THE NETWORKING ASPECT OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' INTEGRATION INTO FINNISH WORKING LIFE: A CASE STUDY OF TEAM&CLIENT PROJECT COURSE.

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Abstract
This thesis explores how the social networks developed during Higher Education Studies contribute to international students' integration into Finnish working life. Previous research provides evidence that international students experience difficulties with finding jobs in Finland after completing their studies, and the lack of social networks is recognized as one of the main employment barriers. According to the Strength of Weak Ties theory, weak social networks, especially when they connect representatives of different social groups, provide better employment outcomes for an individual. Team&Client project course organized by the University of Jyväskylä is used in this study as an example of a university course, where international students have an opportunity to create such ties.

This research was done from a qualitative stance and focused on the international student's perceptions of networking with other parties during and after the course. The research is based on two sets of data: 68 written documents produced by the course participants in 2016-2020, and 8 semi-structured interviews with former students conducted in 2021. The analysis indicates that half of the interview participants was able to utilize the created social network in a way that enhances their employability in Finland. However, the findings also suggest that it can take some time before international students are prepared to enter the labor market, and by that time they may perceive the created ties as too weak or even absent. Another important factor found is that some international students may not be prepared to take an active approach to networking and employability development.

Keywords
International students, social networks, employment, employability, project-based course, strength of weak ties

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1 INTRODUCTION

Various reports and studies indicate that international students are struggling to find employment in Finland after graduating from Finnish Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) (Shumilova, Cai, & Pekkola, 2012; Korhonen, 2014; Tuononen et al., 2021). One of the major challenges in searching for employment is the lack of social ties — relationships with the people who live in Finland. Many international students find themselves in a 'bubble', interacting only with a close group of friends among their fellow foreign students. Regarding job searches, this group may share knowledge and provide emotional support for its members, however, it does not necessarily help them to integrate into the Finnish working life. This thesis takes a new angle of studying international students' networking by specifically focusing on its relation to employment and employability and using a project-based course with a real client as a case study.

Academic research on international students has been conducted for more than a hundred years (Jing et al., 2020). Traditionally, international students have been viewed as temporary migrants who would leave the country after completing their studies; hence the academic studies focused on the initial period of studies abroad and mostly examined the topics of cross-cultural adjustment, intercultural development, mental health issues, and second-language acquisition (Arthur, 2014; Jing et al., 2020). In the last ten years, however, according to a recent scientometric review (Jing et al., 2020), several new research topics have appeared such as student satisfaction, social integration, and international graduate employability. Most studies, however, focus on international graduate employability and work-life integration in English-speaking countries as they are traditionally the most popular destinations for studies abroad. The present study contributes to the emerging trend in global international student research by bringing a Finnish perspective into it.

'Social network' and 'networking' are two key terms that are used in this thesis. Social network is defined as a set of individuals that are tied by one or more types of relations, which are called ties (Mari & Wellman, 2014). Networking refers to building, maintaining, and using relationships either in a broad sense (Wolff & Moser, 2009) or in professional setting to assist in work and career (Bapna & Funk, 2021).

These concepts and their link to employment are further discussed in the fourth chapter.

The thesis uses the Strength of Weak Ties Theory developed by American sociologist Mark Granovetter in 1973. According to the theory, interpersonal ties can be divided into strong ties (family members and close friends) and weak ties (acquaintances). The theory argues that even though people usually spend most of their time with their close connections, in the majority of cases it is ‘weak ties’ that play the main role in finding a job. Thus, in order to improve international students' employability in Finland, it appears important to study how they are developing ‘weak ties’. Currently, there is a research gap in this area which this thesis helps to fill in.

The number of international students in the world has been significantly growing, reaching the number of more than 6 million people in 2019 (UNESCO Institute for Statistics). Finland is highly interested in attracting and retaining international students. In September 2021, the Finnish government announced plans to triple the number of international students by the year 2030 and to increase the rate of those finding employment in Finland after graduation up to 75%. Hence, studying this thesis’ topic can contribute to the Finnish society’s development goals.

Besides having academic and societal motivation, this study may also benefit education practitioners. This thesis uses the URAA1001 Team&Client project course organized by the University of Jyväskylä (JYU) as a case study to gain a deeper understanding of the networking aspect of international student integration into working life. Organizing a project-based work-integrated learning course is one of the examples when HEIs may act as a bridge connecting local companies looking for international talents and international students, seeking employment in the host country. Career Services of JYU have offered the Team&Client multidisciplinary business project course in English since 2016. Over the course of three months, multidisciplinary teams composed of international students work on projects for clients located in the Central Finland region. Besides giving international student participants valuable knowledge and skills of project work, this course provides them with an opportunity to establish social networks with local clients, coach teachers, and other course participants. As there is a lack of research examining the interactions during a project-based course, this thesis helps educators, organizing or planning to organize similar courses to see the international students’ perspective and provides some practical recommendations on how to improve the course in terms of networking opportunities.

The purpose of this thesis is to explore how the social networks developed during Higher Education Studies contribute to international students’ integration into Finnish working life. The study focuses on the networking process that took place both during and after the Team&Client project course. There were two data sets used in the study: data collected by the course organizers in 2016–2020 (24 individual learning reports, 21 final group reports, and 23 feedback forms), and data collected by the author of this thesis in 2021 (8 semi-structured in-depth interviews with former course participants). The population consists of International Master's Degree Program students from JYU and International Bachelor's Degree students from Jyväskylä University of Applied Sciences (JAMK) who participated in the English language version of the Team&Client project course in 2016–2020.

The study aims to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: How do the international student participants describe the networking process that took place during the course?

RQ2: How do the participants view the role of the social networks developed during the course in job seeking and employability?

This study takes a qualitative approach. There was no direct observation of the networking process during the course, instead, this study examines and interprets the subjective accounts of international students' experiences. Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) was chosen as the research method as it can be applied to the data obtained from different sources over different periods of time, and allows to reduce it to the material relevant to the research questions.

After this brief introduction, the thesis presents a review of literature on the relevant topics from the fields of intercultural communication, sociology, business, and education studies as well as an explanation of the key terms used in the study. Chapter 2 discusses international students as a migration category, and presents the current trends on international student mobility/migration in Finland. Chapter 3 focuses on international graduate employment and employability, employment barriers, and the situation in Finland. Chapter 4 starts by presenting the theoretical framework of the study and the role of weak ties in the job search process. It continues the discussion of social ties' contribution for employment outcomes for migrants, and international student network composition. Chapter 5 outlines the project-based course as a networking opportunity and describes the Team&Client project course that is used as a case study.

Chapter 6 of the thesis describes the methodological framework of the study, the research data, the data analysis. Chapter 7 presents the results of the study. Chapter 8 discusses the key findings, implications, and limitations of the study. The thesis ends with a list of references and three appendices.

2 INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AS MIGRANTS

2.1 Who is considered an international student?

Definitions of an international student vary across countries and regions. Many countries define international students based on their citizenship or visa status in the host country, however, it often excludes permanent residents (Banks & Bhandari, 2012). Often the terms 'foreign student' or 'overseas student' are also used. For example, Finnish statistical services use the concept of 'foreign student' which is defined as an individual registered in Finnish educational institution as a student of education leading to a qualification or degree whose nationality is not Finnish (Statistics Finland, 2021). However, not all students of foreign origin and foreign passport holders moved for their studies from abroad; just as not all internationally mobile students may fall into a category of foreign or overseas students (Kelo, Teichler, & Wächter 2006), thus these terms are not used in the present study. In an academic context, the term 'international student' can be loosely defined as "a student holding foreign nationality who is pursuing post-secondary education outside of his/her country of origin" (Abdullah, Abd Aziz, & Mohd Ibrahim, 2014, p. 236).

In order to create an operational definition of 'international student', it is necessary to discuss what kind of experiences can be gathered together under this term. Even though some international students may play several roles in the host society e.g. family members, workers, refugees, or asylum seekers (King & Raghuram, 2013), their main goal is to study. As students, international students can be classified by their level of studies such as undergraduate (Bachelor's), graduate (Master's), and post-graduate (Doctoral) level students. They can also be divided into different categories based on purpose and duration of mobility: students studying abroad for a short-term specialized program, for example, summer school (visiting students),

students studying abroad for a semester or two and then returning to the sending institution (exchange students), and students completing a whole degree program that may last several years (degree students) (c.f. Gargano, 2009; King & Raghuram, 2013). This study primarily focuses on international degree students of undergraduate (Bachelor's) and graduate (Master's) degree level.

According to King and Raghuram (2013), 'international' in the context of international students is usually used to define migration across nation-states. However, in the global world with the rapid development of ICT, the term 'international student' could also encompass students enrolled and completing their studies in a foreign university without physically moving to the university campus (King & Raghuram, 2013).

All international students are so-called voluntary migrants: it is their own decision to seek educational experience from another country. Unlike exchange and visiting students, who only stay in a foreign country for a short period of time, international degree students are long-term migrants. However, their experiences have little in common with other groups of foreigners, such as immigrants, refugees, and expatriates because international students' lives are to a large extent influenced by the academic setting (Gargano, 2009). Therefore, can moving to another country for studies even be considered as migration? The next section briefly discusses this question.

2.2 Defining student mobility and migration

What term should be used when referring to the international moves of students? According to King and Findlay (2012), the term student migration is used in studies to describe a long-distance (intercontinental or between the countries of different levels of economic development) or long-term moving leading to potential no-return and brain drain. Student mobility, in its turn, refers to short-distance (e.g. inside the EU) and short-term moving. Some scholars point out that the terms indicate different nature and causes of moving: migration implies moving because of necessity or enforcement, while mobility is a free and self-initiated move (Habti & Koikkalainen, 2014). In addition, there seems to be a regional distinction between the researchers: while European scholars prefer to use mobility, their colleagues in the U.S. give a preference to the term migration (King & Findlay, 2012; King & Raghuram, 2013). Finally, there is a conceptual difference (King & Findlay, 2012). Mobility is used by researchers who try to associate literature on "mobility turn" with work on student mobility while migration is used by those who discuss the students' cross-border relocations in the context of development and migration.

King and Raghuram (2013) point out that the choice of which term to use may also depend on the type of international student being studied. For describing the experience of exchange and visiting students the term mobility seems appropriate as it implies a shorter-term movement and a high probability of return. In the case of degree students, who move for a period of several years and may or may not leave the host country upon graduation, the term migration seems to be more suitable.

Teichler (2015), however, argues that the term mobility should refer to all non-permanent border crossing with a purpose of study, and include both students going abroad for temporary study and for study of a whole program. In contrast, migration, in his opinion, emphasizes the permanence of border-crossing and would, for example, describe the experience of a person who had lived in the country for years before beginning the studies.

To sum up, the choice between using the terms mobility and migration can be defined by many sometimes even contradictory factors. As a solution to this terminology dilemma, King and Raghuram (2013) suggest using the term ISM where 'M' stands for both mobility and migration. This is the term that is used in this study.

2.3 International students in Finland

Finland has a population of 5.5 million people. It is a country with a predominantly homogeneous population — foreign nationals occupy 5% of the total population (270,000) as of 2020 (Official Statistics of Finland [OSF], 2021a). International students are a significant group of foreign nationals in Finland and their number has been growing rapidly (Figure 1). In 20 years, the number of degree-seeking international students in Finland has increased more than three times from 6000 (2% of all students) in the year 2000 to over 20,000 (7%) studying as of 2020 (Centre for International Mobility [CIMO], 2014; OSF, 2021b).

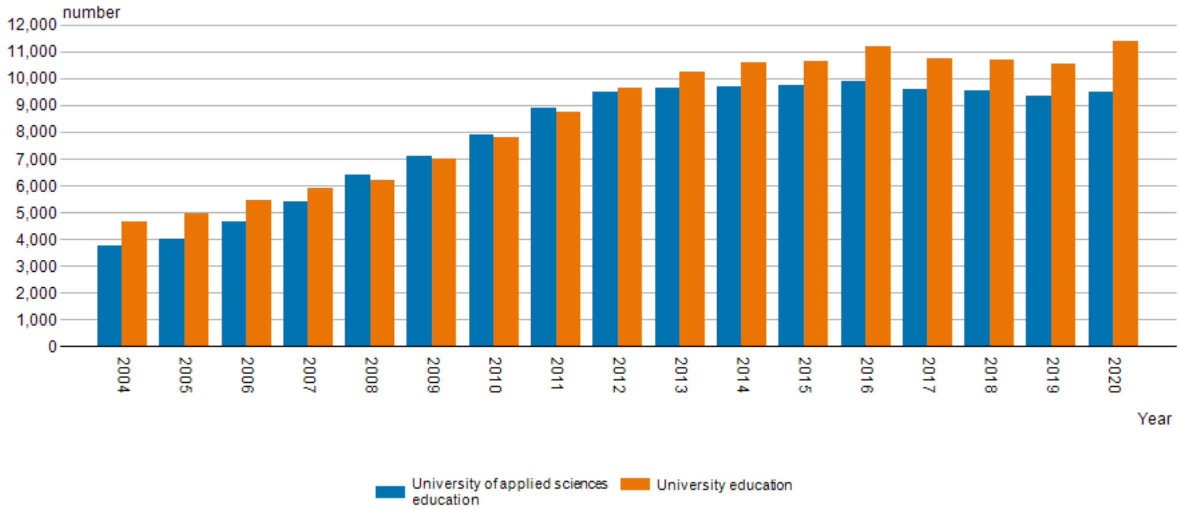

FIGURE 1 International degree students in Finnish HEIs, 2004-2020 (OSF, 2021b).

Finland has 13 universities and 22 universities of applied sciences, which as of 2021 offer more than 500 English-taught Bachelor's and Master's degree programs (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2021a, 2021b). Based on the country of origin, international students in Finland have different juridical statuses. While citizens of the EU/EEA countries can freely move, stay and work in Finland, non-EU/EEA students have to apply for a student residence permit and have enough income to cover their living expenses for at least one year. Since 2017, non-EU/EEA citizens are also subject to tuition fees, however, there is a possibility to receive a scholarship to cover tuition expenses (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2021c).

Since 2001 the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture has implemented various strategies to attract international students (Jokila, Kallo, & Mikkilä-Erdmann, 2019). The Ministry aims to recruit 60,000 international students in Finnish higher education institutions by 2025 (Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture, 2013), which is three times more than the goal for 2015 (Finnish Ministry of Education, 2009). However, with decreasing birth rates and the aging population, it is seen as indispensable for economic development in Finland to not only attract but to retain and integrate international students into society and the labor market (Jokila et al., 2019).

In 2013 the Finnish government published the 'government resolution on the future of migration 2020 strategy', where it accredits international students as an important resource for the Finnish labor market (Finnish Ministry of Interior, 2013, as cited in Mathies & Karhunen, 2020). Some steps have been done to facilitate the labor integration of international students. Non-EU/EEA students have a right to work up to 25h per week during the semester and unlimited time during vacations or if the work is relevant for their degree (EU/EEA students have no working limits).

The validity of the job-seeking residence permit for non-EU/EEA students after graduation has been extended from 6 to 12 months. In September 2021, the Finnish government announced the plan to increase the number of international students to 15,000 per year and their employment rate in Finland to 75% by the year 2030 (Finnish government, 2021).

The rapidly growing numbers of international students, both globally and in Finland, increase their proportion in the potential workforce. However, traditionally, international students were mostly viewed as temporary migrants who return to their home country upon completing their studies abroad. Therefore, the research literature has mostly focused on student recruitment and the initial stage of ISM rather than post-graduation experiences in host countries (Arthur & Nunes, 2014; Fakunle & Pirrie, 2020). The next chapter overviews the available research on international students' transition from university studies to working life in the country of degree completion.

3 INTERNATIONAL GRADUATE EMPLOYMENT AND EMPLOYABILITY

3.1 Employability vs. employment

Before discussing international student integration into working life, it is important to distinguish two important terms related to this topic — employment and employability. Even though the concept of employability is frequently used in higher education studies, university curricula, and by policy-makers, there is no commonly accepted definition for this term. Many researchers and practitioners refer to it as the set of skills and attributes that make graduates more likely to gain employment, retain jobs and develop their careers (see Tran, 2016). Such skills and attributes include, for instance, professionalism, reliability, the ability to tolerate uncertainty, work under pressure, strategic thinking, creativity, time management, the capability to communicate and interact with others either in teams or through networking (Andrews & Higson, 2008). Some researchers, however, argue that employability is more than skills and employer's wish lists and should be conceptualized as a broader notion of graduate ability to gain, sustain, and progress in employment (see Blackmore et. al., 2014; Huang, 2013).

As Yorke (2006) mentions, the term employability should not be confused with employment. Employability refers to the potential of obtaining a job while an actual acquisition of a job is "subject to influences in the environment", with the state of the economy being the major factor (Yorke, 2006, p. 2). Due to these external influences, employability improves students' chances of employment after graduation, but it doesn't assure it (Knight & Yorke, 2004).

3.2 University-work transition and employment barriers for international students in host countries

At the final phase of their studies, international degree students need to make an important life decision: return to their home country, permanently stay in the host country and seek employment there or move to a third state. Many factors are involved in making the decision, e.g. the initial reasons for getting international study experience, relationships developed during the studies, integration in the host society, and employment opportunities (Arthur & Nunes, 2014; Coffey, Farivar & Cameron, 2021). In this study, the focus is on the international degree students who decide to stay in the host country upon graduation.

Regardless of the efforts made by policy-makers, international graduates' employment experiences remain problematic in many countries. Finding internships and post-study employment is a challenging task for all students, however, international students face additional complications and obstacles compared to the local students (Coffey et al., 2021). Studies on employment barriers of international graduates were mostly conducted in the context of English-speaking countries, as these are the most popular destinations for international students. Research literature identifies the most typical barriers for finding employment and internship placements for international students as follows:

1) Discrimination towards visa status and non-residency (Coffey et al., 2021; Fakunle & Pirrie, 2020; Nunes & Arthur, 2013; Shen & Herr, 2004; Than & Hoang, 2020);
2) Lack of fluency in the local language and foreign accent (Nunes & Arthur, 2013; Sangganjanavanich, Lenz & Cavazos, 2011);
3) Limited social network and lack of connections with prospective employers (Gribble, Blackmore & Rahimi, 2015; Nunes & Arthur, 2013);
4) Lack of working experience from the host country (Coffey et al., 2021; Nunes & Arthur, 2013);
5) Insufficient information and support from university services (Fakunle & Pirrie, 2020; Nunes & Arthur, 2013; Sangganjanavanich et al., 2011);
6) Lack of familiarity with the host culture and a need to behave according to the local cultural norms (Sangganjanavanich et al., 2011);
7) Unrealistic employment expectations (Gribble et al., 2015).

There may also be additional challenges related to labor market structure differences. For example, graduates from some countries, e.g. continental Europe, may expect a university to prepare them for a clear career path, while in the UK, for example, they need to adjust to a flexible labor market (Tomlinson, 2012).

Another issue that was found in the literature is that employment rates of international graduates in host countries do not necessarily indicate that they have obtained a meaningful job — a job that is appropriate to the completed degree and skills (Coffey et al., 2021). Due to the employment barriers, graduates may be unable to find a suitable job and choose to seek unqualified employment in order to legally stay in the host country.

3.3 International graduate employment: case of Finland

What is the retention rate for international students in Finland after completing their studies? Statistical data collected in 2013–2019 from international students one year after graduation from 13 Finnish universities shows that more than 70% of them had not left Finland (Education Statistics Finland [ESF], 2021). As for international graduates of both universities and universities of applied sciences, Mathies and Karhunen (2020) examined their data in Finnish national registries three years after graduation. The sample consisted of 10273 international students who graduated from universities and universities of applied sciences in Finland between 1999 and 2011. The findings show a high retention rate for international students — 74% for Bachelor's graduates of Universities of Applied Sciences, and 67% for Master's graduates of Universities. According to Mathies & Karhunen (2020, p. 8), the number of international graduates settling in Finland is higher than in similarly framed studies done in other countries such as Norway, Denmark, and the Netherlands (Mathies & Karhunen, 2020). It was also found that family ties and labor market opportunities increase the probability of international students staying in Finland after graduation.

As for the employment rate among international graduates in Finland, data by the Finnish National Agency for Education demonstrates that approximately 43% of international students who graduated in 2013–2019 found employment in Finland one year after graduation (ESF, 2021; Figure 2). However, there is no evidence of whether jobs found correspond to a degree that international students obtained in Finland (Alho, 2020). Master's thesis by Zewde (2018) demonstrated that some categories of international students who stay in Finland after graduation may become deskilled migrants as they can only find employment in the lowest echelons of the labor market.

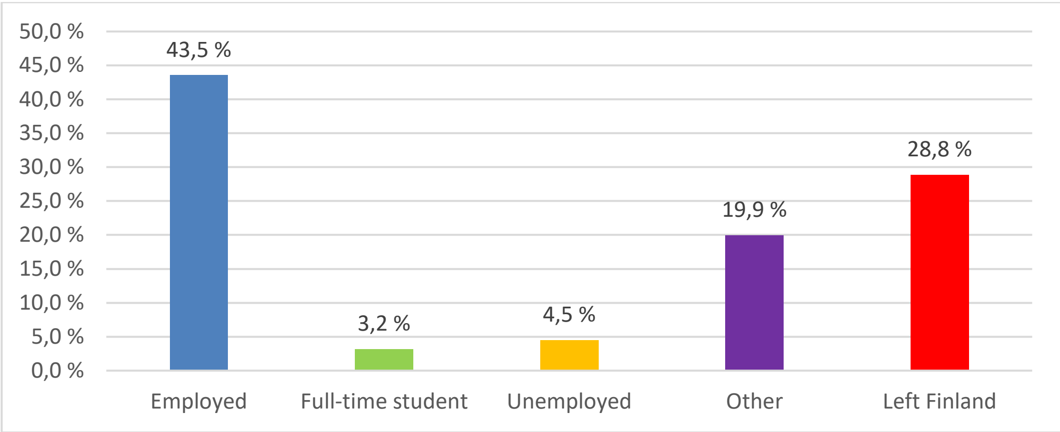

FIGURE 2 International student employment status 1 year after graduation from a Finnish university, 2013-2019 (ESF, 2021)

According to the recent report by the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture (Tuononen et al., 2021) based on questionnaires and interview data conducted in 2019–2020, every second international student is planning to stay and work in Finland after graduation, while only every tenth intends to return to their home country or move elsewhere. However, it is predicted that not all of those who want to stay will manage to find employment in Finland, and for those who will, it may not correspond to their degree field and education level. Participants of the study indicated that if they are unable to find a meaningful job in Finland several years after graduation, they would leave the country. The main obstacles for finding employment in Finland were identified as the lack of culture-specific job acquisition skills, Finnish language proficiency, and the lack of networks that can enable employment. These findings confirm the previous studies (Shumilova et al., 2012; Korhonen, 2014; Alho, 2020) that demonstrates that the same problems remain over time.

Lack of Finnish language proficiency as an important employment barrier has been discussed in the research literature for many years (Korhonen, 2014). By the end of their education in Finland, the majority of international students reach only basic level of Finnish with some having no Finnish skills at all (Laine, 2017). Even though students recognize the importance of Finnish language in working life integration, they don't find enough opportunities to study the language during their studies (Shumilova et al., 2012).

The lack of international graduates' social networks as an employment barrier so far has received less attention in Finnish academic research. International students' networks in the context of finding employment in Finland have been recently examined by Alho (2020). It was found that Finnish employers mostly use informal ways of recruiting, which have a tendency to exclude 'outsiders'. As one of the interview participants mentioned "It was very, very surprising that the Finnish job market can be so dependent on social relationships" (Alho, 2020, p. 11). Only 6 out of 31 international students who participated in the study found their job through formal means rather than a hidden job market, and among those six some had pre-established connections with the employer, e.g. during an internship.

In the light of these findings and in order to contribute to the existing body of knowledge, it appears important to focus specifically on the networking aspect and its relation to employment, which is done in the following chapter.

4 SOCIAL NETWORKS AND EMPLOYMENT

Social networks play an important role in people's lives by providing access to a wide range of resources from emotional support and advice to strategic information and link to employment opportunities. This chapter presents the Strength of Weak Ties Theory by Mark Granovetter as the theoretical background of the study and argues for the importance of weak ties in a job-search process. Then it focuses on the migrant and international student context to identify the specific features of networking for these groups and the challenges it creates in terms of employability.

4.1 Social network, social tie, networking

The concept of 'social network' has a long and complicated history and developed on the ideas from different fields of social science (Jack, 2005). Social network can be defined as a set of network members that are linked by one or more types of relations (Marin & Wellman, 2014). In research on social networks such members are called actors or nodes, and links are called ties (Borgatti & Halgin, 2011). Nodes usually refer to individuals or organizations, however, they can apply to larger units, e.g., countries, as long as they are connected to other units (Marin & Wellman, 2014). Ties can be divided into four broad categories that describe a kind of relation, such as similarities, social relations, interactions, and flows (Borgatti, Mehra, Brass, & Labianca, 2009; Marin & Wellman, 2014). Similarity occurs when two nodes share location, same attributes (demographical characteristics, attitudes) or same group membership. Social relations describe kinship, other social roles (e.g., friend, student, boss), ties based on networks member's feelings for one another (likes, hates, etc.), or cognitive awareness (e.g., knows, knows about). Interactions are ties based on communication acts, for instance, talking to, helping, or advising. Finally, flows describe exchange or transfer between the nodes (e.g., information, resources, beliefs).

Another way to divide social ties is based on their strength. Granovetter (1973) categorized ties into strong and weak depending on the factors that are discussed in the next section of this chapter. He also suggested that ties can be considered absent if there is no relationship between the nodes or if interaction between them can be considered negligeable, e.g., 'nodding' relationship with a person living on the same street. Fendler (2020), however, argued that a relationship between familiar strangers who know about each other existence but have a very limited or no interaction, should be treated as a separate category labeled 'invisible ties'.

'Networking' is another important concept for this thesis. In some research, mostly psychological studies, networking has a broad definition of building, maintaining, and using relationships (e.g., Wolff & Moser, 2009). In business studies, networking is rarely defined clearly and usually refers to developing and maintaining contacts built in a professional setting that can potentially contribute to career development (e.g., Bapna & Funk, 2021). As this study discusses international student network in general and in the context of working life integration, the term 'networking' is used in both broad and narrow definition.

4.2 The Strength of Weak Ties and the Social Capital theories

The Strength of Weak Ties Theory (SWT) was developed by Mark Granovetter in 1973, and since then the original article has been cited more than 60 thousand times. According to the theory, interpersonal ties can be divided into two categories: strong ties and weak ties. The strength of a tie can be defined by "the combination of the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy (mutual confiding) and the reciprocal services which characterize the tie" (Granovetter, 1973, p. 1361). In addition to requiring more frequency, intimacy, and intensity, a strong tie also involves a similarity factor: the more similar individuals are, the stronger is the tie between them. Thus, strong ties should refer to family and close friends, and weak ties — to acquaintances, for example, work-related contacts (Granovetter 1973, 1983). Granovetter argues (1973) that weak ties form a less dense network than strong ones and can reach a larger number of people. They link members from different small groups and provide them with "access to information and resources beyond those available in their own social circle" (Granovetter, 1983, p. 208).

In the job-search context, Granovetter (1973) points out that weak ties play an important role in determining employment outcomes. He argues that individuals receive information about job openings from their weak ties rather than strong ones.

He suggests that often people get a new job through their professional connections with whom they never spent time in a non-working context or even acquaintances whose existence they forgot about. In the revisited version of the theory (1983), Granovetter states that not all weak ties are equally effective. He argues that in order to be valuable, weak ties should bridge social distance — connect people to social circles that are different from their own. Otherwise, instead of broadening employment opportunities, they may merely link friends' and relatives' acquaintances.

The Strength of Weak Ties Theory can be seen as a part of a wider social capital theorizing, mainly associated with the names of Bourdieu, Coleman, Lin, and Putnam. According to Putnam (2000, p. 16), social capital refers to "connections among individuals — social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them". Social capital can be distinguished between bridging and bonding (Putnam, 2000). Bonding social capital is inward-looking and consists of dense connections between members of socially homogeneous groups. It can be applied, for example, to local ethnic groups, church circles, and other communities where members share similar demographic characteristics. Bridging social capital, on the other hand, is outward-looking and loosely links individuals from heterogeneous social groups. Examples of bridging social capital include choirs, sports societies, and the civil rights movement. Ties, in this case, act like bridges that bring together individuals from different and otherwise disconnected social circles whose members may not share many demographic features. However, as Putnam (2000, p. 21) explains, bridging and bonding are not mutually exclusive categories, but rather "'more or less' dimensions along which we can compare different forms of social capital".

Migration studies are widely using Putnam's conceptualization of bridging and bonding social capital to explain migrant resettlement and adaptation processes. It has been further developed into the notion of transnational social capital and applied to professional contacts across countries (Levy, Peiperl, & Bouquet, 2013), and international students' networks (Moon & Chin, 2019). However, this type of social capital will not be further discussed as cross-border social relations are not the main focus of this study.

The notions of strong and weak ties by Granovetter and bridging and bonding social capital by Putnam may be considered relatively close. Both strong ties and bonding social capital are suggested to link similar people in a dense knit and provide them with emotional and social support, whereas weak ties and bridging social capital are seen to loosely connect different individuals and facilitate access to outer resources and information diffusion. However, bonding social capital is a broader concept than strong ties as it encompasses links between acquaintances belonging to the same community who in Granovetter's view would fall into the weak ties definition. In addition, from Granovetter's perspective a tie can be either strong or weak, while according to Putman, social networks may not always be simply divided into bridging or bonding categories.

In this case study, SWT is used as a theoretical framework. It allows focusing on networks developed in the particular context rather than examining an individual's social capital in general. In addition, SWT has a strong working life focus as the original theory was created based on job-search data. The next section discusses the application of the theory to the process of finding employment in more detail.

4.3 The role of social ties in job search

The first application of SWT was done by Granovetter himself in his book dedicated to the job-seeking process, which was originally published in 1974 and republished in 1995. By interviewing about 150 participants Granovetter (1995) demonstrated that the majority of them got employed through personal contacts rather than using formal means (advertisements, hiring agencies) or direct application. Personal contacts that helped to find a job were divided into two distinct categories: family and social friends (strong ties), and people known from a work-related situation (weak ties). The results confirmed the SWT theory, indicating that only about 30% of people found a job through a strong tie while for the majority, approximately 70%, did so through a weak tie.

Another important finding is related to the way how the information about an employment opportunity was passed. For the majority of people who found their job through personal contact, it was the contact person, who initiated the conversation either knowing that their acquaintance is looking for a job or asking whether they are interested. In about 20% of cases, respondents approached their contact asking if they knew about any openings. In other cases, the information about a job position was passed during a casual non-work-related conversation or even an accidental meeting on the street or elsewhere.

4.4 Social networks and employment from a migrant perspective

The importance of social networks in migration has been widely discussed in migration literature (Ryan, 2011). Scholars traditionally took for granted that migrants have ready access to family and friends circle that facilitates their moving and settling process, and little research was conducted on how migrant ties are actually formed (Ryan, 2007). According to Eve (2010), even though only a few migrants are completely without prior contacts in the place they are moving to, migration leads to a reestablishment of social networks. Upon moving, migrants face new needs, e.g. finding a job, housing, leisure opportunities, and the networks they create are shaped by those needs. Thus, migration can be considered as a 'special case of the development of social networks' (Eve, 2010, p. 1236).

The new networks are usually formed quickly upon arrival to the host society (Gill & Bialsky, 2011) and can become a "'temporary 'substitute' for family and friends left behind at home" (Kennedy, 2004, p. 176). Even though many migrants try to keep in touch with their friends and acquaintances from their home countries, those ties become weaker over time and in some cases disappear completely (Popianov & Kovacheva, 2019). In the host society, migrants commonly form new weak ties with their neighbors and colleagues (Popianov & Kovacheva, 2019).

Despite the fact that a lot of research has been conducted on the relationship between networking and employment opportunities, only limited attention has been drawn to the context of migration specifically. Early research on migrant ties strongly focused on intra-ethnic ties, assuming that migrants only rely on their own ethnic group members when looking for a job. However, later it was found out that many migrants, especially those who obtained higher levels of education, also form ethnically heterogeneous ties (Fong & Isajiw, 2000). These inter-ethnic ties are useful for gaining access to a more diverse set of resources including employment opportunities (Ooka & Wellman, 2006).

Furthermore, it was hypothesized and later confirmed by empirical studies that contacts with members of the host society play an important role in migrant employment. For example, a study by Kanas, van Tubergen and Van der Lippe (2011) demonstrated that networking with the local population increased the likelihood of getting employment for migrants while family and friend ties showed no significant correlation. It was also found that the positive impact of having ties with the locals cannot be attributed to the migrant's language proficiency, length of stay, or the tendency of like-minded individuals to become friends. Thus, the results of the study (Kanas et al., 2011) suggest that migrants benefit from social contacts with the local population mainly because of the resources provided by these contacts, such as information about job openings, hiring process, and working culture.

4.5 International student network and social capital

Different migration trajectories help to create a different social network (Eve, 2010). While international students' networking process has many similarities with migrant networking in general, there are also differences due to the nature of ISM. International students spend a great deal of their everyday life at the university, attending classes and engaging in campus activities. At the same time, many of them actively keep in touch with family and friends from their home countries, "thereby building and maintaining social networks that transcend national boundaries" (Gargano, 2009, p. 336).

Compared to other migrants, students may have more opportunities to establish contacts with the members of the host society (Van Mol & Michielsen, 2015). For example, they can meet local students in the classroom, university organizations, or shared accommodation. However, these opportunities do not necessarily turn into interpersonal ties as international and domestic students often coexist in separate social spaces. University administration usually treats domestic and international students differently, they may also engage in different campus and free time activities due to cultural differences and language proficiency (Van Mol & Michielsen, 2015). In the case of non-English speaking countries, including Finland, international students may be structurally isolated in their English-taught programs, having minimum contact with students studying in the local language (Calikoglu, 2018; Moon & Chin, 2019). Overall, studies on international students from different countries report the same problem — a lack of social ties with the local population (Schartner, 2015).

There seems to be a lack of research giving an overall view of international students' networks and social capital as a considerable body of literature focuses only on network formation at the early stage of studies.

A few recent studies help to fill in the above-mentioned research gap. Taha and Cox (2016) summarized key factors that previous studies found important in shaping international students' networks. These factors include language, culture, religion, context, time, sharing the same experience, fear of discrimination, pre-established networks, age, and negative stereotypes. They also concluded that most of the previous studies indicate that international students choose to create their networks based on co-national factors such as common language and cultural similarities. Taha and Cox's own research suggests that international students build four types of networks such as study-related work, friendship, advice, and support networks. Work and friendship networks were found to be built in the classroom setting while advice and support networks were based on pre-existing networks, mainly family and close friends. The study confirmed co-nationality to be one of the factors shaping international students' networks. However, they also indicated a new factor such as work orientation, Another key factor was that international student networks evolve over time. At later stages, students preferred their networks based on the similarity of learning goals and attitudes towards work rather than language and cultural proximity.

Schartner (2015) studied international students' social ties longitudinally and also came to the conclusion that these networks undergo a big change over the course of studies. The study indicated that ties with other international students develop steadily at the beginning of study experience and quickly become the student's primary network. At the same time, co-national ties, peaking at the beginning, start to decrease over time. Ties with host society remained weak over the whole study year. While previous studies on international students reported a lack of contact with host society members, other results were not well-discussed in the research literature before.

Research on international students in Japanese universities (Moon & Chin, 2019) suggested that networks built by international students during their studies have an influence on their post-graduation career plans. For example, it was found out that those students, who create diverse networks with international students from other cultures are motivated to build multinational careers that involve bridging several countries. The study calls attention to the need to further examine the impact of social ties developed by international students during their studies on career outcomes. The present study contributes to this topic as well.

Studies conducted in Finland seem to confirm the same pattern in international student networks that are reported in other countries. According to Korhonen (2014), study participants' social contacts were mostly limited to their family, dating partners, and fellow co- and international students. The situation remained the same over the years, despite the desire of the majority of students for developing social contact with the local population.

Participants of another Finnish study (Li, 2020) also mentioned the importance of having contacts with the host society members, especially in the context of finding employment. However, they pointed out the difficulties in obtaining such ties and the need to be proactive in creating social networks in Finland.

In addition, it was found that in international students' opinion, they did not have enough time during their studies and did not receive enough support from HEIs to create social networks that could assist them with finding employment (Shumilova et al., 2012).

Following the SWT theory, having a wider range of contacts increases the chances of finding work, however, international students found themselves in a 'bubble'. They keep connections with their family and friends from the home country, create co-national ties or ties with other international students that mostly emerge from classroom settings. These ties are either strong or weak, but don't bridge the social distance, hence according to the SWT theory, they do not increase the chances of finding employment. Connections with the local populations that are seen to enhance the job search for migrants are also missing. The next chapter will discuss participation in a project-based work-integrated university course as a potential solution for enlarging and diversifying international students' social capital.

5 PROJECT-BASED COURSES AS NETWORKING OPPORTUNITY

This chapter first overviews the main principles of project-based learning and discusses the previous research available on the interactions within project-based courses. Then it presents Team&Client project course as the case study for this thesis. The chapter ends with a summary of the main findings from the literature review and formulation of the research questions.

5.1 Project-based learning as a type of Work-integrated learning

Project-based learning is a learner-centered pedagogical approach that engages students in working on real-world projects that drive the learning process. Project-based learning is an application of constructivist learning theory, where learners are seen to actively construct their knowledge based on prior experiences and new ideas (Krajcik et al., 1994). According to Helle, Tynjälä, and Olkinuora (2006), the distinctive features of project-based learning are problem orientation, constructing a concrete artifact, learner control of the learning process, contextualization of learning, using and creating multiple forms of representation, and developing motivational orientation. Creating a tangible product (or artifact) that addresses the authentic problem is the key feature that makes project-based learning different from other learner-centered teaching methods, e.g., problem-based learning and experiential learning (Blumenfeld et. al., 1991; Helle et al., 2006).

Project-based learning can be incorporated on different levels of education, from primary schools to high education institutions. Universities mostly focus on providing students with academic knowledge and research skills rather than preparing them for professional life (Guo et al., 2020). Adding project-based courses to the university curricula helps to bridge this gap. Project-based learning can be considered as a form of non-placement work-integrated learning, that combines formal learning with the practical application of acquired skills and knowledge in working-life settings (Jackson, 2018). As project-based courses have a strong real-life orientation, they include cooperation with community partners and industry clients (Krajcik et al., 1994; Lee et al., 2014). Compared to internships, project-based courses might be less taxing to organize resources and time-wise as they don't need to meet the individual needs of a student (McLay & Skelton, 2007). In addition, project-based courses have the potential to be more inclusive than work placements and internships, as the latter tend to be more available to domestic rather than international students (Gribble et al.; Mackaway & Winchester-Seeto, 2018). For instance, international students experience similar difficulties with finding internships in the host country as they do with finding employment, and the lack of local networks is one of the reasons for both of these struggles (Gribble, et al, 2015).

One important characteristic of project-based learning, distinguishing it from other forms of work-integrated learning, is working in teams. This learning method contains both cooperative and collaborative elements, and "a project task is usually planned so that it could not be performed without the common efforts of the participants" (Helle et. al., 2006, p. 296). Some project-based courses are designed to bring together students from different fields of study, aiming to develop their interdisciplinary collaboration skills (Warr & West, 2020). This is the course design of the Team&Client course, which is used as a case study in this thesis.

Students taking project-based courses are guided and mentored throughout the learning process. The role of the course instructor/mentor is to facilitate, advise, guide, and mentor students (Colley, 2008). Instructors/mentors may also perform team-building interventions, e.g., in the form of a team-building workshop to create an effective collaborative working environment (Kapp, 2009). Some project-based learning courses use reflection as a part of the learning experience, such as asking students to write brief reflections on their experience reflections and learning logs (Grant, 2011).

Project-based courses at HEI have several important outcomes for students that are valuable for the professional world. Studies report increasing employability through developing content knowledge, hard skills, soft skills (problem-solving, critical thinking, lifelong learning skills, collaboration, and team-working skills), motivation, and self-efficiency (Guo et al., 2020).

5.2 Interactions within a Project-based course

Researchers have mostly been interested in examining the impact of project-based learning on the learning process and the learning outcomes for students. Most studies available on project-based courses are conducted in a form of course curriculum analysis. Only a very limited number of studies discuss communication between different parties during a project-based course and no studies were found on maintaining the contacts or utilizing them after the course.

Piggott and Winchester-Seeto (2020) present social interaction in a project-based work-integrated course arising from intersections between student teams, academic staff, and partner staff engagement (Figure 3). According to their model, student teams and Academic Staff interact during academic learning support, debriefing, and supervision processes. Student teams and clients engage during the project briefing, ongoing and itinerary feedback and presentations, and final report. Academic and Partner staff, in their turn, communicate during the pre-course by co-designing the project brief and course logistics, and in the post-course face when conducting debriefing and evaluation.

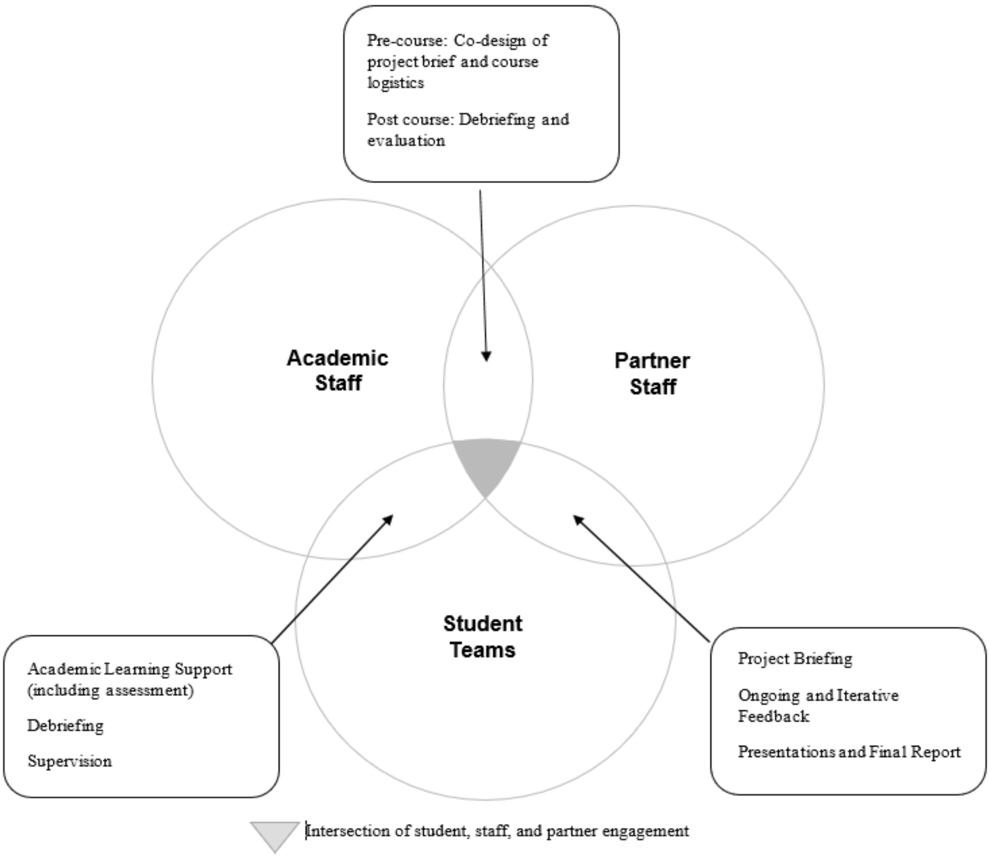

FIGURE 3 Interactions in Project-based WIL course (Piggott and Winchester-Seeto, 2020, p.4)

Based on this model, during a project-based course students have interactions with three actors: with other students within a team, with course teachers, and with clients they conduct a project for. Over the following paragraphs, I present views on these interactions that are available in the research literature. Communication between clients and academic staff is not discussed as it goes beyond the focus of this study. It must be noted that all these studies examine the experiences of domestic students as no research on international student networking during a project-based course has been found.

Isomöttönen and Kärkkäinen (2010) conceptualized student-client communication during various software engineering project courses organized by the University of Jyväskylä. They used grounded theory to analyze teachers' word-of-mouth knowledge about the topic, teachers' written course development plans and reports, and students' project reports. The results of the analysis (Isomöttönen & Kärkkäinen, 2010, p. 79) demonstrated that students experienced communication barriers with all the parties involved in the course (teammates, course teachers, and clients), with student-client communication being the most challenging. Hence the study focused on identifying explanations for the barriers in student-client interactions. The main reason was labeled as inexperience, and involved students not understanding the importance of communicating with the client, showing a lack of confidence and courage, not knowing how to communicate or not being ready to take initiative, and initial confusion due to new experience. How strongly each of the inexperience dimensions appeared was found to depend on a student's background, such as personal orientation and prior experience. It was also found that communication tended to progressively improve during the project course.

The relationship between students and clients was then further discussed in the article by Heikkinen and Isomöttönen (2017) and presented among other topics in the doctoral dissertation by Heikkinen (2017). The studies were dedicated to student experiences during a multidisciplinary project course at the University of Jyväskylä, which was organized in Finnish and had a similar course design as Team&Client course used as a case study by this thesis. Unlike the study by Isomöttönen and Kärkkäinen (2010), these studies used only student's individual learning reports in the data analysis, thus focusing on student's perception of interactions with a client. By conducting thematic network analysis, the researchers demonstrated how the students perceived their status in relation to their clients. They identified three modes of interaction: Parity, Compliance, and Tension. In Parity, students saw the client as supportive, and themselves being equals to the client. Parity was also characterized by informality, open and quick communication, and a supportive working atmosphere. The second mode, Compliance refers to conflicting interests between students and clients, and students complying with clients' requests even when doing so against their own interests. Students were frustrated with clients' indecisiveness or change of plans, however, were afraid to argue face-to-face with the client. Tension described an unstable relationship between students and clients, which varied from students' timidity towards the client to taking control of the project. Students reported being nervous before the first contact or meeting with the client and acting too formally. However, the timidity disappeared during the meeting and students were challenging the client convincing them to accept their project ideas.

There seems to be no previous study conducted on the networking between students and clients during and after a project-based course. However, there is research available that discusses the problems university students report when networking with local companies during and after on-campus employability events. Caldwell and Cattermole (2015) demonstrated that many students experience notable issues with engaging and maintaining contact after meeting an employer. From a student perspective, the main barriers for networking were identified as the following: the lack of free time to spend on networking activities, 'college mindset', the lack of experience and confidence, and belonging to a different social or cultural environment. 'College mindset' was described as a not very serious attitude to studies and a habit of passively receiving information rather than actively and independently engaging in the development of their own employability. Caldwell and Cattermole (2015, p. 295) also highlighted the importance of maintaining the established connections: "in order for students to get something meaningful out of the encounter, they have the opportunity to build a relationship with the person, through regular or repeated contact".

There were no studies found that specifically addressed the question of student-teacher interactions during a project-based course. Literature only provided brief comments on the insufficiency of interactions. For instance, Corno and De Russis (2017) found that only half of the teams had a sufficient amount of interactions with university staff needed for the successful implementation of the project.

Regarding student interactions with other students, as it was stated in the previous section, learning at a project-based course occurs in a social setting, and students are expected to work collaboratively rather than individually to achieve the outcomes of the project. Molina-Besch and Olsson (2016) presented insights into working in multidisciplinary teams at a project course at Lund University. They reported students having an overall positive experience from collaboration in the team both at the beginning and the end of the course. Students named network development as one of the experienced benefits of working in a multidisciplinary team. Interestingly, it was not mentioned as an expected benefit at the beginning of the project. As for challenges, students reported difficulties with communication and more disagreement than they anticipated.

5.3 Case study: Team&Client -multidisciplinary business project course

Universities have a unique position to act as a mediator between local companies looking for international talents and international students, seeking to enhance their employability. This thesis uses the Team&Client -multidisciplinary business project course (URAA1001) as a case study to gain a deeper understanding of the networking aspect of international students' integration into Finnish working life. The English-language version of Team&Client course has been organized by the Career Services of the University of Jyväskylä (JYU) since spring 2016. It gives an opportunity for international master's degree students studying at the University of Jyväskylä (JYU), and international bachelor's degree students studying at the Jyväskylä University of Applied Sciences (JAMK) to work with real clients in Central Finland. The clients are companies and organizations of various sectors and sizes that are located in Jyväskylä or other cities in Central Finland. Many clients seek internationalization or wish to improve their services for customers with foreign background residing in Finland. Clients apply to participate in Team&Client course and discuss the current needs of their company or organization with the organizers before the beginning of the course.

The course is organized every Spring semester and lasts for three months. The course organizers select the student applicants, divide them into multicultural multidisciplinary teams of five, and assign each team a client and a coach teacher. Students cannot choose their teammates or a client. At the beginning of the course, course organizers provide an introductory lecture which includes team-building activities. Each team independently selects a team leader (project manager) and divides the roles among the members. The number of teams varies depending on the number of local clients that signed up for the course. There were 6 teams in 2016 and 2017, 2 teams in 2018, 4 teams in 2019, and 3 teams in 2020. Course organizers discuss the preliminary project idea with clients, however, it is the students' responsibility to negotiate the final topic and define the scope of the project with their client.

The course aims to simulate an authentic working environment. Students work in teams with other students from other disciplines whom they did not know before the project, the client and the coach teacher are also unfamiliar to them. Most of the time students work in teams independently from their coach teachers, making collective decisions on their tasks. Coach teachers assist teams with the project plan and provide advice on how to communicate with the client. However, they are not allowed to directly interfere in student-client interactions and are not helping students with the project deliverables. It is the students' task to contact their client to arrange the first meeting with them and discuss the details of their cooperation. Students take full responsibility for their work and for delivering it to the client on time. The clients are responsible for providing students with the materials necessary to complete the project. Examples of project deliverables in 2016–2020 included customer and staff surveys, market analysis, internationalization strategy, promotional materials, and website development.

At the end of the course, each team presents their project at the final seminar which is open to the public. The clients are also welcome to attend the presentations. The course is graded as pass-fail and students receive 5 ECTS credits for successfully completing the course. Monetary compensation for students is not provided.

5.4 Research questions

Before introducing the research questions of this study, this subchapter summarizes the key themes from the theoretical background and the literature presented in the last four chapters. The number of international students in Finland has tripled over the last 20 years, and the Finnish government aims to attract more international students by the year 2030 as well as increase their employment rate. However, as studies indicate, international students experience difficulties securing employment in Finland with an absence of relevant networks identified as one of the main obstacles. According to SWT theory, social networks that provide better employment outcomes are weak ties connecting people from different social groups. Research shows that in the case of migrants, it is important that weak ties are built with the members of the host society. International students, however, mostly create bonding social capital, by interacting with students from their home countries or other international students in the academic setting. Project-based courses organized by HEI in collaboration with local partners might provide international students with an opportunity of diversifying their social capital. Project-based courses are considered to be more accessible for international students than other forms of work-integrated learning, which are difficult to obtain due to the same barriers that students face when looking for a job. Students participating in a project-based course are involved in three types of interactions — with other students within a team, with a local client, and with a coach teacher. However, as some studies demonstrated, students may experience certain difficulties and barriers when communicating with other parties during a project-based course.

The research aim of the study is to explore how the networks developed during Higher Education studies contribute to international students' integration into Finnish working life. Team&Client -multidisciplinary business project course organized by the University of Jyväskylä acts here as an example of a project-based course where international students can create new social ties which, according to the SWT theory, can be linked to better employment outcomes. Following the key questions identified in the literature review and the importance of student's own understanding of their networking and job-seeking experience, the research questions are formulated as follows:

RQ1: How do the international student participants describe the networking process that took place during the course?

RQ2: How do the participants view the role of the social networks developed during the course in job seeking and employability?

6 THE METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

6.1 Research approach

This study examines social networking that took place between international students, between international students and a client, and between international students and a coach teacher during and after Team&Client -multidisciplinary business project course. For the purpose of this study international students are defined as undergraduate and graduate degree-seeking students who hold a foreign passport and have moved to Finland from another country as adults to be enrolled in the University of Jyväskylä (JYU) or the Jyväskylä University of Applied Sciences (JAMK).

This study follows the interpretive qualitative approach and uses qualitative content analysis (QCA) as the research method. The choice of following the qualitative approach was motivated by both the research questions and the type of data used in this study. I found qualitative methods to be suitable for this study as they allow understanding the meaning of the events or things by answering the questions of 'why' and 'how' (Lune & Berg, 2017). They also allow creating new ways of seeing the existing data and process and interpreting study participants' experiences (Ochieng, 2009).

The study used two sets of data: reports written by international students at the end of the course, and interviews with international student participants conducted 2–5 years after they had completed the course. There was no direct observation of how the participant built and maintained social networks during the course, instead the study is based on participants' accounts of their own experiences. This study shares the viewpoint of social constructivism in proposing that the objects e.g., social ties come to existence through an individual's perception and proposing that they embody meanings during the communicative act. Thus, in this study, social networks between individuals are presented as a subjective perception and not as an objective reality.

6.2 Data collection

This thesis is based on the data collected from the international degree students of five Team&Client courses conducted in English in 2016–2020. The study combines several types of data collected from the course participants: learning reports, final project reports, written course feedback, and interviews. The first three types of data were collected by the course organizers each year at the end of the course. The interviews were conducted in 2021 by the author of the thesis with participants from different course years. The language of all collected data is English.

International student participants of the course had differing socio-economic, socio-cultural and socio-political backgrounds, however as the study is focusing on social network theory these aspects are not considered important and therefore are not further discussed. There were some Finnish students participating in the course; though as the study focuses specifically on international students, data collected from domestic students was excluded from the analysis.

6.2.1 Learning reports, final project reports, course feedback

Individual learning reports were mandatory for course participants in 2016–2017 and were replaced with course feedback in 2018–2020. The learning reports were written by students in a free form, 1–2 pages on average. In the reports, students were asked to analyze what worked well and what did not during the project, to comment on the teamwork, and to reflect on their skills development. Students were informed that the learning report does not affect the grading, so they would feel free to express a possible critique regarding the project course. Some reports from both years were missing. In total, 24 individual learning reports from 2016–2017 were used in the data analysis.

Providing individual course feedback was mandatory for course participants in 2018–2020. Students were asked to answer a qualitative questionnaire that contained 7–9 open-answer questions about their course experience. The course feedback data from 2018 went missing due to the university changing the study platform. In total, feedback forms of 23 students from 2019–2020 were analyzed in the study.

Final project reports were available for each year the course was organized. They were written by either all members of the team or one member chosen for that task. The reports were written in free form, usually between 5 and 10 pages, and described the project results, teamwork, cooperation with the client, and evaluated the team's learning experience during the project. Overall, 21 final project reports from 2016-2020 were collected and used in the study.

The learning reports, final project reports, and course feedback data was collected and provided for this study by the Career Services of the University of Jyväskylä. Students were giving right for their reports and feedback to be used for the research purposes as a part of a course agreement. The data was shared by the Career Services via a secure university communication channel and stored in a passport protected computer. All the data samples were anonymized, including names, organizations, and places, to prevent the possibility that student identities could be recognized from the study.

6.2.2 Interviews

Interviews were conducted with former course participants in 2021. The aim of the interviews was to further discuss the topics emerging from the learning reports, final project reports, and feedback forms and to gain a perspective of the network's development over time. Interview questions were developed after the preliminary analysis of other data sources and are both theory and data-driven. The theoretical framework and the insights from the research literature were used to identify the key themes, after that the preliminary analysis of the earlier collected data was used to formulate the questions. The interviews cover the following major themes: networking process during and after the course, employability, and integration in Finnish working life. Following Granovetter's (1973) argument on the tie's strength, the interview was also designed to establish the frequency and the intensity of contact occurring during and after the course. The interview questions are attached to Appendix 1.

In total, eight formal in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted for the study. One participant took the course in 2016, three participants in 2017, two in 2018, and two in 2019. Participants from the same year worked in different teams. Participants come from different fields of study. Six participants studied in master-level degree programs at JYU and two in the bachelor-level degree programs at JAMK at the time of the course. Participants had different places of origin: five from Europe (three from non-EU and two from EU countries), two from Africa, and one from Asia. Five participants were males and three were females, the age varied from the early 20s to mid-30s. At the time of the interview, two participants graduated and found employment in Finland, two graduated and enrolled in another degree program, two were finishing their studies and working at the same time, and two were at the final stage of their studies looking for jobs. Due to the small number of participants at the Team&Client project course, precise demographic information of each participant will not be provided in order to prevent their identification from this study. Instead, they are referred to as interview participants 1–8.

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, all the interviews were conducted online via Zoom. Interviews lasted fifty minutes on average and were recorded. Before the interview, each participant was given a privacy notice, explaining the basic information about the study and the processing of the personal data, and signed the informed consent form (Appendix 2). As it is mentioned in communication research methods literature, degree of membership is important in interview-based research projects (Croucher & Cronn-Mills, 2014). It is advised that a researcher should be "deeply involved and closely connected to the scene, activity, or group being studied," while at the same time "achieve enough distance from the phenomenon to allow for recording of action and interactions relatively uncolored by what [you] might have had at stake" (Fitch, 1994, p. 36, as cited in Croucher & Cronn-Mills, 2014). Since I am an international student and a former course participant, I was reminding myself during the interviews to obtain enough distance and not let my personal experience influence the research process. I also instructed the participants before the interviews to consider me as a researcher and not as a fellow international student.

Interviews were transcribed, resulting in 116 pages of text. Each interview was preliminary transcribed using Otter software, after which the transcripts were manually edited to ensure the quality of transcription. After that the transcripts were anonymized. I was the only person working with the recordings and transcriptions, and stored them on a password-protected computer.

6.3 Data analysis

Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) was selected as the research method for this study. The SAGE encyclopedia defines QCA as "the intellectual process of categorizing qualitative textual data into clusters of similar entities, or conceptual categories, to identify consistent patterns and relationships between variables or themes" (Julien, 2008, p. 120). QCA is a systematic and flexible method that is suitable for data that requires some degree of interpretation (Schreier, 2013). One of the reasons to choose this method is that it can be applied to any kind of qualitative material, including the data collected by the researcher and sampled from other sources. Another reason is that it helps to focus on the selected aspects of the research material. As it was described earlier, some parts of the data used in this study, such as e.g., project descriptions and student's skills development are beyond the scope of this study. Unlike many other qualitative methods, QCA reduces data to the material relevant to the research questions.

The analysis was conducted following the guidance presented in the textbook Qualitative Content Analysis in Practice by Margrit Schreier (2012). First, I needed to leave out the irrelevant material for my analysis. I read through the data from the learning diaries and final project reports and extracted the parts where students talked about their team, client, or coach teacher. Then I read through the feedback forms and extracted students' answers for two questions, which correspond to the research aim of this study. These two questions were: "How was the cooperation with your client?", and "How was the cooperation with your coach teacher?". After reading through this new set of data, I developed interview questions and conducted the interviews. Once I finished transcribing the interviews, I read through the texts and removed parts that were not relevant to the research questions.

Step two was creating a coding frame. As there are no coding frames available from the research literature, I started building my own coding frame, that can be found in Appendix 3. As it was recommended for studies with multiple data sources (Schreier, 2012), I started by building a frame that fits one data course, adding to the frame at a later stage to make it fit other sources. I decided to first concentrate on participants' descriptions of interactions during the course and started building the frame based on personal learning reports. Regarding the structure of the coding frame, I decided to combine both concept-driven and data-driven strategies. The first step was to create the main categories that cover most important aspects of my research questions. I created the main categories in a concept-driven way. First two main categories labeled 'Frequency of contact' and 'Quality of contact' were adopted from the SWT theory. The third category named 'Factors perceived to affect networking' was created based on the studies by Caldwell and Cattermole (2015), Isomöttönen and Kärkkäinen (2010), and Heikkinen and Isomöttönen (2017).

The next step was creating data-driven subcategories, which help to specify and focus the most relevant material. According to Schreier (2012), there are several ways to do that: progressively summarizing the material, adapting coding from grounded theory, subsumption, and contrasting. I followed the summarizing strategy. As a first step, I paraphrased all the parts in the personal learning diaries that were relevant to the research questions. As a second step, I paraphrased again, deleting the unnecessary details and leaving only the main statement. As a third step, I grouped similar paraphrases together and created a common name for them. Table 1 shows an example of progressive summarizing:

TABLE 1 Examples of progressive summarizing used for building the coding frame

Quote from the data	**Paraphrase, step 1**	**Paraphrase, step 2**	**Common name for both paraphrases**
"It was very hard to communicate with the company due to their tight schedule and limited number of employees."	Communication difficulties due to client's schedule and number of staff	Client is unavailable to communicate	Unavailability
"I was unlucky with my schedule because I had another important classes or exams I couldn't mess at the same time with the company's meetings."	Student unavailable to attend meetings with the client	Student is unavailable to communicate	

After finishing with personal learning diaries, progressive summarizing was conducted on feedback forms and final project reports. I needed to conduct the summarizing process several times to achieve a higher level of abstraction as originally I listed almost 50 potential subcategories. Many of the preliminary subcategories were semantic opposites, and therefore could be labeled under one code name, for instance, initial subcategories 'availability' and 'unavailability' were merged.

The second part of the coding frame, that describes contact and social networks taking place after the course, was created in the same way. The main categories were based on the ideas presented in the literature review and the main interview topics, and the subcategories were created by progressively summarizing the interview data.

Once the subcategories were created, I proceeded to segmenting my data into units of coding. When choosing between the formal and thematic criteria for dividing my data, I chose the latter since students often changed from one topic to another in one sentence, or continued the same idea in a different phrase.

During the pilot phase, I found out that several subcategories were overlapping. I reduced the number of subcategories and re-defined them. After that, I conducted the coding twice, with a two-week difference to increase coding reliability.

The next chapter presents the main results of the analysis. The data illustrations were anonymized, however, grammar, spelling, and punctuation errors were not corrected.

7 FINDINGS

In order to answer the research questions, this chapter will focus on the networking between the Team&Client course participants in two different time periods: during the course, and the period between the end of the course and the time of the interviews. The term ‘course participants’ encompasses the following actors that took part in the course: international students, coach teachers, and client representatives.

7.1 Contact and social networking during the course

The following subchapter analyzes student-student, student-client, and student-coach teacher interaction that from the perspective of international student participants took place during three months of the Team&Client course. The first finding here is that no significant differences could be found between the data created during the course (learning diaries, final project reports, and feedback forms), and the interview data. In other words, the participants’ recollection concerning the course remained accurate years after the course had taken place. This subchapter presents the joint findings from both types of data.

Participants described the networking during the course especially in terms of contact frequency, contact quality, and the factors that they saw affecting the process. These aspects are important for determining the type of the social ties created from the perspective of SWT theory.

7.1.1 Frequency of contact

According to participants, interactions between the course participants varied in frequency. The reported frequency of contact can be divided into three types: high frequency, low frequency, or insufficient frequency.

High frequency refers to communication on a regular basis throughout the entire course. This type of contact frequency was mostly reported regarding interactions between team members. According to the participants, many teams arranged team meetings every week and communicated via social media on a daily or nearly a daily basis. High frequency of contact was also reported for student-client interactions. Several clients had weekly meetings with the student teams and established a regular email exchange:

> The team has weekly meeting with the customer during which receives valuable comments about its work. Also the client keeps in touch with team via emails and promptly answers the questions from the team members. (final report #9)

High frequency of contact was never reported in the data when describing interactions with coach teachers. This is not surprising, taking into consideration that the role of the coach teachers was to mentor the students rather than to take an active part in their work.

Low frequency describes interactions that only happened a couple of times during the whole duration of the course and were based on a specific need. This type of frequency was mostly reported about interactions with a client and a coach teacher. For example, many students would only meet their client twice — at the beginning of the project to discuss the client's goals and requirements and at the very end when presenting the project's results. Some teams only communicated with their coach teachers when there were problems with group dynamics or if they failed to understand the assignment. Also, in some teams, students preferred to work independently and only met when they had to complete a joint task, for example submitting the project plan:

> We only decided to meet when we needed to make group decisions and we think it was wise as the tasks were allocated in a way that each could work on their own. (final report #2)

Insufficient frequency refers to the amount of contact that was below participants' expectations or wasn't enough to effectively work on the project. This category was reported regarding student-client interactions. For example, some participants initially expected that they would work closely with the client, however, the client preferred that the team works their own and only arranged a few meetings with the team. In some cases, participants viewed regular weekly meetings to be necessary for the project's success but the client was not able to meet with them so often:

> We tried to colloborate [sic] with the client as much as possible. However, the client was too busy to collaborate with us as we expected. For example, we tried to have weekly meeting with the client to update on the project status and steps to move forwards, but in reality we could meet the client 1 time every 3 weeks. This made the communication prolonged, which somehow contributed to the delay of the project. (feedback form #3)

7.1.2 Quality of contact

Along with the frequency of interactions, participants often discussed their quality by talking about contact depth, communication clarity, and the general impression from collaboration.

7.1.2.1 General impression

The general impression from collaboration varied from excellent and good to satisfactory and poor. The majority of international students described the general impression that they got from interactions as excellent or good. A few poor general impressions were mostly related to communication hiccups with a client or one of the team members.

7.1.2.2 Depth

The depth dimension describes the level of intimacy and emotional involvement between the different people engaging in an interaction. Some participants described interactions in a team as being distant and purely professional while others talked about creating a close bond and even becoming friends with their team members.

A similar pattern emerged from students' descriptions of their relationship with a client. In most cases, when the depth theme appeared in the data regarding student-client interactions, the relationship was described as distant. However, in several cases students developed close proximity with their client, perceiving these relations as a form of friendship. The following quotes illustrate the differences in student's descriptions:

> Our relationship [with the client] was very professional. Because we were working for them… We didn't keep in touch as much and every time we wanted to meet we had to book an appointment. (interview participant #5)

> She was more like a teacher, a friend then [sic] our client. (feedback form #21)

> I think, after the second or third, meeting with the client, we didn't feel anymore that we were actually meeting a client. It was more like meeting people that you know well, and you were just spending this time together. It was more like a friendship. (interview participant #1)

Some clients were willing to get to know the students better by inviting them for joint lunches and company events. Several clients wanted to thank students for their work and organized special celebrations of project completion. One student was invited to a business trip and spent several days closely cooperating with their client.

The depth theme rarely appeared in students' comments on cooperation with their coach teacher.

7.1.2.3 Clarity

Finally, the quality of interactions was described by participants in terms of clarity. In some cases, international students emphasized how clear and effective communication with other course participants was. Some students, on the contrary, experienced problems with understanding what other parties expected and required them to do. The following examples illustrate different student experiences:

> From the first meeting with client we received all instructions/expectations from the project. (feedback form #5)

> I would have wished if he [client] would have given us more clear instructions of what he expects. (feedback form #1)

7.1.3 Factors perceived to affect networking

During the data analysis, a number of themes emerged that can be considered as factors that could influence participant's networking process during the course. These factors are: type of contact, availability, working atmosphere, motivation, ability to handle diversity, personal impression, and language barrier. All these factors could affect the networking experience in either positive or a negative way with an exception of the language barrier that can only be considered as an obstacle for interactions.

7.1.3.1 Type of contact

Type of contact refers to whether a student participant directly interacted with the client or a coach teacher or indirectly through another student acting as a mediator. The first meetings with a client or a coach teacher were usually attended by all team members, however the interactions after that varied. Many teams organized their work in such a way that only one student in the team was in direct contact with the client. Some of them appointed a communication manager who was in charge of all teams' external interactions, in some teams this role was played by a team leader. Thus, in many cases, only one student in a team exchanged information with the client or coach teacher, and other members sent and received information through that person.

However, in a few teams, members who were not supposed to be in charge of contacting the client or a coach teacher were still interacting with them directly because they perceived it to be more convenient. For example, a student who was designing brochures for a client found it easier and more time-effective to email the client directly to discuss the technical details and rather than to forward their questions and receive feedback through the team's communication manager. In other example, sharing the same physical had an effect on the type of contact:

> Yeah, I talked to him [coach teacher] directly.… And I think, as far as I remember, the team leader was technically in charge of communicating with him. But honestly, it was just easier to meet with him at my university, because he's working there. (interview participant #4)

7.1.3.2 Availability

The availability factor describes whether participants of the course had time and opportunity to engage in interactions. This factor was perceived to affect interactions taking place on every level — between students in the team, between students and clients, and between students and coach teachers. Members of each team were studying at different degree programs which timetables did not always match. Also, it could be difficult for students to combine the project work with their social and personal life. While some students found a way to deal with this challenge and make themselves available for the project meetings, others did not attend them, thus losing an opportunity to interact with other course participants.

Clients' availability also varied. Some students mentioned that their client was always ready to meet, promptly answered emails, and provided all the necessary materials. Several students were positively impressed that the client constantly stayed in touch despite their very busy schedule. Others, however, reported that their client was too busy to interact with them. In the case of clients, availability issues were sometimes long-lasting and were perceived by students as seriously affecting their project experience.

> I think there was like a five-week block or something where they just didn't reply to our messages… I don't know if it was exactly five weeks, but it was quite, quite a long chunk of the project where, you know, we could have been doing stuff, but because we had no interaction with them, then we were kind of held up. (interview participant #3)

As for coach teachers, several students highlighted that their coach teacher was reachable despite being very busy.

7.1.3.3 Working atmosphere

Working atmosphere refers to how participants described the atmosphere in the team or cooperation with the coach teacher and client. The most typical description that can be considered as having a positive influence on networking is supporting atmosphere. For example, some participants mentioned that their coach teacher was supportive and encouraging, and they felt that they could talk about any issues. Some students were positively surprised by the level of support they received from their client:

> In my opinion the cooperation with our client was very professional and we received all the information and the help we needed. The clients even sensed our confusion at times and pointed us in the right direction. (feedback form #20)

Themes of harmony and unanimity were also often brought in the research data. Students mentioned, for example, that team members were getting along very well, and there were no conflicts or big disagreements between them. Some participants also used the words friendly and relaxing when positively describing the working atmosphere in the team or between the team and the client.

On the contrary, one of the negative influences mentioned was contention. Some students reported arguments and conflicts during team meetings that had a negative impact on their relationship with other participants. Some described the atmosphere in the team as forced due to the students having no influence over who they work on the project with.

> It [atmosphere in the team] was very forced. I think since the groups were all mixed together randomly, it was a bit kind of forced to try to get along, which wasn't always so easy. (interview participant #7)

7.1.3.4 Motivation

Another factor that appeared in the student's reports and interviews rather often is motivation. The level of participants' interest in the course was seen as having influence on their willingness to interact with other participants. According to the participants, highly motivated students were prioritizing the course to their other activities and commitments while less motivated students tended to be less committed. In several teams, some participants dropped out at the beginning or even during the middle stage of the course.

Even though the clients were initiators of the project and the ones to directly benefit from their successful implementation, their level of motivation and commitment also varied. According to the participants, some clients demonstrated a very high level of engagement and were interested in having regular interactions with the students:

> Yes, I think I was really positively impressed by the level of their personal interest in this and also like, level of engagement, because the very first meeting, we saw the CEO, and then the second person in the company, and they were very much into this project.... And it turned out that it was everlasting energy that we discovered there at the first meeting because we had those meetings consistently, we never dropped out kind of from our schedule. (interview participant #1)

Some clients, however, seemed to become less motivated as the project progressed:

> Towards the beginning of the project, the client was prompt and encouraging but unfortunately seemed less invested as the project went on. (feedback form #18)

The theme of motivation did not come up in students' description of cooperation with a coach teacher.

7.1.3.5 Level of comfort with diversity

Diversity in the context of this study relates to the variety of participants' cultural backgrounds, personal features, language proficiency, and prior study and work experiences. Each team could be considered to be both multicultural and multidisciplinary, and participants had to handle differences in work styles and ethics. Some students reported being positive about the multicultural experience in the team because they perceived that having different approaches to doing things increased creativity and innovation. Some students also expressed delight that they could learn something new or different from their teammates with different backgrounds. Others experienced challenges related to getting all different working styles "under one roof" as one participant put it. Students reported repeatedly arguing about these matters, and in some cases, it led to a conflict and team members refusing to share tasks, preferring to work on them individually.

Even though in most cases clients and coach teachers had different cultural backgrounds than students, the diversity theme never emerged in the data when describing cooperation with course participants.

7.1.3.6 Personal impression

The impression students got from other course participants also seemed to contribute to their interest in networking with them. Mostly the personal impression theme emerged in the data when describing cooperation with the contact person from the client side. All those personal impressions were positive. The students used such descriptions as 'very friendly', 'really nice person', 'open-minded', 'understanding', and 'kind'. Coach teachers, however, were almost never described in terms of personal qualities. It might be explained by the fact that for many students working with a real client in Finland was a totally new experience, while a coach teacher could be in their eyes just another teacher. In most cases, students described their team members collectively, e.g. "the [team]members were friendly, understanding and patient", rather than commenting on the personal impression they got from individual members of the team.

It was found that not only personal impression of another participant of the course, but also the impression the student thought the other person got of them could affect the networking process. Below is the example of a perceived negative impression that made the student unwilling to interact with the client:

> I didn't feel that he [client] liked me as a professional. That's why I was kind of scared to talk to him. (interview participant #4)

7.1.3.7 Language barrier

The language barrier is a factor that can negatively influence an individual's ability to interact with each other. Even though for the majority of students in the course English wasn't their native language, there were no reports of students having problems with using it as lingua franca within the team. Instead, students attributed the difficulties in understanding each other to cultural differences rather than to (English) language proficiency. This can potentially be explained by students having prior experience of group work in English from other university courses. However, the theme of a language barrier emerged in several instances of student-client and student-coach teacher interactions. For example, a few students reported that it was hard to understand what their coach teacher was talking about due to problems with their English skills.

One of the clients also couldn't speak English very well and wasn't willing to speak with the students in that language. During the first meeting, the client found out that the team leader had high proficiency in Finnish, and from that moment on only interacted with that student:

> She [client] introduced herself and company and the project in English. And then I don't remember exact details, but somehow she switched to Finnish and she spoke to our team leader. And then she spoke to him. Meeting wasn't so long, it was less than an hour, 30 minutes to 40. And then when we left he told us what that was about. (interview participant #6)

As it can be seen from the data analysis results, participants had very different interaction experiences during the course. In some teams, students reported communicating frequently and intensively, which led to closer proximity between the members, while in other teams the members remained rather distant and only engaged in interactions when there was a perceived need. Finding time for the project work, creating an atmosphere of support and harmony in the team, being motivated, having a positive approach to diversity, and having a positive impression of fellow team members were seen as having a positive influence on networking with team members. At the same time, unavailability, forced working atmosphere or contention in the team, and inability to handle diversity were found to be an obstacle for networking within a team.

Relations between international students and the clients also varied. With most clients, international student participants had non-frequent interactions and a distant kind of relationship. However, some students reported having weekly interactions and developed a close level of proximity, which was sometimes perceived as a kind of friendship. Some students also reported having an insufficient frequency of contact with their clients. Positive influences on the student-client networking process were found to be having direct contact, being available for meetings and email exchange, support from the client's side, client's high level of interest in the project, and student's personal impression of a client. On the contrary, such factors as communicating with a client through a mediator, a client being too busy to interact, a client not being invested in a project, a student perceiving their client not liking them personally, and having a language barrier had a negative influence on the networking between a student and a client.

Descriptions of student-coach teacher interactions were appearing more rarely in the data than the other two types of interactions during the course. It can partly be explained by the fact that in 2016–2017 students were not asked to comment in their reports on their cooperation with the coach teacher. In addition, it may be explained by students being used to interacting with teachers at other university courses, thus potentially not perceiving it to be a new and different experience that is worth describing. Students mostly reported having low frequency of contact with a coach teacher. Positive influences on the networking experience were identified as being in direct contact, coach teacher available despite their busy schedule, and being supportive. The reported obstacles were having indirect contact, and a language barrier.

Another notable conclusion is that in individual learning diaries and individual feedback forms as well as in the interviews the participants often used the collective 'we' referring to the whole team instead of describing their personal experience when talking about their interaction with their team members, clients, and coach teachers.

7.2 Contact and social networks after the course

In the previous section, it was discussed how the Team&Client course participants networked during the course. However, were the social networks maintained and developed after the course had finished? The following section is based on the analysis of the interview with former international student participants of the course from different years. It examines whether participants keep in touch with each other after the course and establishes the factors that could affect social ties maintenance. It also discusses whether students used any of the networks created during the course in their job search activities, in what way, and which factors in their eyes had an impact on network utilization.

7.2.1 Maintaining network after the course

The majority of interview participants (6 out of 8) mentioned that they had interactions with their former teammates after the course. However, only two of them mentioned that they kept in touch until the present day. Participants mentioned that for several months they kept talking in the group chats that they used during the project course. They also mentioned that the team members were having discussions about meeting together after the end of the course. Some did meet, for others, it never happened. Several interviewees mentioned maintaining contact with all team members while others indicated that they only talked with one or two members of the team.

Half of the interview participants (4 out of 8) maintained contact with the client. Most of them kept in touch via social media such as Facebook and LinkedIn, where they liked and commented posts or sent holiday greetings. One interviewee mentioned that they tried to contact the client two years after the course when collecting data for their thesis, however, never received a response to their email.

As for coach teachers, 3 out of 8 participants reported having interactions with them after the course. Two of them recalled having occasional interactions in the form of an email exchange or having small talk when seeing each other at the university. One student, however, developed a long-lasting relationship with their coach teacher. The teacher invited them to take part in their course and later suggested to co-author an article.

7.2.2 Factors affecting network maintenance

There were several themes raised by participants during the interviews that seem to influence the maintenance of networks created during the course.

7.2.2.1 Time

When talking about relations with other course participants, several interviewees mentioned that the connection weakened over time. For several months after the course had ended, they kept talking in the team chat, however, such communication had gradually stopped. As for the relationship with the client, one participant mentioned that during the same year as they took part in the course, they had met the client several times at different events. However, after two years passed, they assumed that the client no longer remembered them.

7.2.2.2 Availability

Another factor that came up during the interviews is availability, which in this context means whether it was possible or not to have interactions. Many former students and one of the coach teachers moved to other cities or countries, which created a physical distance between the participants. One interviewee was not able to reach their former client and assumed that the company might have ceased existing two years after they had completed the project.

> I contacted him [client] because I wanted to go to his office and maybe to collect data [for the thesis] from his office as well, but… I never heard back from them. I'm not sure if the company still exists. (interview participant #5)

7.2.2.3 Motivation

Motivation can be considered another important factor in social network maintenance. Some participants kept in contact because they shared similar professional interests and were willing to discuss them with each other. On the contrary, former course participants, who moved away from Finland after graduation, were no longer interested to upkeep the ties they had created during their studies. Some of them, according to their teammates, only completed the course for study credits and "didn't have any willingness" to keep in touch.

7.2.2.4 Frequency of contact during the course

Finally, the low amount of interaction during the course in student's opinion led to no interactions after its completion:

> ...I don't even remember the name of the person [client]. So, no, I didn't keep in touch. Although, honestly, like, I was assuming that when I joined the course, that it would be a good way to build connections with the client, but I met him only once already at the end of the program. (interview participant #4)

7.2.3 Utilizing network for employment and employability related activities

When asked whether the networks developed during the Team&Client course had assisted them in finding a job, all the interview participants answered negatively. Many of them did not see a possible connection between networking and the job search process. Nevertheless, half of the interviewees utilized the created social networks in some way that could benefit their future employment. Three of them utilized the tie they built more than once and in several different ways. It is important to note that out of all ties developed during the course, students only used the networks they created with their former clients. There was a big variety in the time period when students utilized the ties: from the time right after the course up to almost three years after its completion. In six instances the student approached their client, in two other cases, it was the client's initiative.

Two of the interviewees who have not used the ties did not exclude the possibility of using them in the future in case they would be actively looking for a job in Finland. During some of the interviews, students started to reevaluate their interactions during and after the course, and think about what they could have done differently. Some of them realized that they could still use those ties in a way that could help them in a job search.

7.2.3.1 Recommendation Letter

Three interviewees asked their former clients to write them a recommendation. They did it at different time periods: one student approached their client soon after the end of the course, another student — one year after, and another — almost three years after the course had finished. In all cases, the clients provided students with a written recommendation.

7.2.3.2 Internship/Job opportunity

One interviewee was offered an internship by the client and completed it a few months after the end of the course. They also discussed the possibility of full-time employment, however, the student decided not to take the offer. Another interview participant mentioned that the leader of their team was asked by the client to continue cooperation and worked for them with a temporary contract.

One of the interviewees asked for a job opportunity from the client but was told that there were no vacancies at the time. The majority of interviewees did not contact the client regarding further cooperation due to the factors that will be discussed in the next section of this chapter. Two of them, however, expressed a desire to work for the client if they would be given such an opportunity.

7.2.3.3 Thesis

Two interviewees were considering writing their Master's thesis for the client. In one case, the offer came from the client, in another case, it was the student's initiative. None of the thesis ideas, however, was implemented.

7.2.3.4 Expanding professional network

One interviewee asked their client to recommend another company or organization that could potentially be interested in their skill set. The client put the student in touch with a local company that invited them for a meeting. The meeting did not lead to an internship or a job opportunity, nevertheless, the student found it to be a useful experience.

7.2.4 Factors affecting network utilization

When discussing social ties usage in employment-related activities with interview participants, several factors emerged that could influence network utilization.

7.2.4.1 Attitude (proactive vs. passive)

Several interviewees highlighted that they took a pro-active attitude and it was their own initiative to reach out to the client and ask about potential job opportunities or a recommendation letter. Others, however, were taking a more passive stand. They did not think of possible ways of utilizing the contacts they developed but instead expected course organizers to provide them with information and guidance on what they can ask of clients:

> Asking for a letter of recommendation? No, I didn't. But on hindsight, I think, I think if those who handled the course had told us about these opportunities, I think maybe some of us would have got it... None of that was communicated to us at the beginning of the course. (interview participant #5)

One of the interviewees suggested that the course participants should be more active in using the networking opportunities provided by the course:

> I think, I think what also should be taught to students or kind of explained is that we are often as students… we kind of inherently think or believe that it should be like that all the time that everybody has to suggest us things, and everybody has to provide us with information. But I would suggest to adopt a rather proactive approach independently and, and recognize the opportunities and being active, and reaching out and asking. (interview participant #1)

7.2.4.2 Level of proximity

Two interviewees explained that they did not approach the client after the course because they believed they had not developed a close enough relationship. In their opinion, a few meetings over a few month period did not give their client "a good extensive knowledge" about them, their character, and abilities. As one of them highlighted, the client did not know them much as they did not work closely, and even if the client agreed to write such a letter out of politeness, it would not be a meaningful recommendation in the interviewee's opinion.

The participant, who was offered an internship attributed it to having a closer relationship with the client compared to other team members, who unlike the interviewee studied in the study program directly related to the internship position:

> I was surprised that they picked me because there were two other people in, in the group that were actually studying [field of study].... I think it could be also to do with that I maybe had the most contact with them, I suppose. Well, you know, I think I was, I think I went to all the meetings with the client, but not everybody else did. (interview participant #3)

Another interviewee also mentioned that their team member got the job offer due to their close proximity to the client. That team member was responsible for communication with the client on behalf of the team through the entire project and was regularly in touch with the client.

7.2.4.3 Relevance

When talking about contacting former team members regarding potential job opportunities, two interviewees raised the topic of the relevance of such contacts. Ties with the students from the same or similar field of study were perceived to be potentially useful. However, from their point of view, it did not make sense to ask students from other subjects for help in the job search process.

> I mean, no one from them really would help me in the areas where I want to work. So that was never really a consideration. (interview participant #7)

The relevance theme also emerged in a conversation about utilizing a network with the client. One interviewee explained that they decided to ask for a recommendation several years after the course because the former client belonged to the same industry as the job they applied for.

7.2.4.4 Language barrier

Two interviewees did not ask the client for potential employment opportunities because they perceived the lack of Finnish language proficiency to become an obstacle. Even though during the course the projects were carried out in English, they believed that to be able to work for the same client full-time, good skills in Finnish would be essential due to the nature of the client's business.

> I didn't try to ask anything [about continuing cooperation with the client] because I knew it's hopeless, because of Finnish. And I was 100% sure that there is no any sense to ask if I can't speak it. (interview participant #6)

7.2.4.5 Project outcome

Finally, one student explained that they did not contact the client because of the project outcome. The interviewee did not feel proud of the project as they believed that their team did not put enough attention and time. Another student, on the contrary, felt confident contacting the client for a recommendation several years after the course, because they knew that the client was very satisfied with the project results.

7.2.4.6 Time

One student also perceived the time factor to be important. They mentioned that for half a year after the course they could still contact their former members regarding job opportunities. However, the more time passed, the less they considered such a possibility.

As it can be seen from the analysis of the interview data, the majority of the participants were initially maintaining the networks developed during the Team &Client course, however, the interactions lowered in frequency and depth over time. The participants mostly kept in touch with their former team members, half of them had interactions with their client, and some of them — with the coach teacher. The amount of time passed from the end of the course, the possibility of having interactions (e.g. physical distance), motivation to stay in touch, and the number of interactions during the course were seen by interviewees as the factors influencing the contact maintenance.

None of the interview participants found a job through the networks developed during the course, however, one of them received a job offer from the client. Half of the interviewees utilized or tried to use the ties in a way that can be considered beneficial for their employability, such as receiving a recommendation letter, getting an internship or a job position, writing a thesis for the client, and connecting to possible local employers. The interviewees only used the networks they had built with their clients in the employment-related activities. In most cases, a student has initiated the contact. From the interviewees' perspective, several factors had an impact on their decision of using or not using the ties: pro-active versus passive attitude, perceived level of proximity, perceived relevance of the connection, language barrier, the perceived outcome of the project, and the amount of time passed from the end of the course.

Overall, even though during the course international students built networks with their team members, clients, and coach teachers with most interactions being between the students, only the network with the client was used in a job-search and employability-related activities.

8 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This thesis aimed to explore how the social networks created by international students during university studies contribute to their integration into Finnish working life by analyzing the interaction experience of the Team&Client project courses' international student participants. This chapter analyzes the findings against the theoretical background and the existing literature, suggests the possible implications for research and practice, and discusses the limitations of the study.

8.1 The elusive nature of networks

According to the SWT theory, which was discussed in the fourth chapter, social networks can be divided into two types — strong and weak, based on the amount of time two individuals spend with each other, emotional intensity, intimacy, reciprocity of communication (Granovetter, 1973). Which type of ties was created during this course? Even though some international students perceived the relationship that they developed with their team members and their clients as a kind of friendship, it can be argued that those networks should rather be categorized as weak ties. The participants spent a large amount of time together, however, those frequent interactions happened during the three months of the project work. Based on the interviews with some of the former course participants, those interactions were likely to weaken in frequency after the project had ended. It may also be assumed that emotional intensity and intimacy in those relations did not reach the level required for a close friendship. Thus, following the SWT theory, it can be concluded that international student participants developed only weak ties with other team members, clients, and coach teachers during the Team&Client project course.

SWT theory predicted that weak ties are important for employment outcomes, however, in order to be valuable, they need to connect the individuals from different social circles (Granovetter, 1983). In the case of people of foreign origin, previous studies highlighted that weak ties with the members of the host society are essential in the job search (Kanas et al., 2011; Li, 2020). Even though no interview participant found a job resulting from the developed networks, weak ties led to employability outcomes. The finding that only ties with a client were utilized by students in their integration into Finnish working life is in line with both the importance of weak ties bridging members of different social groups and them being developed with the local population. This finding may also raise the question of the reasonability of a project course design where the majority of the team members are international students. Following Putnam's conceptualization of social capital (2000), working in a team of solely international students doesn't increase an international student's bridging capital as it doesn't connect them with individuals from heterogeneous social groups. Having both domestic and international students in the project teams might have been more beneficial from the networking perspective.

Another consideration regarding the SWT theory is whether a weak tie has any potential employment benefits if an individual perceives it as a distant connection. In his book called Getting a Job (1995) Granovetter mentioned that in some cases it is a person whose name they do not even remember who helps an individual to find a job. The findings of this study, however, indicate that some students would not utilize their ties with a client because they thought that a client did not know them well enough.

The impact of time on a tie and its utilization is another factor that is not covered by the SWT theory. This study found that the course participants perceived the change in the tie strength over time. It can take several years before international student participants of the course transit into employment, and by that time, according to the interviewee's experiences, they may no longer remember the name of the client, think that the client no longer remembers them or the organization they completed a project for may no longer exist. Thus, if the contact was not maintained after the course, it may turn from a weak tie into an absent tie in Granovetter's definition or into an invisible tie in Fendler's definition. Unlike weak ties, invisible ties can hardly be a source of information (Fendler, 2020); hence they cannot benefit individuals in terms of career development.

Maintaining contact, on the contrary, through occasional interactions may bring benefits to a student even several years after the course completion. When two interviewees decided to reach their client more than two years after the course, the one who kept in touch all that time promptly got a response, while the other one who had no interactions with the client never heard back from them. The importance of maintaining the tie between a student and a local employer through regular and repeated contact has been previously highlighted in a study by Caldwell and Cattermole (2015).

8.2 'College mindset' and other perceived networking barriers

This study identified students' passive attitude to their employability development and expectation that course organizers should navigate them through this process as one of the negative factors, affecting network utilization. This finding relates to the so-called 'college mindset', which was found by Caldwell and Cattermole (2015) to be one of the perceived barriers to student networking with local employers. According to Caldwell and Cattermole (2015), students may not fully realize what being a higher education student actually means: that it differs from the previous level of studies and that they need to take a more serious approach to the opportunities provided for them. 'College mindset', thus may also correspond to the motivation factor, identified by the present study.

In the case of international students, lack of initiative and independence may also be influenced by their previous educational experiences in another culture. Cortazzi and Jin (1997) identified five different academic cultures, which are characterized not only by a different approach to research but also by the type of relationship between students and teachers. By comparing teaching practices at British universities, and expectations held by Chinese and other non-Western students, Cortazzi and Jin found out that those two do not match. While university teachers in the UK expected the students to demonstrate active involvement and independence of mind, international students were used to passive participation and dependence on a teacher as an authority figure. International students in Finland may face a similar challenge if they come from a different academic culture. For instance, a study by Wang and Räihä (2021) found that international students from China were struggling to cope with a high level of individual freedom and self-motivated learning typical for Finnish HEIs.

This study found that in most cases when the tie was utilized in the job search and employability-related activity, the initiative belonged to the student. This finding contradicts the one made by Granovetter (1995) who claimed that only in 20% of cases respondents approached their contact, while in 80% of cases it was their contact person's initiative. However, it must be noted that Granovetter's study (1995) was conducted on the general population in a different part of the world. A study focused on the Chinese international student's integration in Finland (Li, 2020) highlighted the importance of taking a proactive attitude when transiting into working life. For instance, one of the participants of that study (Li, 2020) stressed that Finnish people do not actively seek to establish contact, and therefore it is in international students’ own interest to take the initiative.

In addition to ‘college mindset’, other obstacles for networking from a student perspective that Caldwell and Cattermole (2015) found were the lack of free time to spend on networking activities, the lack of experience and confidence, and belonging to a different social or cultural environment. Students’ lack of time corresponds to the availability factor identified by this study, which was found to affect the networking process during the course. The lack of experience and confidence did not appear in the data used in the present study. This can be potentially explained by the differences in study design. The research conducted by Caldwell and Cattermole (2015) focused on the interactions between the students and employers during and after university employability events. At such events it is a student’s own decision whether to engage in any interactions at all, however, during the Team&Client project course, some interactions were mandatory in order to complete the course. Belonging to a different social and cultural environment did not emerge as an obstacle for networking in this study. However, the language barrier factor may be viewed as a related one.

8.3 Team network vs. personal network

One topic that was not discussed in the literature review but appeared in the data is whether networks developed by students working in a team should be considered as personal ties or shared group ties. When describing their interactions with the client or a coach teacher, students often used the pronoun ‘we’ as presenting the opinion on behalf of the whole team rather than their own personal opinion (e.g., an interview participant saying “we didn't feel anymore that we were actually meeting a client”). It may imply that the participants perceive the interactions taking place during the course as a shared group experience. Seeing a joint team’s opinion was expected in the group reports, however, it was as common to come across it in the personal feedback forms and personal learning diaries. The interview participants also used ‘we’ when asked about their individual perceptions. During the data analysis, it was also found that while some students were in direct contact with their clients, others communicated with the client via other team members who acted as mediators. In the light of these findings, it appears important to pose a question: in the case of a project-based course, is it an individual student who builds a tie with a client, or is it a team as an entity that creates the tie and shares it with its members?

This question has not been raised by the previous studies that discussed student-client interactions during a project-based course. Nevertheless, a similar pattern can be spotted from the data illustrations presented in those studies. For example, in the article by Heikkinen and Isomöttönen (2017, p. 21), a student mostly used the pronoun 'we' when describing their impression of the first meeting with the client in their personal report: "We were nervous, since we did not know anything about the people we were going to meet…. We felt immediately relaxed, and the discussions about the project topic were equal."

8.4 Implications

This study is in line with SWT theory, as it showed that weak ties are beneficial in the work integration process. It also confirmed that weak ties which bridge social distance are more useful for an individual than weak ties that do not. However, it was also found that international students might not use a tie if they perceive the relationship to be too weak, not relevant or if a long time passed since they were in touch with the person. These results call for quantitative research on the influence of different factors on network utilization in job search and employability by international students. In addition, this study raised the question of whether students create a personal or a shared tie when they work and interact as a team.

It would also be interesting to compare how international student networking and network utilization processes differ across various work-integrated learning (WIL) opportunities, organized by HEI. Is it the same in the case of, for example, work placements, internships, work simulations, or volunteering? As this study was the first of its kind, a coding frame was developed for it that can now be tested on different materials.

In addition, this study solely focused on the international student's point of view. However, communication involves two parties, and each of them may have a different perception of the process and its outcomes. Conducting a similar qualitative study with a focus on clients' experiences may bring new insights to the topic of international student networking.

The questions for future research may be formulated as follows: Are there other factors that affect international students' networking? How significant are different factors in weak ties utilization from an international student's perspective? What is the client's view on networking with international students during a project-based course? Are the networks built during a project-based course personal or are they shared by a team? Are there any differences between different types of WIL in terms of networking and network utilization opportunities?

Regarding practical implications, the results of this study suggest that international students should take a serious approach to employability development, and recognize the potential importance of the networks they are creating during HE studies. A project-based course as a type of work-integrated learning connects students to local working life. If an international student plans to stay and find employment in Finland, it may be in their best interest to take part in such a course. However, this course is an opportunity, not a guarantee. Building a network, maintaining and getting a benefit out of it does not automatically happen on its own but requires active input from a student. Relying on course organizers to give precise instructions or wait for the client to approach them may not be a good tactic for an international student in Finland. Instead, it would be more beneficial to take the initiative and add a client on LinkedIn, ask for a recommendation, job and internship opportunities, or contact information of other potential employers.

Besides being motivated and proactive, another piece of advice for international students would be to carefully plan when to participate in a project-based course. In order to take the most of the course and its networking opportunities, it is important not to have too many other studies and other commitments that could overlap with the project work. Allocating enough time for meetings and other forms of communication during the course can help in establishing networks that may later be utilized when integrating into working life. In addition, as the results of this study show, tie strength can weaken over time, or utilizing it may become difficult due to other factors. Thus, it might be more beneficial to take the course closer to graduation rather than at the beginning of the studies.

Practical advice for the course organizers would be to talk to the participants about networking and its role in job seeking and employability. As the findings of this study indicated, students may not realize the importance of networking and its role in transition into working life. It may also be useful to invite course alumni to talk to the students about their experience during and after the course. In addition, educators should take into consideration that students might have a 'college mindset', not realizing that participation in a work-integrated project course requires a high level of independence. When instructing international students at the beginning of the course, it is also important to bear in mind that they come from different academic cultures and may have different expectations regarding the level of guidance during the course. Finally, educators may consider changing the course design in a way that there are both domestic and international students taking part in the course. This would allow international students to create more weak ties that bridge the social distance, therefore having higher potential to be useful in Finnish working life integration.

8.5 Limitations

Some limitations of this study are related to the nature of qualitative research. First of all, the results of qualitative research may be influenced by the researcher's personal biases (Anderson, 2010). Being an international student myself, and a former participant of Team&Client course I could possibly project some of my own thoughts and perspective when analyzing and interpreting the findings of the study. Qualitative research is also prone to ambiguities in the language (Ochieng, 2009). As I am a non-English speaker and the data was produced mostly by other non-native speakers, there might be a certain degree of misunderstanding and misinterpretation present. Finally, as this is a qualitative study, the results cannot be applied to a wider population with a high degree of certainty (Ochieng, 2009).

Other limitations relate to data collection and data analysis. As it was previously mentioned, all feedback forms of the 2018 course participants were lost as well as several personal reports from the previous years. In addition to that, it was challenging to combine different types of data in the study. Personal learning reports and final group reports were written by students in a free form and, unlike feedback forms and interviews, had no explicit questions regarding networking with their clients and coach teachers. Also, students could leave some thoughts out, for example, the information about a client communicating to the team in Finnish appeared during the interview but was not reported by any of the team members at the time of the course. As for the interviews, they were conducted several years after participants had completed the course, and it is possible that they could forget or mix some details.

Qualitative data analysis is usually considered to be more consistent and trustworthy when the coding is performed by a group of researchers (Harding & Whitehead, 2016; Schreier, 2012). However, the Master's thesis format does not provide an opportunity for teamwork. In order to improve the reliability of this study, the coding was done in accordance with recommendations for one-coder research developed by Schreier (2012).

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1 INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1) Background: When did you participate in the Team&Client course? What motivated you to take part in the course? Did you know any other course participants before the course?

2) Team: Please tell me about your team. Do you remember how the team-building process went? How often did you communicate? How was the 'atmosphere' in the team? How was communication in general? Did collaboration with the team members meet your expectations? Did you keep in touch with your team members after the project ended?

3) Coach teacher: How was your cooperation with your coach teacher? Did it meet your expectations? How often did you communicate? Did you keep in touch after the project?

4) Client: Who was your client? How did your first meeting go? How often did you communicate? Did you feel it was sufficient? How would you evaluate your cooperation? Did it meet your expectations? Did you keep in touch after the project ended?

5) Other possible contacts: Did you interact with students from other teams, other coach teachers, or clients?

6) Employment: What is your current employment status? Please tell me briefly about your job search process and working experience after this course.

7) Network utilization: Did personal connections made during this course assist you in finding a job? Did you contact any of the course participants (team members, coach teacher, client) when looking for a job? Would you consider contacting them? Did you ask any of them for a recommendation?

8) Course evaluation: Retrospectively, what do you think about Team&Client course? Do you think this course was useful for you? Do you think it enhanced your employability? Did it help you integrate into Finnish working life? Would you change anything in the course structure?

APPENDIX 2 THE PRIVACY NOTICE AND CONSENT FORM

UNIVERSITY OF JYVÄSKYLÄ

FACULTY OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

07.02.2021

A description of the processing of personal data for scientific research purposes (privacy notice; Articles 13, 14 and 30 of Regulation (EU) 2016/679)

1. **Personal data processed in study The networking aspect of international students' integration into Finland: A case study of Team&Client project course**

The study aims to gain a deeper understanding of networking aspect of international students' integration into the local culture and working life by using URAA1001 Team&Client project course as a case study.

The following personal data will be collected from you: name, audio recording, interview notes.

This privacy notice has been given to participants in person.

2. **Legal grounds for the processing of personal data for research/archiving purposes**

Processing is necessary for scientific or historical research purposes or statistical purposes, and it is correctly proportional in relation to the goal in accordance with public interest (section 4.1(3) of the Finnish data protection act).

Transferring personal data outside the EU/EEA

During this study, your personal data will not be transferred outside the EU/EEA.

Protection of personal data

In this study, the processing of personal data is based on a proper research plan, and a responsible person has been appointed for the study. Your personal data will only be used for purposes of conducting historical or scientific research.

Prevention of identifiability

Direct identification data will be removed as a protective measure when handling the data. The original interview recordings will be stored on a password-protected hard drive. After the research, the research register will be anonymised, i.e. all identifiers will be fully removed so that no persons can be identified from the data, and no new data can be merged with the data. Once the study has been concluded, the original recordings will be destroyed.

Controller(s) and researchers

The controller for this study is Elizaveta Arzamastseva: +358449608772, eliza-veta.n.arzamastseva@gmail.com.

If you have any questions about the rights of data subjects, please contact the controller.

During the study, the controller and the thesis supervisor have the right to process the data.

Profiling and automated decision making

In this study, your personal data will not be used in automated decision making. In this study, the purpose of the processing of personal data is not to assess your personal characteristics, i.e. profiling. Instead, your personal data and characteristics will be assessed from the perspective of broader scientific research.

You have the right to file a complaint with the supervisory authority of your permanent place of residence or employment if you consider that the processing of personal data is in breach of the GDPR. In Finland, the supervisory authority is the Office of the Data Protection Ombudsman.

Contact for Office of the Data Protection Ombudsman: https://tietosuoja.fi/en/home

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATING IN SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH

The networking aspect of international students' integration into Finland:

A case study of Team&Client project course

I understand that participating in the study is voluntary, and that I can, at any time, cancel my participation in the study.

I have obtained sufficient information about the study and the processing of my personal data. I have understood the information and want to participate in the study.

____

Signature of the participant, name in print (or electronic declaration of the participant)

Contact details:

Elizaveta Arzamastseva, 0449608772, elizaveta.n.arzamastseva@gmail.com

If the document is signed, it will be retained in the archives of the person in charge of the study. This consent form will be retained securely for as long as the data is in identifiable format. If the data is anonymised or erased, this consent form no longer needs to be archived.

APPENDIX 3 THE CODING FRAME

1) **Contact and social networking during the course**

   a. <u>Frequency of contact</u>
   -High frequency
   -Low frequency
   -Insufficient

   b. <u>Quality</u>
   - Scale (General impression)
     Excellent
     Good
     Satisfactory
     Poor
   - Depth
   Close proximity
   Professional/distant

   -Clarity
   Clear communication
   Unclear communication

   c. <u>Factors affecting the Networking</u>
   -Type of contact
   -Availability
   -Working atmosphere
   -Motivation
   -Level of comfort with diversity
   -Personal impression
   -Language barrier

2) **Contact and social networks after the course**

   a. <u>Maintaining network</u>
   -Yes
   -No

   b. <u>Factors affecting network maintenance</u>
   -Motivation
   -Availability
   -Time
   -Frequency of contact during the course

c. Utilizing network in employability enhancing activities
-Yes
-No

d. Ways of utilizing network
-Recommendation
-Internship/Job opportunity
-Thesis
-Expanding professional network

e. Factors affecting network utilization
-Attitude
-Level of proximity
-Language barrier
-Time
-Relevance
-Project outcome