnish language skills. To mitigate these challenges, it is really important to manage people's expectations about life in Finland before they arrive. For example, if a researcher relocates from the United States it is important for us to manage their expectations about the size of houses in Helsinki which tend to be smaller compared to those in the States. People tend to have a lot of expectations related to everyday life and living. The quality of life in Finland is high but it might still be different to what one is used to.

2) *What kind of support services does your university offer staff who are relocating from abroad?*

Vibeke (Aarhus): We provide a suite of services which varies depending on the individual's situation and circumstances. For example, we generally tend to provide more support to staff who are accompanied by family members and to full Professors and Associate Professors compared with postdoctoral students. Our services include a help desk which is open for four hours each day where staff can come and ask questions about their life in Denmark. Through the *Expat Partner Program*, we try to speak with an incoming staff member's partner before they arrive in Denmark to help them find employment (if they want to work) and to discuss how they will establish their own network. We recently commenced a *Cultural Training* awareness program to help staff better understand and adjust to Danish culture. We also have a *University International Club* that host events for our international staff and their families to hear practical information on life in Denmark and to network with staff in similar situations to their own. In the past there have been presentations on issues such as taxation, Denmark's school system and an international potluck.

Kirsi (Helsinki): We offer a range of services to staff who have relocated from abroad. To begin with, HR services support all new staff members with any questions they have related to working at the University. We also have services aimed at international staff members. For example, *UniBuddy* is a scheme where existing members of staff voluntarily support new international staff and doctoral students and introduce them to the social life of the University. We arrange an event called *Experiencing Finland* which is co-hosted with Aalto University for new staff from abroad to learn more about Finnish culture and its traditions, and to meet colleagues from both institutions. In the past, the event has covered topics such as *Experiencing Autumn and Winter in Finland*, *How to Effectively Communicate and Socialize with Finns*, *Finland with Children* and *Working with Finns*. This event is open to family members of staff who have relocated from abroad. The Rector of the University hosts a university-wide annual networking event called *International Evening* for all international staff and students. In addition to these events, we offer formal induction and training sessions, such as *This is Your Campus* where we introduce the University and useful services.

3) *What is covered in the cultural training sessions at the University of Helsinki?*

Kirsi (Helsinki): The University of Helsinki organizes a training session every term on Finnish society and working culture. The course examines intercultural communication in the workplace, different codes of conduct, personal experiences and possible challenges. It also discusses integration in and outside the workplace, giving practical tips on how to make the most of one's experience in Finland. The course is aimed at all new employees and researchers of the University of Helsinki, especially those who have not worked or studied in Finland before, and gives attendees a basic understanding of Finnish working culture and the necessary tools to ease their working life in Finland. The course also raises the attendees' awareness of relocating to another country and what kind of adjustment a successful relocation requires.

4) *Do you have any particularly memorable moments where the relocation support you have provided has had a lasting impact on the life of an international researcher, their partner or family?*

Vibeke (Aarhus): Last summer at an event I met a family who had moved to Denmark about three years ago. I was amazed at how quickly the son had learnt Danish and had settled into school. I was also delighted to see that the mother had also found a job. It was really rewarding to see that this family had adjusted to life in Denmark and it was a great reminder of how the right support can really make a big difference in people's lives when relocating abroad. We receive a lot of positive feedback from staff who say that our support helps reduce the stress of moving abroad which means that they can focus on their research.

Kirsi (Helsinki): We receive a lot of positive feedback about our services. One of the most frequent comments that I hear from staff is that through our office they have somewhere to ask questions. If they have any concerns about their relocation to Finland they have somewhere they can be heard which alleviates a lot of stress. We also welcome enquiries from the partners of staff who have relocated to Helsinki which is really appreciated.

5) *How important do you think it is to provide support to not just international staff working at your institution but also their partners?*

Vibeke (Aarhus): In many cases, it is the spouse who is the decision maker in a family, so in order to attract researchers from abroad we also need to appeal to the spouse. In past years, people from abroad would sometimes decline a job offer because they could not see a future for their family in Denmark, or they would leave shortly after arriving because they could not adjust to their new life. Thankfully, this is not so common anymore because our support services help alleviate some of the anxiety associated with relocating. Our team tries to be involved in the recruitment process of overseas staff as early as possible. We often contact potential candidates during the interview stage to inform them of the services we provide. The sooner we contact new staff from abroad the sooner we can begin offering relocation assistance which increases the retention rate.

Kirsi (Helsinki): I think it is essential to offer support to the partners of international staff. From my experience the main reason why international staff members decide to leave a country is because their family is unhappy. By providing support to partners we increase the retention rate of international staff.

6) *What is your advice to someone who is working with a colleague who has recently moved from overseas? How can they help their colleague adjust to life in their new country?*

Vibeke (Aarhus): Include the new staff member in activities both in and outside of the workplace, talk to them, ask questions, and make sure that they are gently introduced to the local culture. Depending on the new staff member's culture, it is important to be aware that not everyone is accustomed to asking questions. In Denmark we ask questions whenever we are unsure about something but this is not the case in all cultures. Be aware that not everyone is comfortable asking

for help so you may need to create opportunities that make it easier for them to speak about any issues that they are facing.

Kirsi (Helsinki): I would encourage the university staff member to make sure their colleague feels welcome and is not excluded in any way. Casual conversations over coffee are really important and so is inviting the new staff member out for lunch. It is important to be sensitive to the fact that new staff members are not in their comfort zone and they are new to everything. In Finland people do not usually spend much time with their colleagues outside work. Finns are very friendly but it takes time to make friends. Team building activities outside the workplace can really help a new person adjust. I would encourage all new staff relocating from abroad to become involved in the *UniBuddy* scheme and join all the social activities at the University.

7) *What do you think attracts foreign staff to your institution?*

Vibeke (Aarhus): People are attracted to Denmark in general because of our country's excellent work-life balance. There is a lot of flexibility for people to choose when, where and how they work which is attractive to many people.

Kirsi (Helsinki): Excellent quality research, career prospects and quality of life in Finland draw people to the University of Helsinki. Of course, we are in competition with other countries in the region to attract the best international talent so it is really important that we project a good image of the University of Helsinki and life in Finland in general. It is also important that we clearly outline and promote the relocation support services that we offer. For example, staff relocating from abroad can rent an apartment within the University for a very affordable price for the first two years of their stay in Finland. This is quite an attractive incentive to staff relocating from abroad who might be concerned about searching for accommodation. We need to make it as easy for new staff to establish a new life in Helsinki and also clearly communicate the many opportunities that exist here to advance their careers and lead a good life.

8) *Most universities that provide relocation support do so for incoming staff from abroad but I read on the University of Helsinki's homepage that you provide support to staff who are relocating overseas. What kind of support do you provide?*

Kirsi (Helsinki): Higher education and research is an international field. Academics and other staff often work on international projects away from their home university. The University of Helsinki supports staff who are going abroad on assignment. This means working for the University abroad for research or other reasons, usually for 6 to 12 months. We provide assistance and information on managing matters related to working abroad, such as information on taxation and social security, insurances and practicalities. Staff going abroad are required to sign a contract with the University of Helsinki which covers the reasons for their time abroad, period of travel, tasks that they will undertake, and where they will be stationed. Human Resources provides support to about 100 staff annually who travel abroad for work.

9) *Do you think there is a need for long-term support for staff who have moved from abroad? Or are their needs primarily only in the initial stages of their relocation?*

Vibeke (Aarhus): Long-term support is important because it increases the retention rates for foreign staff. We usually contact people who have relocated to Aarhus University from abroad around the summer holidays and Christmas time to see how they are adjusting to life in Denmark. By doing so, it helps remind these staff that our support services are still available and that someone is willing to help them when they encounter difficulties.

Kirsi (Helsinki): The services offered by Human Resources are available to employees for the duration of their contract at the University of Helsinki. And of course it is also important to encourage supervisors and colleagues to look out for new employees and be aware of questions such as: *Are they enjoying life? Do they have something more to do with their lives other than just work?* It is

important that we create social networking opportunities for staff over the short and long term. Supervisors should be aware not only of the outputs and results of their colleagues (including staff who have relocated from abroad) but also their wellbeing. Monitoring wellbeing is not just one person's responsibility – it is everyone's business.

10) Are there any new services that you would like to offer in the future to international staff that you think would really help them through the relocation process?

Vibeke (Aarhus): If we had the financial resources, I would like to offer pre-arrival visits for new staff members relocating from abroad. From my own personal experience relocating to China and the United States, it was really helpful to visit both of these countries before moving in order to visit schools, search for accommodation and to get a better feel for the community where I would be living. I would also like to be able to offer cultural awareness and cultural intelligence training courses to all local staff at Aarhus University. I think that local staff would find it easier to help staff from abroad if they had a better understanding of their own culture.

Kirsi (Helsinki): I would love to open a Welcome Centre which would serve as a physical presence where staff could come for practical advice and guidance and also have a place to gather and chat. It is really valuable for anyone coming from abroad to speak about the challenges that they encounter with someone who has experience in supporting international staff. This kind of center would also allow people to come and have a coffee and socialize. We could arrange information and training sessions as well as social get-togethers for the whole University community. I would also love to introduce a more formalized spouse program, similar to [Hidden Gems](#) offered by Tampere University. We are lucky to have great public services too, such as [International House Helsinki](#) and I am sure that the services will become even better as the national [Talent Boost](#) program progresses. Naturally, I want to offer excellent support services on internationalization to the whole University community.