UNIVERSITY OF EASTERN FINLAND

Faculty of Social Sciences and Business Studies
Business School

Recruiting and attracting international professionals to sparsely populated areas
Case Study: Pohjois-Savo, Finland

Abstract

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Title **Recruiting and attracting international professionals to sparsely populated areas Case Study of Pohjois-Savo**			
Main subject **International Business and Sales Management**	Level **Master's degree**	Date **June 2021**	Number of pages **84**
The aim of this master's thesis is to reveal factors that could help companies located in sparsely populated areas to recruit international professionals. Other aim is to identify factors that could attract international professionals to sparsely populated areas. International recruiting has been extensively studied, but research regarding sparsely populated areas is limited. In addition, effects of diverse workforce are widely researched. Literature review of the master's thesis introduces international professionals, international recruiting and sparsely populated areas. Furthermore, the factors of the theoretical framework created for the empirical research of the thesis are introduced and enriched especially with literature regarding sparsely populated areas. Additionally, a case study method and details regarding the data collecting are introduced. The empirical research of the master's thesis is based on inspecting three companies operating in a sparsely populated area. All of the case companies are providing interesting insight on operating in a sparsely populated area, and especially on the importance of workforce availability and recruiting. These companies are from different industries and vary in size. Data is collected mainly through interviews with representatives of these three companies. The interview data is analysed with cross-case analysis method and results are presented in two parts. Each of the case company is presented through a holistic view. After this, the discoveries of the interviews are compared with each other. The findings of this master's thesis are offering interesting thinking points. First, different factors related companies operating in a sparsely populated area are explored. Secondly, themes concerning availability of workforce and recruiting are presented. What is highlighted in the findings is how important workforce availability is for companies and what special features there are in attracting international professionals to sparsely populated areas. In addition, special features concerning a specific sparsely populated area are discussed. Furthermore, the effects of diverse workforce are explored, and what it takes to manage such is discussed. Lastly, interesting points of views are brought up regarding the definition of international professional and companies' thoughts on supporting services and projects.			
Keywords **International recruiting, international professionals, talent attraction, sparsely populated areas, diversity**			

Tiivistelmä

ITÄ-SUOMEN YLIOPISTO

Tiedekunta **Yhteiskuntatieteiden ja kauppatieteiden tiedekunta**			Yksikkö **Kauppatieteiden laitos**	
Tekijä **Leevi Vehreävesa**			Ohjaaja **Irina Mihailova**	
Työn nimi (suomeksi ja englanniksi) **Kansainvälisten osaajien houkuttelu ja rekrytointi harvaan asutuille alueille Tapaustutkimus Pohjois-Savosta**				
Pääaine **International Business and Sales Management**	Työn laji **Pro Gradu -tutkielma**	Aika **Kesäkuu 2021**		Sivuja **84**

Tämän Pro Gradu -tutkielman tarkoitus on tuoda esiin niitä tekijöitä, jotka mahdollisesti auttaisivat harvaan asutuilla alueilla toimivia yrityksiä rekrytoimaan kansainvälisiä osaajia. Tavoitteena on myös tuottaa ymmärrystä niistä tekijöistä, jotka saattaisivat tehdä harvaan asutuista alueista houkuttelevia kansainvälisille osaajille. Kansainvälistä rekrytointia on tutkittu kattavasti, mutta suoraan harvaan asuttuihin alueisiin liittyvä tutkimus on toistaiseksi ollut vähäistä. Monimuotoisen työvoiman vaikutuksia on lisäksi tutkittu laajasti.

Kirjallisuuskatsaus käsittelee kansainvälisiä osaajia, kansainvälistä rekrytointia ja harvaan asuttuja alueita. Tämän lisäksi empiiristä tutkimusosiota varten rakennettuun teoreettiseen viitekehykseen liittyvät teemat on esitelty ja rikastettu erityisesti harvaan asuttuja alueita koskevalla tutkimustiedolla. Seuraavaksi on esitelty tutkimusmetodina käytetty tapaustutkimus, sekä tiedonkeruuseen liittyvät detaljit. Tämän Pro Gradu -tutkielman empiirinen osio koostuu kolmen harvaan asutulla alueella toimivan yrityksen tarkastelusta. Jokainen yritys tarjoaa mielenkiintoista tietoa yritystoiminnasta harvaan asutulla alueella, sekä etenkin työvoiman saatavuuteen ja hankintaan liittyvistä teemoista. Nämä yritykset eroavat suuresti toisistaan niin toimialan kuin koonkin puolesta. Aineistonkeruumenetelmänä toimi pääosin haastattelut. Tutkimustapana on sovellettu empiiristä monitapaustutkimusta ja tulokset on esitetty kahdessa osassa. Jokaisesta tapausyrityksestä esitellään holistinen kuvaus, jonka jälkeen näiden tuloksia verrataan keskenään.

Tämän Pro Gradu -tutkielman tulokset tarjoavat mielenkiintoista pohdittavaa. Ensiksi tutustutaan eri tekijöihin, jotka liittyvät yritysten sijaintiin harvaan asutulla alueella. Tämän jälkeen nostetaan esiin työvoiman saatavuuteen ja rekrytointiin liittyviä teemoja. Tutkielmassa korostuu työvoiman saatavuuden tärkeys yrityksille, sekä kansainvälisten osaajien houkuttelun erityispiirteet ja tutkimuksen kohteena olevaan alueeseen liittyvät tekijät. Lisäksi osoitetaan monimuotoisen työvoiman tarjoamat hyödyt, sekä sen johtamiseen liittyvät erityispiirteet. Mielenkiintoinen näkökulma löytyy myös kansainvälisten osaajien määrittelyyn, sekä yritysten näkemyksiin tukipalveluista ja -hankkeista.

Avainsanat **Kansainvälinen rekrytointi, kansainväliset osaajat, osaajien houkuttelu, harvaanasutut alueet, monimuotoisuus**

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1   INTRODUCTION

1.1   BACKGROUND

Today's labour markets are international and fluid and it is easier than ever to seek jobs all over the world due to technological disruption such as online-recruiting tools. Furthermore, everyday life is more and more international, indicating that increasing number of people are gaining international experiences from studies, travels or work abroad. As a consequence, international work opportunities are valid options for increasing group of people and there are more and more changes for that. (Brewster, Mäkelä & Suutari 2018, 42)

My studies have been thoroughly international and my career aim is in the field of international business. Therefore, it came naturally that the topic of my thesis also aligns with international business. When recapping my past years, I understood how extremely intelligent, thoughtful, and talented individual foreigners I have met in my travels, studies abroad, and studies in University of Eastern Finland. After considering these experiences, I can honestly claim that I have learned a lot and grown as a person. Further analyse of my cross-cultural encounters and studies together with international talents has convinced me that Finland and Finnish companies could greatly benefit from extensive actions to attract international professionals. Because of my love for my home region Pohjois-Savo, which is classified as a sparsely populated area even though Kuopio as its capital is rather small but vivid and vibrant city, I would like my thesis to be helpful for it in some ways. Hence, the overall context of the thesis is sparsely populated areas and their struggle in global competition and talent attraction.

According to European Parliament (2016), sparsely populated areas are problematic at least because of:

-   low population density and demographic trends
-   higher rates of poverty
-   lack of transport connections
-   environment
-   monoculture economies and stagnation
-   unemployment
-   lack of comprehensive framework of EU support

As areas are not similar, the possible threats vary among them. For example, in Finland poverty seems to be very irrelevant fear but in Romania the situation is more alarming (European Parliament, 2016). Furthermore, for example in innovations northern sparsely populated areas are doing significantly better compared to their southern and eastern counterparts within the EU. It is still evident that all sparsely populated areas have signs of alarming development, such as stagnant population growth.

Because of constantly globalising world, ever-progressing business environment, and moreover the tightening and world-wide competition, sparsely populated areas and companies operating there must retain and furthermore develop their competitiveness (Lee, 2016). For example, Mohr and Shoobridge (2011) have stated that companies, especially SMEs (small-to medium-sized enterprises), have to compete against foreign companies entering the market, as well as with local companies that have production in locations of lower costs. In negative or low growth situation, companies need to seek success from abroad in terms of outsourcing, market opportunities and similar actions (Mohr & Shoobridge, 2011). Thus, companies may see sparsely populated areas as no-go zones where there is lack of both customers and labour force. Furthermore, sparsely populated areas or sparsely populated regions, such as Pohjois-Savo, can be seen competing against not only other countries, but also against other areas within the country. On the other hand, because of globalisation, companies from sparsely populated areas have a chance to compete in multiple different markets instead of staying local or national (Dubois & Roto, 2012).

In order to stay competitive, healthy and developing, sparsely populated areas must have stable economies. More desirable, aim should be in having growing economies, since economic growth protects regions from decreasing population, shrinking tax money and other problems, and vice versa. In the end, issues such as outsourcing, aging population, downsizing, lesser number of succeeding people and budget cuts are also a threat for public sectors (Mahfoozi et al., 2018), and in sparsely populated areas both the companies and public sector are in danger.

Vital part of successful business environment is the availability of labour force. Quality of labour force is based on education level, previous experience and other factors. According to Habti & Koikkalainen (2014) highly skilled person has either higher education or rare expertise. It is most likely that companies with best labour force are succeeding better. As previously mentioned, globalisation exposes companies for tougher competition which naturally leads to thicker competition for competent labour force. Social globalisation is parallel with economic

globalisation, and therefore the effects of opening the labour markets can be seen in demographic make-up of the labour pool available (Mohr & Shoobridge, 2011). Thus, countries that are in risk of decreasing population and lack of talents needs to turn their eyes abroad and aim to recruit international professionals. My home country Finland is part of the European Union, and the free movement of workforce between the members of the EU is a fundamental part of the EUs existence. Due to social globalisation, the ethnic heterogeneity inevitable increases in Finland, and therefore Finnish companies will transform to more and more cross-cultural and ethnically diverse (Mohr & Shoobridge, 2011). All in all, global development and integration of labour markets and economies is leading to increasing global mobility of international highly skilled individuals (Habti & Elo, 2018, 1–2).

In 2017 at least 47 000 jobs were not filled in Finnish labour markets due to the lack of talents (Business Finland, 2019). Furthermore, thousands of professionals are needed in many sectors in coming years in Finland alone, and the situation in sparsely populated areas is even more alarming. On top of that, educated locals are fleeing rural areas due to the lack of high-skilled jobs (Estes et al, 2016), which make the situation even more concerning for sparsely populated regions. Thus, this will probably firstly create demand for international professionals to cover the national brain drain and secondly leave the local economies in great danger. However, research on national migration would need another thesis, thus it is barely discussed here. Dyrting et al (2020) have proposed that the population growth in sparsely populated areas comes down to two aspects, attraction and retention. These are also in the core of the thesis.

From previous paragraphs arises the following questions. What is the role of sparsely populated areas in global context and are international professionals interested to move to rural areas at all? Do sparsely populated areas have any advances to lure international professionals? My hope is that the reader will find answers to these questions and also understands the importance of actions needed in sparsely populated areas.

1.2 RESEARCH GAP AND RESEARCH PROBLEM

International business studies have been highly focused on internationalisation during the past decades, and therefore there is significant amount of existing literature available. Terms such as 'international professionals', 'international recruiting', 'talent attraction and retention' and 'diversity' have been popular in the literature, however it seems that the academical focus have avoided the differences between geographical areas when it comes to international recruiting

and talent acquisition. Therefore, during the literature review it is necessary to 'connect the dots' in terms of finding the right sources to be applicable in the context of sparsely populated areas.

Furthermore, my aim to analyse the current situation of international recruiting in sparsely populated areas, as well as to explore the current situation in Pohjois-Savo, is a topic that has been studied rather modestly in the past as far as I am aware. However, even if there is existing literature or research available regarding these interesting topics, I believe that up to date information is extremely important for the business environment and regional institutions in sparsely populated areas. Noteworthy is that international recruiting is, however, currently a hot topic in both academic world and governmental research. Ultimate goal of this thesis is to highlight the importance of international recruiting and furthermore introduce the possible tools and key points for attracting international professionals to sparsely populated areas and companies there, and thus help them to survive in the global competition and secure their existence.

1.3 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND KEY CONCEPTS

Intention of this study can be summarized to be a will to enlighten the current literature of international recruiting in companies located in sparsely populated areas, and the factors that enhance and prevent international migration to sparsely populated areas. Therefore, the main research questions of the thesis are:

RQ: How companies from sparsely populated areas can compete for international professionals, or can they?

SQ1: What are the main barriers in attracting international talents to sparsely populated areas?

SQ2: What are the main arguments in favour of sparsely populated areas?

SQ3: Are the projects aimed to boost international recruiting seen beneficial by companies from Pohjois-Savo?

Next, some of the key concepts of the thesis are briefly introduced. Further chapters will also explain these in more details.

International professionals

It is necessary to exclude international professionals from immigrants as a group, because the overall discussion around immigration is more or less negatively coloured and immigration is sometimes viewed as something that needs to be prevented. Instead, the focus in the thesis is at skilled, experienced, and professional foreigners who possess valuable knowledge for companies and the local economies. Furthermore, company backed expatriates who are often sent for short-term secondment works are left out.

In academic literature it is common that concepts, words, and terms are granted different meanings and are used in different ways (Habti & Elo 2018, 4–5). They are referring migration as movement from one country or location to another, which can be international or internal. In the thesis migration means movement of international professionals from one country to another, unless stated otherwise. Therefore, international professionals are skilled individuals migrating from one country to another. However, the term 'international professionals' itself remains still somewhat unclear.

Three categories of skilled migrants, introduced by Weinar et al (2020, 16) are:

- People defined as directly productive talent, such as entrepreneurs, engineers, and technicians
- People defined as academic (indirect) talent, i.e., scientists, researchers, research managers, and scholars
- People defined as talent in social sectors

The above-mentioned categorisation of international professionals is clear and encompassing enough, thus it should clarify by who are referred as international professionals within the thesis.

International recruiting

In the thesis international recruiting means recruiting international professionals abroad, thus for example recruiting foreigners already living in the country or Finnish citizens from abroad are excluded. International recruiting can be targeted specially to recruit international professionals, or applications from international professionals can be received to generally open vacancies.

Sparsely populated areas

The concept of sparsely populated area, or region, is somewhat disperse, yet the colloquial meaning states for less-densely populated, rural, agricultural, or more nature-like area. However, it does not necessarily mean uninhabited and undeveloped wilderness, and the academical literature varies with definitions and meanings (Le Tourneau, 2020). For example, the association of Northern Sparsely Populated Areas (NSPA) consists of four counties from Sweden, seven from Finland and two from Norway. The area these are covering has a population density of 4.9 inhabitants per square meter, which according to NSPA is unique in the European Union (NSPA, n.d.). European Commission (2013) categorizes sparsely populated areas as NUTS 2 (population density < 8 per km2) and NUTS 3 (population density < 12,5 per km2) regions.

Within the area of NSPAs member regions, there are multiple cities with flourishing businesses, universities, and communities, which reveals how flexible the concept of sparsely populated area is. According to the European Commission (n.d.), there are multiple regions within 15 Member State of EU that are considered as either insular, mountainous and/or sparsely populated, and from which sparsely populated areas are mostly located in the Mediterranean and in the northernmost regions. In the thesis sparsely populated areas means regions as a whole, including both the more urban areas and the outskirts of the regions. As a summary, in this case region is sparsely populated if there are multiple regions with higher population density within the country, or if the region is in official statement claimed as a sparsely populated area.

1.4 STUDY STRUCTURE

The structure of this thesis follows mainly the "normal" structure of a typical thesis in business studies, if compared to most of the thesis published by Finnish universities. Firstly, the background and the overall idea of the thesis is presented. This section also gives a hint of the researcher's ideas behind the thesis, and perhaps awakes some questions and thoughts in reader's own mind. Reader will get a good view on reasons why this thesis exists and is written, and hence is hopefully better prepared for the reading process. In the following chapter the theoretical side is analysed by reviewing the academical literature of chosen phenomena. There the reader will get a view on the literature and research of international professionals and international recruiting, as well as to the potential benefits of recruiting international

professionals. Also, in this section reader will gain more understanding regarding sparsely populated areas, and the connection of it and the research topic is explained. The theoretical framework of the thesis is also presented and its sub-factors are explained. In the third chapter the chosen research method(s) are explained, whereas some ethical consideration of the research is also presented. It is followed by fourth chapter, where first the empirical context, and then the results of the data collection are presented. Chapter five consist of discussion of the findings. To finish, in the chapter six the whole thesis is concluded by conclusions.

2   LITERATURE REVIEW

In this section, the chosen phenomena are examined through an academic literature review, thus meaning that existing literature is analysed in order to get better understanding on the topics of the thesis. The aim of this is to create a theoretical framework, or a grounding theory, to be utilized as a basis of the empirical research of the thesis.

Firstly, theories and explanations related to international professionals are introduced. Secondly, international recruiting and its specialities are examined. Lastly, the situations of beforementioned are connected to the literature of sparsely populated areas. This structure will hopefully give the reader a good understanding of the themes of the thesis and thus prepare the reader for the empirical section of the thesis.

2.1   INTERNATIONAL PROFESSIONALS

International mobility of skilled people has been debated and researched through different theoretical perspectives and practical approaches during the las two decades (Habti and Elo, 2018, 3). Since the patterns and forms of global, local, and inter-local mobility has evolved over time, current ways of thinking and theorizing this mobility are saluting it as an integral part of everyday life (Habti & Elo 2018, 13). Since 2000, the number of transnational migrants has grown by almost 50 percent, now representing 3.4 percent of the world's population (United Nations Foundation, 2018). In 2021 it is most likely even more, although Covid-19 situation might have slowed the process. According to the United Nations, economic, social, environmental and demographic changes are affecting societies and can have implications for and result from migration (UN, n.d.). Thus, international movement of people cannot realistically be shut down and forgotten by decision-makers, but rather it should be analysed and adjusted to best benefit both receiving and dispatching countries.

According to traditional human capital theory, skilled immigrants are landing jobs that match their qualifications and skills, and that employers do not have major effect on the outcomes of labour markets for immigrant professionals (Almeida et al, 2015). However, Janssens and Zanoni (2005) have argued that employees whose background varies from the prevalent of the specific geographical area, tend to be in more vulnerable position in organisations and labour market, and have limited emancipation and possibility of resistance. If people with different cultural, national, and ethnical backgrounds are grouped as a one, above-mentioned is most likely a correct observation. However, since the focus of this thesis is in skilled and experienced

individuals, rather than in all categories of immigrants, it is expected to have major differences if compared to for example all persons with different ethnical background in a specific country. For example, Koskela (2014) has stated that immigrants in Finland are viewed as hierarchical categories, where most skilled migrants bear different attributes and integration level compared to those in lower levels of hierarchy, and that hierarchy affects also how the society is welcoming these newcomers. Therefore, it is extremely crucial to analyse existing literature in order to find out how international professionals are actually positioned in the labour market.

In literature, migration of those from developed countries and those from developing countries has often been classified as different things and referred with different terms (Habti and Elo 2018, 10–11). However, in the thesis migration of skilled individuals from developed and developing countries are grouped in to one phenomenon.

2.1.1 International professionals in sparsely populated areas

As the focus of this thesis is, beside in forming general understanding of recruiting international professionals, in the current situation of international professionals and their recruiting into sparsely populated areas, it is important to clarify what this means. In addition, academic literature concerning sparsely populated areas is explored and brought up along the thesis.

Sparsely populated areas

"Sparsity is essentially a political, socio-economic and cultural phenomena related to the margins of human settlement" (Dubois & Roto, 2012, 13)

Noteworthy is that it is extremely difficult to compare sparsely populated areas for example in Finland or Europe to those in Africa or another developing continent, since the current infrastructure and situation is very different in these. For example, in a Swedish research on international physicians working in rural regions of Sweden it was found that when compared Swedish areas to similarly inhabited, or even greater areas in other countries, the Swedish ones were described by the examinees to have better quality of life, more resources available and better infrastructure (Sturesson et al, 2019). Furthermore, it was acknowledged that in fact such descriptions as rural or remote are indeed complex. However, findings in the thesis might apply to other areas than Finland and Europe to some extent, and nonetheless can be used as support in developing the processes and actions in any sparsely populated area in the world. Dubois and Roto (2012) have found that the employment structure in sparsely populated areas located in

same macro-regional environment is usually similar to each other than compared to sparsely populated areas in other macro-regional environments. Thus, areas in Nordic countries are more similar compared to each other than compared to for example Spanish areas. All in all, most of the literature is still considering either Finland or Western countries.

Future of sparsely populated areas

The empirical context of the thesis is a specific Finnish sparsely populated area. Finland is a rather recent member of countries experiencing increasing inflow of skilled migrants, since in the past it was Finns who expatriated abroad in a seek for better living, thus existing literature concerning international recruiting in Finnish sparsely populated areas is extremely limited.

In India, the government has boosted the rural regions by providing higher salaries, infrastructure investments and introducing rotational postings (Ramani et al, 2013). Thus, sparsely populated areas benefit from national cohesion policy decisions for example when governmental institutions or organisations are placed in rural areas. The Finnish Ministry of the Interior (2021) has also stated that immigration is a possibility for regions to boost their economies, yet they also have the responsibility to support integration, equality and good relations between different groups. Therefore, under current understanding, the future of sparsely populated areas is aligned with the availability of workforce and inhabitants.

Besides the obvious challenges sparsely populated areas are facing and the negative sides associated with them, it is important to mention that at least two comparative advantages of sparsely populated areas have been mentioned. These are high level of social capital and high endowment in natural resources, which includes tourism and energy sector as well (Dubois & Roto, 2012). Le Tourneau (2020) have argued sparsely populated regions have a significant role in the global battle against climate change, namely because these regions are widely covering the globe. Sparsely populated areas, often having richness in forms of natural resources, could benefit from new view on natural resources, such as conservation and tourism, where these resources are not extracted but nurtured and highlighted (Lundmark et al, 2014). Social capital and other factors in sparsely populated areas are discussed in further chapters. For further reading and forming deeper understanding of sparsely populated areas, I would suggest the work of Dubois and Roto (2012), and Le Tourneau (2020), where the concept, economical and demographical factors, and such are discussed more deeply.

2.2   COMPETITION FOR INTERNATIONAL PROFESSIONALS

Since Western countries are experiencing urbanization, stagnant and even decreasing population growth, aligned with aging population, it is necessary to focus to the actions that can prevent or slower any harmful consequences of these. In sparsely populated areas the situation is probably the most visible, as brain drain and aging population are harming both business and public sector. Urbanization is a well-known megatrend and it is hard to deny that migration mostly focuses in more urban areas than rural areas. Without implementing some sort of regulations, such as those introduced in post-Cold War Germany to prevent *Aussiedlers* (descendants of ethnic German immigrants migrating back to Germany) to leave their assigned regions to more urban regions (Jahn & Steinhardt, 2019), only possible way to compete is the re-branding of sparsely populated areas, and thus raising awareness of the perks found in these for international professionals, and perhaps for the national migrants as well. By no means can sparsely populated areas compete in numbers, but perhaps quality is where their hope lays.

According to Business Finland (2019), the competition for international professionals is tough, and yet it is expected to even intensify. Some of the reasons for stronger competition for international professionals have been already mentioned, such as decreasing population and increasing mobility of skilled workforce. Also, worth mentioning is the demand for skilled labour force from the technological point of view, as knowledge intensive technical positions are more and more available in so-called knowledge economies (Wei et al, 2019). After the 2000s, the Finnish state begun to invest in attracting international professionals by employing some sort of initiatives instead of procedures that had been the way earlier (Habti & Elo 2018, 20). However, it is clear that more work is needed if Finnish sparsely populated areas want to pose as attracting destinations for international professionals.

Benefits of diverse workforce

As immigration is inevitably growing in Western countries, there has been increasing debate about its benefits. As mentioned, the overall discussion might be somewhat negatively tuned, as critical voices are questioning the benefits of migration. Pro-migration arguments are often concentrated on economic growth of the receiving countries through such channels as technology adaption, knowledge transfer, cultural diversity and capital accumulation (Jahn & Steinhardt, 2016). However, as the focus of this thesis is on skilled immigrants, some of the literature and research is irrelevant considering the heterogeneity of all immigrants as a group.

Thus, the assumption in the thesis is that migration of international professionals to sparsely populated areas is beneficial for the local economies.

Perhaps the most common argument to highlight the above-mentioned economic growth is to bring up facts how immigrants have been innovative and entrepreneurial. For example, it is often referred that in the US immigrants are founding successful businesses. Indeed, in 2017 40 percentage of the U.S. Fortune 500 companies were founded by immigrants or their descendants (United Nations Foundation, 2018), which is quite significant share. In addition, Solimano (2006) have argued that settling skilled migrants are creating a virtuous circle of aligning foreign and local talent which is resulting as a stronger human capital base and thus is beneficial for the area. United States of America has been a great example of successful immigration and equal opportunities for all, as for example Solimano (2006) have introduced Silicon Valley as an example of rapid development and growth where the important factor has been immigration of entrepreneurial migrants from Asian countries. Although, as recent news has shown, there are underlying constitutional problems that may dim the polished image of US as the most desired migration destination. Perhaps some sparsely populated areas could benefit from the ongoing restlessness in the world and highlight the safeness and openness of them.

Ethnically diverse workforce may for example reduce the informational and psychological barriers in SMEs considering internationalisation (Mohr & Shoobridge, 2011). This does make sense, since smaller enterprises may believe that they lack necessary information and resources to expand their businesses abroad (or interstate). Internally diverse company culture could perhaps encourage companies to pursue expansion by presenting cultural differences as less insuperable barriers. Mohr and Shoobridge (2011) have suggested that network of relationships ethnically diverse workforce offer for a firm is a crucial factor for firms' internationalisation. They also present that ethnic diversity helps firms to serve their international customers locally, which is a very good competitive advantage for almost all type of firms, since it can be assumed that the number of ethnically diverse stakeholders is not decreasing in the future. Furthermore, firms with diverse workforce are likely to achieve meta-competence, a sort of silent knowledge, which ultimately allows easier interaction with foreign customers in general (Mohr & Shoobridge, 2011).

Thus, competition among countries to attract skilled migrants is frenetic. Ethnic background, experience, knowledge, and etc. traits of employees can be seen as potential resource for a firm, and which furthermore is challenging for competitors to replicate and fully understand, Mohr

and Shoobridge (2011) have stated. However, they have also argued that in order to gain from diverse workforce, active diversity management needs to be applied. Therefore, companies need actively monitor and adjust their diversity operations in order to be successful in long term. Talent attraction, management and other phases of international recruiting are discussed more detailed in next chapters.

Current research acknowledges the connection of international migration and firms' innovation (Wei et al, 2019). In their research Wei et al (2019) have found evidence that where international talent inflow is centred the companies invest more in research and development, thus they are also recognizing the connection between innovations and talent inflow. Further on, small and medium sized companies had higher increase in their innovation investments compared to their bigger counterparts, and domestic companies outperformed foreign ones. Hence, it is double-sized benefit for the local economy when international professionals are recruited, as they first bring well-needed population to the area and second have high change of boosting the performances of the companies they work for. In a paper surveying the current research of the economic impacts of immigration, Nathan (2014) also found some support for immigration's positive effects to innovations in both area and firm-level. Nathan also explored the studies of productivity changes due to skilled migrants in firms and found some evidence that productivity could slightly increase when international professionals are recruited. Furthermore, he found support that recruiting international professionals increases trade activities overseas. My firm believe is thus that the economies of sparsely populated areas will benefit from international professionals, and that recruiting and attracting them should be the mutual goal for companies and governments within sparsely populated regions.

2.3 INTERNATIONAL RECRUITING

In major Western countries, such as US, Canada and UK, the main source for skilled migrants is China and India (Weinar et al, 2020, 27). This is reflected to the academic literature, as many of the research and papers published are either addressing these Western countries or conducted in China and India. Literature is therefore in some extent applicable to the empirical context of the thesis.

In their article on research of diversity, Shore et al (2009) have discussed that diversity is often seen as a factor to manage or deal with, and that in both research and practice, negative wording is attached to discourse on diversity. Assumption is thus that diversity might be viewed as an

unpursued thing because of, perhaps unintentional, negatively charged undertone in overall discussion around it. Almeida et al (2015) found out in their research that those managers who have worked with mostly Anglo-American clients or have had less encountering with diversity are more worried of the person-job fit regarding for example the Chinese, the Indians, or South-east Asians. Non-Anglo personal attributes also had more change to perceive negatively to them. Therefore, if a company decides to pursue diversification of its labour force, it needs to ascertain the issues beneath its organizational culture. Companies may believe that their organization is ready for recruiting international professionals, but they might lack the knowledge to fully understand what it means to turn the organizational culture to support more diverse labour force. These findings are interesting, as in current debate firms and leaders are often referring diversity as a pursued and cheered phenomenon. Perhaps in reality there is still much work needed in order to reach the situation where organizations are actually diversity-ready.

Typically, in hiring process the selection is made based on knowledge, skills, and abilities (Hosain & Liu, 2020). This is oftentimes described as person-job fit, meaning that person and organisation are fit for each other. However, what is the case with international professionals, whose backgrounds are more difficult to compare? Recruiters might be afraid to hire international professionals, because of lack of knowledge they possess. Therefore, recruitment, especially international, can be a difficult decision to make. Also, in recruitment the time frame where the recruiter needs to gain enough knowledge on the applicants is often very limited (Almeida et al, 2015). Thus, these specialities of international recruiting should be clear before proceeding with international candidates.

Assessments and decisions may be influenced by subconscious attitudes and beliefs, even though recruiter intentionally try to avoid discrimination (Oreopoulos, 2011). Time pressure and fear of bad hires amplify the above-mentioned effects. Therefore, the case might be that recruiter is believing that all the applicants are reviewed equally and that even the focus is indeed in hiring people with diverse backgrounds, when the reality is that recruiter is subconsciously sorting the applicants by stereotypes and other beliefs. Thus, potentially valuable assets for employers are hidden in the mass of unwanted applicants only because recruiting processes are not designed to actually recruit international professionals. Implicit discrimination also may affect, for example when recruiter is thinking in categories (Oreopoulos, 2011). This means that even though foreign experiences, educations, and other

backgrounds vary significantly due to numerous reasons, these are hastily put in same group(s). Similarly, Almeida et al (2015) have argued that people are likely to use in-group/out-group thinking in regard of their identifying toward others, meaning that the persons' identification is happening based on shared similarities, and dissimilarities, with others.

According to Almeida et al (2015) the background of the one who make decisions, as well as experiences of different cultures, is highly affecting on how they are evaluating immigrant professionals. Thus, in organisations where recruiters and other decision makers have had less exposure to cultural diversity or have backgrounds from more homogeneous environment, may struggle in hiring international professionals even though the aim is indeed to recruit internationally. For example, if company is located in sparsely populated area and has previously hired mainly or only local workforce, it can be difficult to expand their scope in recruiting.

In research conducted by Ramani et al (2013), educated health workers in India named their most desired monetary and non-monetary incentives to lure them to migrate to rural areas. These were higher salaries, improved living conditions for the families, opportunities for career growth, better tools for work and decent organisational support policies. Although the research concerned national migration, it gives a peek in to what skilled individuals in one developing country are seeking for, and thus gives at least some information on how sparsely populated areas could improve their competitiveness in global labour markets by providing perks international professionals are looking for. Expectations of international professionals and the competitive advantages of sparsely populated areas are discussed in the following chapters.

2.4   TALENT ATTRACTION MANAGEMENT MODEL

For regions and cities aiming to attract international professionals, it is necessary to rationally evaluate their current situation and readiness as places to actually do so. As a tool for that, Business Finland, a Finnish governmental organisation under the supervision of Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment of Finland, has been using Talent Attraction Management model (TAM), which is illustrated in Figure 1 below, created by Future Place Leadership, a management consultancy agency focusing on the development of places (Business Finland, 2019; Future Place Leadership, 2021). In this chapter TAM is first introduced and then reinforced to suit sparsely populated areas by aligning it with relevant academical literature. This reinforced TAM is also the grounding theoretical framework of the thesis. TAM consists

of four activities that are interrelated: Attraction, Reception, Integration and Reputation. In addition, fifth element is the management of these four activities. These all parts play great part in developing the environment for international professionals and their recruitment, and thus this tool prepares and orientates companies, cities and regions to understand better these factors. I firmly believe that the Talent Attraction Management Model is also very beneficial tool for individual companies, for example in evaluating their current business environment, organizational competence and readiness for international recruiting. Thus, this literature review should be interesting for both the regional and organisational decisionmakers.
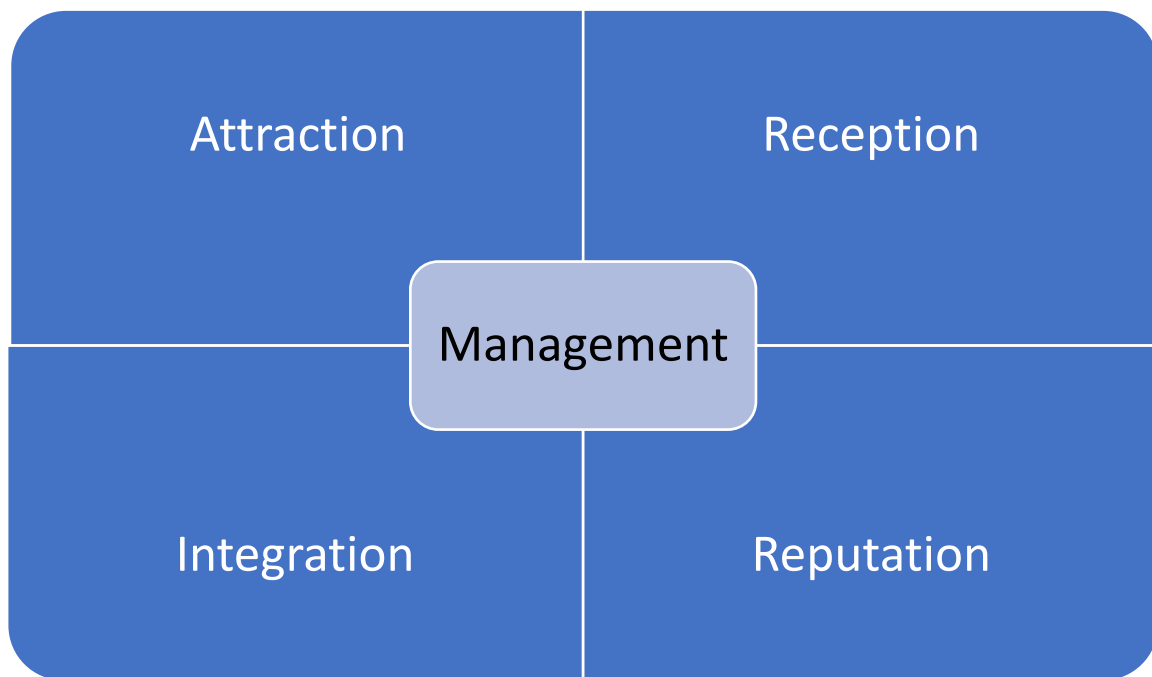
Figure 1   Talent Attraction Management model.

2.4.1 Talent Attraction

According to Habti and Elo (2018, 21) the skilled individuals migrating to Finland are representing individually constructed form of mobility, which is more complex, thus meaning that they are believed to have specific reasons to come to Finland. Although, the reasons are probably as numerous as the migrants are and thus it is not simple to draw too broad assumptions from individual reasons to migrate to Finland. As sparsely populated areas cannot

compete with same arguments and natural appeal as better-known major cities and areas, they need to come up with something else. Thus, cities and companies from sparsely populated areas should be innovative and even experimental in their activities and decisions. Furthermore, it is essential to understand the reasons why other international professionals have already migrated there.

The first move in sparsely populated areas should be in forming understanding of the reasons international professionals are migrating at all in order to be attractive destination for them. Movement between somewhat similar economies, namely Western countries, have different driving forces compared to movement from developing countries to developed countries. Drivers can be divided in two different categories, where first one contains economic, cultural, and social factors, and the second one contains political and governance factors (Solimano, 2006). For example, the ruling political regime might be dangerous for some, and thus results as emigration of skilled individuals. The state of democracy, human rights, and the overall condition of the public sector can therefore be significantly attractive factor for international professionals.

As the economies of sparsely populated areas are usually smaller compared to their more densely populated counterparts, not all industries can be as flourishing as others. This reduces the number of companies able to recruit international professionals, or even locals. In order to overcome the problems of outperformance compared to other regions, it has been suggested that specialisation could be one way (Dubois & Roto, 2012). Thus, instead of uncoordinated and more general operations, regions could focus on specific sectors where they have deep knowhow and experience. On the other hand, Dubois and Roto (2012) have suggested that strategies aimed to strengthen the local economies should also increase the support to other sectors, not only the dominant ones, for example by boosting the innovation spillovers above the sector borders. Furthermore, attracting only specific types of international professionals could be one way to coordinate the attraction-activities. For example, there is no need to lure all software developers, but those who value things available in the region or city. European Commission (n.d.) have listed few potential and crucial industries for Northern Sparsely Populated Areas (NSPA), where job generation would be extremely important. These are tourism, food production, niche manufacturing and ICT-related services. Also, as internet and broadband connections are improving, online market is even more an opportunity for businesses in sparsely populated areas (Dubois & Roto, 2012).

The following is an example of how a specific, lesser-known area can create positive image and pursue talent attraction. City of Topeka in the state of Kansas, United State of America, is offering 15000 dollars for a person relocating there. Incentives are limited to 60 person and they need to be employed by local companies in order to receive the incentive money. Shawnee County, which is the county where Topeka is located, is inhabited by around 178 000 persons, thus it is indeed a sparsely populated county. Some of the arguments to attract people are 10 percent smaller cost of living index, relatively cheap median price for houses, vibrant business sector, significant investments to infrastructure, close to major universities and other schools, and leisure activities such as breweries, trails and paths, and pet friendliness – thus, economic, cultural, and social factors are used in talent attraction. (choosetopeka.com, 2020.)

One of the main arguments in favour of sparsely populated, or rural, areas is the higher social capital existing there (Putnam 2000, 205). For example, people in less-urban areas are claimed to be more honest, altruistic, and trusting. Hence, Putnam (2000, 206) have suggested that from the perspective of social capital, smaller communities are better. In addition, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2006) states in its publication that rural areas could battle the problems emerging from decreasing population by focusing on existing perks such as social capital, cultural and natural amenities and location. Higher education-level correlates with higher social capital (Glaeser et al, 2002), and thus regions with educational institutes could potentially bear both social capital and educational capital. Moreover, in European Parliament's briefing paper (2016) it is said that students who stay in their remote and peripheral home regions may have less options for education. Therefore, governmental decisions for supporting and maintaining educational opportunities in sparsely populated areas are extremely crucial in order to keep these areas vital. Collaboration with local institutes and companies is therefore highly important for lobbying on behalf of educational opportunities within the sparsely populated regions.

Undeniably, money is important. According to Solimano (2006), the national and international talent allocation has been highly determined by the market rewards, i.e., salary or other honorarium. Furthermore, he has suggested that if there is difference in salary level, purchasing power parity taken in account, between countries, skilled professionals will probably migrate to higher paying locations. Hence, to some extent sparsely populated areas can compete with rewards. Yet, it is difficult to compete only with money against more urban and populated areas, since those are most likely wealthier and thus can pay more to the absolute top professionals.

For example, in the United States the average salary of software engineer is 93 533 euros per year, compared to 73 977 euros per year in Finland (Indeed.com, 2021; Salaryexpert.com, 2021). As Solimano (2006) has claimed, talents from countries with high income tax rates, such as the Nordic countries and Canada, should be moving to countries where income tax rates are lower. However, this is perhaps too straightforward assumption, as the situation would need more thorough examination in the effects of taxation and other income-related factors. Furthermore, as the global mobility is growing and more skilled migrants are available, is it necessary to compete for the absolute top talents, as well-skilled professionals could make the difference anyway?

Perhaps it is the urban life and the lights of the metropolises that have vanished the togetherness and communality from our lives and replaced the emptiness with hurry, excessed individualism and overwork-orientation, and the old ways of living could be found again in sparsely populated areas? Indeed, the usage of above-mentioned arguments can be seen in marketing materials published by less-densely populated areas, claiming that living quality, people's attitudes and the overall way of living are high quality. For example, Pohjois-Savo region have been advertising in the Capital Region of Finland by highlighting the less-crowded environment, anti-stress and such in its Olemisen vapaus -campaign (Olemisenvapaus.fi, n.d.). Noteworthy is that again, specialisation is important. Urbanisation is a massive megatrend and cannot be ignored, yet sparsely populated areas need only a fraction of the migrating masses, and those who are bouncing questions concerning whether they are happier in big cities or not can be targeted by extensive talent attraction actions. However, one key rule should be telling the truth, as clear and realistic information should be presented to the possible candidates about the new living environment (Becker et al, 2011).

2.4.2 Talent Reception

Talent reception includes soft-landing practices and other actions aimed in welcoming the newcomers. In terms of immigration policies, skilled migrants are often treated differently compared to their more unskilled counterparts, as their entry is often easier (Solimano, 2006). Solimano have stated that for example the UK, Germany and others have special visa categories for skilled migrants, such as IT experts and doctors. Thus, some countries have realised the actual need for international professionals and made it easier for them to migrate there. However, it is debatable is it still too difficult to migrate from for example developing country to developed country. If bureaucracy is complicated and time-consuming, information flow

with the bureaucrats is jammed and the overall experience is confusing, it might be possible that the process is stopped by the migrater, and other locations are perceived as more attracting. Furthermore, difficult processes will not help with attracting other international professionals, as word-of-mouth will probably spread among those who are considering migration.

When recruiting international professionals, it can be expected that they are not aware of the taxation, residence permissions, housing options and such matters that may feel irrelevant when recruiting domestically. Thus, employer should be responsible for providing all necessary information and support for employees in order of smooth landing to the new home country. Furthermore, supporting organisations should provide guidance and well-structured information for companies, as they are also responsible for the soft landing of the new inhabitants.

2.4.3　Talent Integration

When discussed about the settling in and integration of skilled migrants, it is reasonable to presume there are sometimes others to consider as well. Interestingly, families of skilled migrants have not been very popular topic in literature until recently (Weinar et al., 2020, 23-24; Becker et al., 2011). For example, highly skilled persons tend to seek partners who are somewhat similar in terms of education and social background (Weinar et al., 2020, 23). Thus, it is important that the immigration process considers partners and descendants as an asset, not burden, and aim is to integrate them all as well as possible. For example, work opportunities, support groups, and education could be beneficial for the spouses of international professionals. Important fact is that services and such should be designed to suit all genders, as partners of international professionals are not necessarily only women, and because educated female professionals are needed – and perhaps they should be more in the scope of recruiting too. As sparsely populated areas are competing against other areas, one way to stand out could be well-structured integration processes and supporting actions for families as a whole, no matter what the family structure is. In addition, perhaps the recruitment process itself could include participation of the possible family members, and at least important information of the local amenities, social culture and such should be provided as early as possible in order to avoid disappointments and wrong recruits.

In their research on population attraction and retention in Australian rural areas, Dyrting et al. (2020) found that home ownership and family formation can be seen as retention-boosting

factors. In Australian rural areas subsidized or even free housing has been in use as an attracting and retention method (Becker et al., 2011). For locals, the sinking price of housing could be a problem, but for immigrants becoming a house owner can be a life-long dream, which might be easier to achieve in sparsely populated areas where prices tend to be lower. Thus, perhaps it would be beneficial to highlight the possible home acquisition opportunities for international professionals in the region, as owning a house would probably tie them deeper to the area and prevent emigration. Family-related services, opportunities to meet possible partners and other families with children might also be important in retention, as when the family is satisfied, the international professional is probably less likely to emigrate.

According to Callois and Aubert (2007), it has been a trending topic in politics to address that the rural areas can be improved by leaning on the identity and cohesion of those. Thus, these factors can also be used to soften the landing of international professionals to the region and further improve the integration of them. Important addition is that without nurturing the regional atmosphere it can vanish, which might lead to brain drain and less-favourable climate for development. For example, racism can be a form of exclusion in sparsely populated areas. The lack of cross-cultural experiences for instance can be a fostering factor for discrimination toward foreigners and even those who are from different regions but have same national or ethnic background.

Negative effects of social capital in less-densely populated areas can be at least the following: strong embeddedness which can lead to timid or conservative behaviour, individuals are not pushed to do their best because of community-provided safety nets, and outsiders can be excluded because they are not part of the right group (Callois & Aubert, 2007). They have also argued that due to social relationships, new or better economic opportunities may not be considered, which lead to ineffective resource allocation. Thus, old ways to do things and problematic relationships can create barriers for economic development, which is extremely harmful especially for sparsely populated areas and the economies of those. Local cohesion, ergo, bonding, indicates how dense are the social links within the region (Callois & Aubert, 2007). In their research, they found correlation between economic performance and the level of local cohesion in French rural regions, yet straight assumptions should not be drawn to cover all sparsely populated areas. However, it seems reasonable to acknowledge the importance of local cohesion as a part of social capital, and furthermore as an active factor of wellbeing and integration of migrants. Thus, the more welcoming and bonding-ready the region is, the better

international professionals are settling in and prospering. Undeniably, it is the locals who are the acting operators there, but with extensive actions the businesses, institutions and such can affect the prevalent attitude climate within the region and shift it more favourable toward healthy bonding, open relationships, and newcomers.

Finnish people, as well as Finland itself, have received negative feedback from international migrants (Koskela, 2010; Koskela, 2014). For example, they are seen as cold, distant and unfamiliar. Thus, international migrants have felt unattached from the Finnish society. In addition, Koskela (2020) has researched how international skilled migrants feel they are viewed by Finnish people. Major feeling has been that they are seen as refugees, asylum seekers, or more commonly as lower-skilled migrants rather than normal, producing members of the society. These are very alarming findings, as long-term settling to Finnish society will be extremely difficult if the gap between Finnish people and skilled migrants is wide and prejudices are strong – perhaps in both sides. Hopefully, the situation has improved from the time of Koskela's articles, yet there is still definitely lot of work to do with the social integration of international professionals. As sparsely populated areas are most likely receiving only a small amount of migrants, integration of them should be highly prioritized. Although, one reason for such views from Finnish people might be the reality that foreign and different-looking people are not too often living in the most sparsely populated areas, and thus instead of racism, it is the lack of knowledge and comprehension, as well as too little interaction with foreigners.

2.4.4 Talent Reputation

Sparsely populated and rural areas do have some significant downsides compared to more urban areas which can affect the availability of international professionals willing to move there. With active branding and advertising, these areas might however have a change to create better image for themselves and to be presented in more favourable light globally. Conceptions are ideas, thoughts and understandings skilled migrants have on rural areas (Sturesson et al, 2019). Educated and usually experienced international professionals are most likely having conceptions about living and working in different places and countries. Thus, companies and public organizations should aim to affect the conceptions of international professionals in order to attract them in the first place, and moreover fulfil the promises delivered through their advertisement and communication.

Foreign physicians in Sweden, i.e., skilled migrants, have stated that living in rural areas is perceived as expensive, areas are seen small and quiet and therefore lack of entertainment and street activity is affecting the quality of life, travelling to work or to visit families is thought to be very time and money consuming due to the lack of international airports and greater distances between places, weather is seen hazardous – namely cold and dark, and lack of opportunities for families in for example education or relationships (Sturesson et al, 2019). On the other hand, some of them also stated that finding a job is easier, salaries can be higher, infrastructure is similar nation-wide, activities for hobby and leisure are gradually available and locals are believed to be friendlier compared to those in more urban areas. Therefore, it would be smart to highlight the opportunities and existing good aspects in sparsely populated areas in order to narrow down the conceptions possible immigrants have toward working and living there. As mentioned before, focusing on specific type of international professionals may reduce the barrier to attract them to more rural areas since they might find things they value from there. Hence, in Finland highlighting the cleanliness, nature, education, innovations and safety may be efficient, but also the living quality in smaller yet active cities should be brought up.

For less known companies it can be difficult to attract international professional, especially those companies located outside the capitol area or other major cities may appeal less attractive. These companies therefore need to pay extra attention on company branding and appearance on publicity. For example, utilization of social media can save companies time and money (Hosain & Liu, 2020). Nonetheless, guidelines and caution need to be taken in account in its usage. Most efficient way to utilize social media is perhaps to stick with professional platforms such as LinkedIn in screening, and perhaps more unformal platforms such as Facebook and Instagram for company or area branding and advertising. In addition, when advertisements or job listings are targeted abroad, it should be clear what are the main channels used by the target group (Centre for Economic Development/Kokka kohti Suomea-hanke, 2021).

2.4.5 Talent Management

One thing needs to be understood among the decisionmakers of sparsely populated areas is that development is not a zero-sum game rather than an international and national co-operation. Best practices, methods and ideas should be shared and communicated through networks and associations dedicated to co-operation of sparsely populated areas. For example, already mentioned NSPAs association works for the benefit of all its participant regions within the Nordic countries. Other example of such collaboration and idea sharing is Nord Regio,

established by Nordic Council of Ministers, a research centre focusing on regional development (Nordregio.org, n.d.). Thus, rather similar and close together regions are working together in planning and development. As previous literature has shown, areas close to each other bear similarities in demographic and economies, and therefore close collaboration is good way to find best solutions for all.

During the period of international experience, it is rather expectable that one's knowledge and skills are increasing. For example, at least three kind of career capital is perceived, knowing-how, knowing-why, and knowing-who (Brewster, Mäkelä & Suutari 2018, 43–44). These include skills and work-related knowhow, deep understanding of one's purpose in work and motivation to work, and wide scale of relationships and networks. Thus, international teamwork, more challenging tasks, diverse cultural encounters, the awakening understanding of ones' potential, to name a few, are all shaping international professionals and their future selves. All these are affecting their career expectations and need for being valued by the employing companies. This highlights the importance of firm-level talent management, where skilled individuals are first recognized and furthermore given more challenging tasks and thus provided career-advancement. Recognition and appreciation of firms' workforce leads to their contribution, and thus to utilisation of the benefits of ethnically diverse workforce (Mohr & Shoobridge, 2011). This can be nurtured by remuneration and career policies, to name a few. I would argue that successful companies are paying much attention to this, since unhappy employees may seek for other options and put less effort for their current work. It is also important to mention that all employees should be managed the same way, thus paying attention to their job satisfaction, knowledge level and capabilities.

Bridging of social capital mean linking people from other locations to the specific region, for example those who have moved away, are relatives or friends of migrants in the region, political and economic decision-makers, and such connections are bridging the social capital, and thus can have positive impacts in the region (Callois & Aubert, 2007). Especially in sparsely populated areas where the outflow of people is high, the leavers can be a valuable asset in the future (Thurmer & Taylor, 2020). Therefore, the regional decision-makers should actively pay attention into the networks of former inhabitants and the benefits these can offer. For example, one way to create better image among desired migrant pool is to bring up some former migrants and their experiences. Also, more research on reasons why former residents are not eager to move back could be beneficial in order to develop the attractiveness of the regions.

2.5   THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In order to actually provide enrichment to current literature and research, it is necessary to introduce the framework of the thesis (Figure 2 below). Before-mentioned Talent Attraction Management model is the grounding base for the empirical research of the thesis, as it provides the main themes empirical research is concerning. TAM is reinforced by chancing reputation to retention and adding recruiting, and some factors are put under the same headings. In the previous chapters the Talent Attraction Management model was first introduced and then its sub-factors were aligned with existing literature and research of international professionals, recruiting, and sparsely populated areas. Talent Attraction Management model was also evaluated to be suitable for both the regional level and the company level, as its sub-factors are more of hypernyms, as talent attraction, reception, integration, reputation and management are all relevant in both contexts. Also, international recruiting and the global competition for international professionals were discussed, which are essential topics in the further parts of the thesis. As the literature of international recruiting in sparsely populated areas is very limited, the theoretical framework is solely based on the bigger themes of one model, strengthened with one extra feature. However, as the themes are quite universal and easy to understand, they suit well the purpose of the thesis.
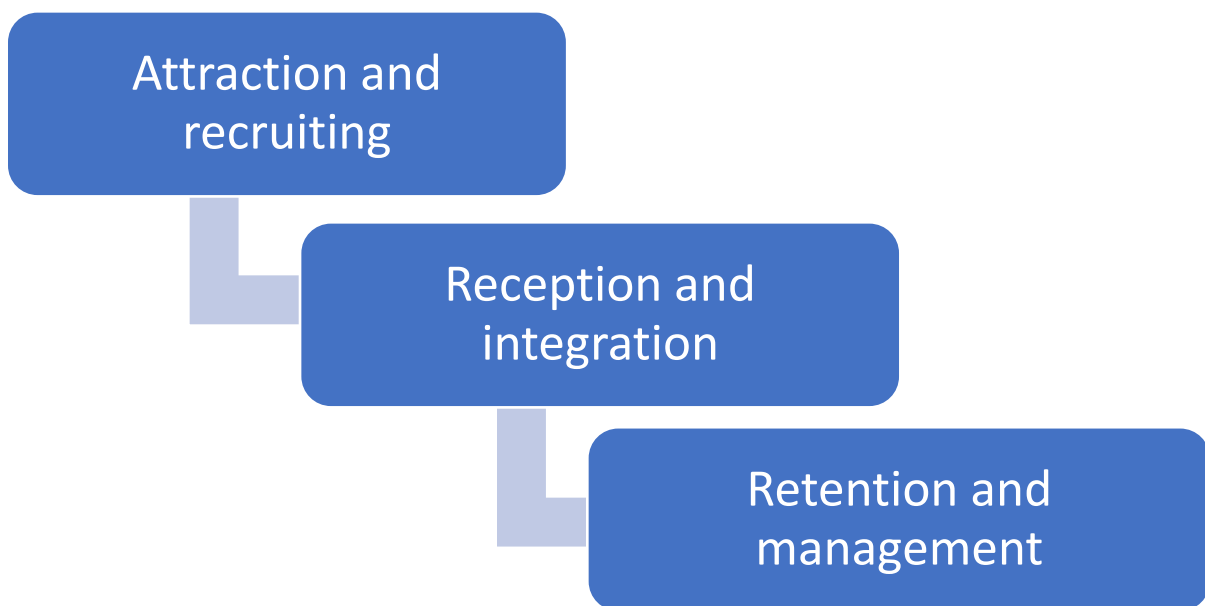

Figure 2   Theoretical framework of the thesis.

In the empirical part of the thesis the aim is to answer the research questions of the thesis, context being a specific sparsely populated area, namely Pohjois-Savo region. In addition, in the empirical research it is researched how well the collected data matches with the previous literature presented in the literature review chapter. Moreover, the aim is to use the research data along with the Talent Attraction Management model as a basis for future tools to be used by the companies and other instances in developing and understanding the features of international recruiting and talent attraction in sparsely populated areas. In addition, the hope is also to explore valuable suggestions and concerns from the companies actually operating in a sparsely populated area. Lastly, hopefully the companies and organisations in Pohjois-Savo region could benefit from the results of the thesis, which also supports the chosen theoretical framework and the aim for pragmatic results.

One major assumption of the thesis is that some international professionals do want to move to sparsely populated areas, or at least could be attracted to do so, and that with revised and targeted actions sparsely populated areas can improve their situation in the competition for recruiting international professionals. The later part of the paper focus on the presented topics and ideas of the thesis, and the next chapter introduces the methodology of the empirical research of the thesis. In the empirical research the representatives of companies located in a sparsely populated area are expressing their thoughts, feelings and concerns regarding the topics of the thesis.

3 METHODOLOGY

Before introducing the findings of this research, it is important to introduce the methodology used in the thesis and the reasons for chosen methods. Firstly, the research paradigm is explained. Secondly, the methodological approach of the thesis is introduced. Thirdly, the overall design of the research is presented. Fourthly, a deeper glint into the data collection process is provided. Lastly, the ethical consideration of the research is presented.

3.1 RESEARCH APPROACH

Literature review of the thesis revealed the fact that there is very little previous research on the international recruiting in sparsely populated areas, and thus the groundwork for the empirical part of the thesis is based on aligning relevant existing theories and research. Furthermore, the approach in the empirical part is to clarify the situation in Pohjois-Savo, a sparsely populated region in Finland, and gain further information of international recruiting, talent attraction, management and other matters introduced in the literature review. Previous literature and discussion reveals the ongoing struggle sparsely populated areas are undergoing, as well as the potential future threats they are facing. Expectation is thus that the topic of the thesis is also seen highly relevant in the empirical part, namely by the participants in the case studies. According to Eriksson and Kovalainen (2016), the main issue is usually described in the research question(s) and this is the case in the thesis as well as the research questions are quite self-explanatory.

3.2 CHOSEN METHOD

In business studies, case studies are often used to examine real-life business case(s). Case study is an integral part of business studies also due to the themes that might not be generalised too much and need to be evaluated on a deeper level in every case. Also, many topics and phenomena are such that too strong hypothesis or preconceptions should not be drawn, thus the research should instead be less structured and almost spontaneously floating in order to discover the potential findings and connections. Eriksson and Kovalainen (2016) have stated that diversity and complexity are integral factors in a case study, which prevents too simplistic research design. They have also highlighted the importance of case studies in international business research and it as an equal substitute to quantitative research. Furthermore, they have addressed that real-life business cases have a long history in business research and thus case study is a popular and useful research method.

Due to the nature of the thesis and the research topic, it is safe to assume that some attributes of contextualized explanation are also present in the thesis. Contextualized explanation aims to find cause and effect explanations of causal mechanisms, and furthermore the generalizations drawn from the research should be limited and contingent. (Welch et al., 2011).

Due to the nature of the research of the thesis, and the experience level of the researcher, the scale of this research is limited to be manageable. This decision, however, does not limit the importance and reliability of this research since the aim is indeed in shedding light into the chosen phenomena in the chosen context, in opposite to a large-scale research. Therefore, this research has some elements of intensive case study, meaning that the focus is on gaining a deeper understanding of a small number of cases instead of wider selection of cases and more general understanding, which are the focus on extensive case study (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016). As according to Eriksson and Kovalainen (2016), statistical generalisations cannot be drawn from case studies, this thesis is not an exception.

However, intensive case study is usually focusing in only one case, whereas this research does have more than one cases, and thus the research in this thesis in more of an extensive case study after all. Based on my understanding and experience, philosophical descriptions of research styles often align, mixes, and varies along with the chosen explanation, explainer, and source. Perhaps then the matter of subject is that the chosen methods and theories are suitable, reliable, and proven in order to conduct good research. After all, researcher should be flexible and sensitive towards the research and the ongoing research process in the terms of methods, since finetuning, adjusting and even reshaping the research is often needed. Thus, the empirical research of the thesis is more of a self-emerging narrative case study than a very structured and prompt, even straightforward, process. In addition, perhaps the personality and qualifications of the researcher has an effect on the chosen methods, even though it should be clear that the researcher needs to stay neutral observer in the most cases.

Lastly, the chosen case study method is multiple case study. According to Gustafsson (2017), researcher needs to consider whether a multiple case study or a single case study is better in order to understand the phenomenon researched. The topic of the thesis is such that multiple case study suits the empirical research best. One benefit of a multiple case study is that it can create more convincing theory because suggestions are based on wider empirical evidence (Gustafsson, 2017).

3.3   RESEARCH DATA AND DATA COLLECTION

The research of the thesis is based on interviews with the representatives of three different companies from the Pohjois-Savo region. As the aim was to learn from the situations of these companies and harvest knowledge from the decisionmakers of these companies, interviews were good choice to study past events and experiences (Norman & Lincoln, 2011, 869). Data collection took place in April and June 2021. Interviews lasted 45 minutes, 55 minutes and 62 minutes and were conducted by either Microsoft Teams or Google Meet due to the corona-pandemic and ongoing remote work in many companies.

Company size or origin was not limited, since the amount of the possible case companies in Pohjois-Savo was expected to be relatively small. In two of the cases the interviewed persons were HR-managers and in one the interviewee was CEO of the company. Companies were selected by the researcher from the pool of companies located in Pohjois-Savo either by overall conspicuousness, known recruiting policies, or company size. Thus, a short-list of potential companies was created, which was followed by contacting the most suitable ones via email. Also, some help was asked from other individuals, for example from Kuopio Region Chamber of Commerce. Interestingly, it was quite difficult to get assist from such organisations, as few contacted persons did not reply at all.

Even though the importance of international recruiting is highlighted in the public debate and by the supporting organisations, it was surprisingly challenging to find information on companies actually recruiting international professionals, as companies' internet sites do not usually provide such information. Also, the lack of news and other sources of information regarding the topic made it harder to find such companies. News and papers about the general need for international professionals and projects concerning it were however available, but these are merely on a general level and without concrete examples. Few company representatives answered that they have not recruited international professionals, whereas quite many did not reply at all. In addition, a few companies answered that they could match the search criteria and might be willing to participate in the research but did not reply to my further contacts. Also, one company withdraw after an interview was scheduled. However, these three companies participating in the research are very different to each other, which turned out to be a fruitful for the thesis. Interestingly though, all the participating companies are Finnish companies and established in Pohjois-Savo. Foreign companies were the most difficult to reach,

as they often had only global email, numbers and persons available on their websites, which led to multiple unanswered contacts.

The number of cases in multiple-case study is not commonly ruled to be at least something, thus the research question and the study goals are affecting the number of cases (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016). Hence, the research question or researched phenomenon can be such that the amount of possible cases is low or very limited. These three cases can provide enough data in order to draw conclusions and participate in the discussion about the topic. However, a few more cases could have been beneficial and would have given more grounding for the analysis and conclusions. Though, as the cases are quite context related and tied to a specific geographical location, too many extra cases might not bring more depth to the analysis.

The interviews were guided by a framework (See appendix 1) conducted by the researcher, which included relevant themes and guiding questions concerning the themes introduced in the literature review under them. However, as the topic is quite broad and situations in companies are different, the interviews were expected to be different to each other. The framework was beforehand sent to the interviewees in order to avoid asking unpleasant or irrelevant questions. Other reason was to help interviewees prepare a bit for the data collection. All interviews went well and discussion flowed and flourished through the reserved time with all participants. The main point in having such structure in the interviews was to enhance the conversation and prepare the researcher for diving more in the details or moving to another questions depending on the more or less extensive answers from the participants. Thus, the interviews were semi-structured. (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016).

3.4 Data analysis process and method

As previously mentioned, the interviews were conducted via video meeting platforms. By the permission of the participant, each interview was recorder. Recording happened with a third-party application and it captured the audio only, thus video was not recorded. As the interviews were recorded it was easy to return to each interview in order to understand them better. Chosen analysis method for the data analysis was qualitative content analysis. In qualitative content analysis the aim is to produce holistic and factual sense of the data, thus better revealing the "big picture" of the phenomena (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016).

After the interviews were conducted, the next step was transcribing them. Before that, the process included replaying the interviews several times in normal speed. After the interviews were familiar it was possible to move to the transcription part. Interviews were played in slower speed in order to catch all the nuances from them, and because of the fact that lettering things is slower than saying them. Since all the interviewees were native Finnish speakers, interviews were conducted in Finnish. Main reason for this was the assumption that Finnish instead of English would enhance the conversations and provide more fruitful results. Therefore, the next phase was to translate the written data in English. This demanded extremely careful work, as it is crucial to maintain the meanings and nuances of every sentence said in the interviews.

When thorough understanding of the contents was reached, transcriptions were coded to find the similarities and commonalities of themes in each of the three interviews. Coding process begun by highlighting the key themes of the interview framework, which were location related matters, recruiting and personnel related things, projects, and development/future. Such work is important part of qualitative content analysis (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016), as in the end the goal is to create an actual description of the data.

During the research process it is necessary to keep ethical guidelines and consideration in mind. University of Easter Finland has issued research ethical guidelines, which was followed throughout the writing of the thesis. Desirable research practices were complied with during the whole research process, meaning that interviewees were given choice of attending, essential information about the research, confidentiality, anonymity and to only assess relevant parts (Hirsjärvi et al. 2009).

In the beginning of each interview essential information about the purpose of the study was provided as well as complete anonymity of the interviewee was promised. Participants were promised anonymity, as without it, some answers from the participants could have been partial and concise. It was also thought that it would create more open atmosphere for the interview. In addition, identifiable characteristics of the participants, locations, stories and such are modified, faded out or completely left out in order to maintain unidentifiability. However, due to the context of the research some readers may be able to figure some of the details left out. The names of the case companies are left out from the thesis in order to maintain the anonymity of the participants. Correct data handling was promised to all participants, meaning that their answers are not modified or distorted, gathered data is deleted after the thesis is completed and

data is not available to anyone beside the researcher. After providing the necessary information, all interviewees agreed to participate on the research.

This thesis has several limitations and thus needs to be taken in account when evaluating the final results. The study context is Finland, which may possess some unique features compared to other countries, and the focus was on a specific geographical location within Finland. Due to this geographical limitation and time constraints, the number of case companies is limited. However, the case companies vary a lot in terms of size, personnel and operations. In addition, noteworthy is that the researchers previous experience on research methods, large scale writing process or analysis methods is limited.

Lastly, I personally do not have any connections with the interviewees or the case companies, and the thesis was not assigned or sponsored by any individual or company. The master's thesis was conducted by me and any help during the writing process or the empirical research was not received.

4 EMPIRICAL RESULTS

In this section the empirical results, more commonly the findings, are presented. Empirical research of the thesis consists first clear explanation of the empirical context of the study, which is a Finnish region of Pohjois-Savo. It is followed by three case analysis, where representatives of three different companies located in Pohjois-Savo were interviewed about international recruiting, sparsely populated area as a location, talent attraction and retention, to name a few topics.

4.1 EMPIRICAL CONTEXT

Finland itself is rather sparsely populated country as a whole, with approximately 5.5 million inhabitants, from which some 2.726 million were consider as labour force in the December of 2020 (STAT, 2020). Therefore, it is necessary to attract skilled labour force from abroad, as previously it was shown how many jobs were not filled in 2017. Furthermore, Finland is a rather rural country located peripherally far north, and with freezing arctic climate (Habti & Elo 2018, 19–20), which can further reduce the attractiveness of Finnish sparsely populated areas. From 19 regions of Finland seven are part of the Northern Sparsely Populated Areas network, which are Lappi, Pohjois-Pohjanmaa, Keski-Pohjanmaa, Kainuu, Pohjois-Karjala, Pohjois-Savo and Etelä-Savo (NSPA, n.d.). As a comparison, in the most sparsely populated region, Lapland, the population density in 2019 was just 1,9 per km2, whereas in Uusimaa it was 185,7 per km2 (STAT, 2019).

However, Habti and Elo (2018, 20) have argued that Finland is also known for its' deep involvement in high-tech companies, global higher education, global economy, and international business. Hence, Finnish sparsely populated areas are most likely very different compared to sparsely populated areas globally, perhaps northern and western Europe providing an exception. All in all, Finland is widely recognized as a developed Western country.

International professionals can bring skills and expertise needed by the companies, but they are also vital for the regions' future as taxpayers, socially active persons, and possible permanent inhabitants. Therefore, both the region and the employers should have mutual drivers for attracting international professional and skilled migrants. According to Oreopoulos (2011), global competition to allure skilled migrants is growing. Thus, it would be unwise to deliberately lag behind in the competition to attract prospective immigrants, at least if there is a will to remain the existence of the specific area.

4.1.1 Pohjois-Savo

As the focus of the empirical part of the thesis is in the current situation of a specific geographical location, it is important to first introduce it. This chapter consist of basic information about Pohjois-Savo (sometimes translated as Northern Savonia), its business environment, the current situation of international professionals in the region and information of possible actions taken in the region to promote international recruiting.

General information

Northern Savonia is one of the 19 regions in Finland. It is located in the middle of Finland, laying between Southern Savonia, Northern Karelia and Northern Bothnia. It is a member on Northern Sparsely Populated Areas (NSPA). In June 2020, the population of Pohjois-Savo was 243 551 persons (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2020). In the most recent Regional Plan of Pohjois-Savo the population goal for 2040 is 278 000, although it is accepted to be very optimistic goal since the current trend is estimating population decrease in almost all municipalities of Pohjois-Savo (Regional Council of Pohjois-Savo, 2017).

The city of Kuopio is the capital of Pohjois-Savo and by far the biggest urban area within the region with its population of 120 227 (foreSavo, 2021). Second largest municipality is Siilinjärvi with the population of 21 294, slightly beating Iisalmi where the population is 21 133 (foreSavo, 2021). In total there is 19 municipalities in Pohjois-Savo, thus it can be clearly seen that overall, it is very sparsely populated region with only few urban areas. However, it is not the most sparsely populated region in Finland, which is Lappi with population density of just 1,9 persons per km2. Currently, Pohjois-Savo is eighth sparsely populated region in Finland with the population density of 14,8 person per km2.

Future and current lead sectors in Pohjois-Savo are part of the before-mentioned smart specialization strategy, thus the importance of specialization has been understood in the Regional Plan 2040 conducted for Pohjois-Savo region by the Regional Council of Pohjois-Savo (2017). Named sectors are woodworking, food products, machine and energy technologies, water and biorefining, tourism and wellness technologies. Currently the first three sectors are the carrying forces in the regional economy. It is stated that companies and organisations operating in all these sectors need more professionals and further innovation, for example export, branding, marketing, and innovation clusters are mentioned multiple times in

the regional plan, as well as early support for companies in these. (Regional Council of Pohjois-Savo, 2017.)

Furthermore, the optimistic goal in Pohjois-Savo is to create more than 25 percent more new vacancies until 2040 (Regional Council of Pohjois-Savo, 2017). If this can be done, the demand for international professionals would grow significantly. What becomes clear in the Regional Plan 2040, and as a matter of fact in every paper considering the future of sparsely populated areas, is that economic growth is clearly aligning with population growth, innovations and investments in development. The current trend of available workforce, however, is saddening. In 2019 the average percentage of participation in workforce amongst age groups was 61 percent, and thus it must grow in the future (Regional Council of Pohjois-Savo). In research from 2019, app. 84 percent of the companies replied that within 1 – 3 years they need more workforce (Spring House, 2019). In addition, 47 percent of the companies predicted that the availability of workforce within 3 – 5 years will be weak. Thus, there is evidence that recruiting international professionals could be highly beneficial for the economy of Pohjois-Savo, from both the demographic side and the economical side.

International talents in the region

Migration flow to Pohjois-Savo is not yet rather heavy, as for example in 2020 there were 701 migrants from abroad (foreSavo.fi, n.d.). As a comparison, in Uusimaa, which is the capital region, migration was 15 133. In 2018 there were 7384 foreigners in Pohjois-Savo (Kotouttaminen.fi, n.d.). Trend is that most of the foreigners live in Uusimaa, as currently approximately half of the foreigners living in Finland live in Uusimaa (Ministry of the Interior, 2021).

According to a recent research by Spring House (2019), 69 percent of the companies having recruited foreign workforce in Pohjois-Savo felt that it had went either very well or somewhat well. Thus, previous good experiences gives positive signals for the future of international recruiting in Pohjois-Savo. In addition, 41 percent of the participating companies stated that they would recruit straight from abroad.

Supporting actions in the region

Pohjois-Savo has recognised the importance of recruiting international professionals, and the current problems there are in attracting them to Pohjois-Savo. Hence, regional Talent HUB-

task force was launched in 2019 in order to clarify the operational model and prerequisites for further Talent HUB-program (Centre for Economic Development, Transport and the Environment, 2019). Talent Boost Goes Savo-event was held in August 2018 and the aim of it was to discuss on how Pohjois-Savo could be attractive for international professionals, and it was organized by the Centre for Economic Development, Transport and the Environment (2018), but unfortunately the material from the event is no longer available in its internet site. Thus, it is rather difficult to evaluate some of the projects and supporting actions if the results or project sites are not updated or maintained. Also, recently finished Future Savo-project lasted for almost three years and its aim was to create a better image for Pohjois-Savo, attract new citizens and employees in the area, and to increase the retention of the area (Future Savo, 2021). Centre for Economic Development, Transport and the Environment (ELY-keskus) provides support for organizations, for example by language courses and coaching for multicultural workplace (ELY-keskus, 2020).

Concerning the above mentioned Talent HUB-program, government subsidies were granted in January and February of 2021 (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment, 2021). Subsidies were applicable to all Finnish cities where foreign-language speaking population exceed 15 000, thus it was not directly helpful to sparsely populated areas. However, as Kuopio is the capital of Pohjois-Savo and the headquarter of regional Talent HUB-program, it can be expected that some subsidies from there are also beneficial for the whole region. Yet, it can be questioned are sparsely populated areas too often left out from development processes and governmental subsidies compared to more densely populated areas. In the results of the case studies, it is interesting to see if the case companies have participated in the local projects and events, and what kind of comments they have regarding these.

4.2 CASE COMPANIES

In this chapter the analysis process of the empirical data is presented, also, the most relevant and interesting results gained from the collected data is shown. The analysis process is conducted bearing in mind the research question and sub questions of the thesis. Other noteworthy thoughts and ideas of the interviewees are also highlighted. Quotes from the data are included in order to support the analysis method and for transparency. The way the data is represented and the quotes are used are essential for better output in the representation of the results and in discussion on the themes.

The previous part of the chapter four clarified the context of the empirical research, which hopefully offers along with the literature review a better foundation for understanding the results of interviews with the company representatives from Pohjois-Savo. Thus, in the following parts of the chapter four the results of the data collection are presented. It is followed by a cross-case analysis, where the situation and views from the three cases are analysed as a whole. Thus, the aim of this chapter is to reveal the key findings and how the analysis process happened.

4.2.1 Company A

Background

The company A is a Finnish manufacturing company with the history of several decades. It operates truly globally, having presence in over 40 countries and exporting over 80 percentage of its production. In Finland, the company employees close to 1000 person, from which several hundred are located in Pohjois-Savo. The main factory and operations are located in Pohjois-Savo as well, as the company was established in the region. Globally the company employs professionals in many different positions, such as in sales, service and supporting operations.

The HR-manager of the company A acknowledges the effects of the location, but states that *"...it has affected our business but I rather see it as a challenge than a problem."* However, the pool of skilled workforce within the area is a limitation for the factory. One challenge is also transportation, as connections between smaller places in Pohjois-Savo are weaker compared to those in more densely populated areas. Although, thanks to some projects new connections have been established to suit the needs of the company and its employees. The company A also pays lot of value on having specialized education and schools in the area, as the graduates from these are crucial for it. Regarding the governmental services, for example educational institutes and health and social services, the interviewee sees that these are alright and more information on the availability of these would be important.

Attraction and Recruiting

The company A has had situations where a vacancy could not be filled due to the lack of applications to a position where physical presence was required. As the main factory of the company is located in Pohjois-Savo, and because factory work cannot be done remotely, the availability of workforce in the area is very important. According to the HR-manager the

company has been so far able to find skilled workforce, thus they have not had specific need for international professionals for now but the interviewee acknowledges that the growth of the company makes it more difficult to rely merely on the local workforce in the future. When it comes to the attractiveness of the area and the company, the interviewee says that it is very situation specific. The company itself attracts applicants by offering them a change to work with high-quality products and high-tech, and the HR-manager highlights that the change to get to work with concrete end-product indeed attracts people. Also, the reputation and size of the company are advantages in attracting the local workforce and those moving to the area. Regarding the people moving to the area, the interviewee explains that existing ties to the area plays a big role.

Currently the company A has not been actively targeting international professionals, as they have been able to recruit the needed workforce domestically. Regarding this, the company has not seen it important to use any international recruiting sites. Although the company is actively monitoring the situation, and perhaps in the future they may need international professionals too in Pohjois-Savo. In recruiting the company is always looking for the best possible candidates in the first place and all their decisions are based on certain criteria.

The HR-managers explains that the challenge in recruiting international professionals to Pohjois-Savo is that the company's operations there often require Finnish language skills. This is due to the history of the company, as many processes are in Finnish and lot of the work is done in Finnish. The interviewee brings up that the company still has multicultural employees in Pohjois-Savo, but these have had the demanded Finnish skill already acquired when they have joined the company. Still, the company offers possibilities to learn English or Finnish when needed, and such services are organized by their partners or the public sector. The HR-manager adds that thanks to internet connections today, such services are easy to set up in sparsely populated areas as well.

On the other hand, the company employs experts whose work is not so location-tied and where the language requirements are non-existing or more lenient. When recruiting these experts there are multiple location choices available within Finland and abroad, thus recruited experts do not land to Pohjois-Savo very often. Most of the expert positions and target positions for international professionals are located in more densely populated areas, for example in the bigger cities of Finland. When the company receives applications from international professionals, these are carefully reviewed and the applicant's possibility to work in Finland is

examined, as remote work from other parts of the world is not yet possible. Some of the international applicants may be directed to the company's local subsidiaries, but the possibilities in these are scarcer. In addition, the HR-manager agrees that depending on the job remote work can be an option and it can be agreed case by case. Few points arose to clarify the current work culture: face-to-face seeing and presence has been a part of the company culture, and team policies and dynamics are affecting on how the work is organized.

In talent attraction, the company A has not directly used Pohjois-Savo or themes related to it, but they have participated in projects, campaigns and events. Thus, they have been aiming to do more general communication regarding the attractiveness of the location and their vacancies. One example is that during the corona-pandemic, the comfort of less crowded and less urban areas have been highlighted. The HR-manager lists some of the pros of Pohjois-Savo to be mentioned in communication *"All the basic services are on point…nature…opportunity to live freely and do things."*

The HR-manager highlights the importance of collaboration with educational institutes and says that one of their target group in recruiting is the local graduates from the schools in the area. Regarding this, the company has developed for example specific learning paths with the educational institutes and the interviewee sees the importance of new ways of education like apprenticeship contracts. The company also has collaboration nationwide, but not internationally, as they are having deep ties with for example the University of Tampere.

On the other hand, the availability of more experienced employees is important for the company. The local pool of these can consist also national and international migrants. The HR-manger sees that it is crucial for the company to be able to attract these experienced workers as well. Targeting them takes namely active and honest communication, but the HR-manager underlines that *"Perhaps the most efficient way to get them [workforce]…it is the recommendations of existing employees."* All in all, the company believes in long-term work regarding the organizational image, in work satisfaction, continuous development of the workplace and the spirit and atmosphere in the organization.

In addition, the HR-manager was asked to provide some attracting factors that could be highlighted in recruiting international professionals to the area. *"Well…nature…the lightness and comfortability of being…safety, quality and cost-efficient living…it is easy to move around,*

quality of life here…it is less-crowded and built compared to metropoles…but it is also possible to work in international positions and with high-tech."

Reception and Integration

The HR-manager says that they have not recruited many international professionals to Pohjois-Savo, but underlines that *"As far as I know…these [international professionals] we have hired have settled in rather well."* In addition, the company has not faced situations in Pohjois-Savo where foreign employees have not settled in, but the HR-manager brings up some reasons why Finnish employees have not integrated in the area. These have been for example having family on the other side of the country, no ties to the area, unsettling and not having networks in the area.

The company A is helping its employees in integration by guiding them to get familiar with the services provided by the municipalities, hobby activities and is introducing the team and other colleagues well. The HR-manager says that *"Not too binding guidance…but of course recommendations on where to turn to…"* and continues that it is also about making sure the daily life at work is good and work satisfaction is high. In addition, the company itself also organises exercising opportunities and hobby groups where one can get to know the colleagues. The company would help newcomers in finding housing options, but so far everyone has been able to find accommodation from the area.

Retention and Management

The HR-manager says that they have recognized the benefits international professionals can bring in with them, for example in the form of language skills in the global context, but underlines that *"…these employees are rarely located here [in Pohjois-Savo]"* In addition, regarding the discussion about the benefits of diverse workforce, the interviewee agrees that these have indeed been discussed. Although the company has not had any specific campaigns or such to highlight the importance of diversity, it is seen as something to be supported and it is viewed as a richness in the company, as the HR-manager states that in the end *"…it [diversity] is an important value for us."*

Current Projects and Future development

The HR-manager sees that the current and past projects on branding the area and boosting the attractiveness and recruiting have been good and helpful. Especially events are seen as beneficial because of *"…direct contacts with the applicants…open vacancies can be advertised there."* The interviewee says that the projects of public sector, often in collaboration with the business sector, have resources to put in the overall marketing and branding of the area, and brings up such examples as Future Savo-, Ytyä- and By Iisalmi -projects. The interviewee sees that both the region and the company has gained something from the projects and events. In addition, it is beneficial to collaborate in marketing, events and fairs, but it would also be important to come up with some new ideas as well. Thus, how and where Pohjois-Savo is present and seen is important. On the development of the area the interviewee adds that it is very necessary and important matters such as housing and leisure activities needs to continuously be improved.

The HR-manager recalls that the collaboration between the local employers is an advantage, but also adds that the depth of it is always a question. One example of such collaboration has been the company's participation in the local HR-forum, which has led to for example to cases where potential candidates are directed to other companies. In the future there could be demand also for even more collaboration.

4.2.2 Company B

Background

The company B is a Finnish company established in Pohjois-Savo and it does its own production but also offers contract manufacturing. Main operational location of the company is in Pohjois-Savo, whereas most of its production is for export. Currently the company employs 250 persons in the area, from which 25 are foreign employees coming from 22 different countries.

As already revealed, the company's location is Pohjois-Savo, which according to the HR-manager is merely due to the fact that the company was established there back in the days. One reason for the formation of the company was that there has been a cluster of know-how and collaboration among the local institutions. Generally, the core work of the company is not location sensitive. Due to the corona-pandemic, the absence of flights is a problem, but normally the transport options have been enough from the company's point of view.

Attraction and Recruiting

According to the HR-manager the company B is rather well-known in their industry and have a good reputation, which is attracting certain type of workforce. Also, the industry the company is operating in is fascinating and growing. The interviewee states that the company has received more and more applications from abroad, which is a great thing. The company's aim is always to seek the best match and previous experience from the industry is valued, but they also value potential, thus their recruitment pool is the whole world. The interviewee underlines that *"International applicants may have experience from areas where Finnish candidates don't have."*

Targeted communication is also familiar to the company, as they have for example partnered with the Finnish TE-centre and gained visibility through employment agencies in other countries. The HR-manager brings up great example of such *"We found that in Australia there was a lot of people watching it [a live stream]."* while telling about the company's participation in a live stream concerning job opportunities in Pohjois-Savo. The company has also participated in EURES-recruiting events and they have recruited employees through these.

Regarding the targeted communication, the HR-manager admits that in a place where there is lot of companies operating in the same business as they are it is very difficult to compete for the experts. Thus, depending on the open vacancy, the company's interest is also aimed to specific geographical areas where suitable experts are educated but there is not clustered industry related their business. So far, the company B has not targeted specific groups of people but it has been noticed that it is easier to recruit international professionals who are in the beginning of their careers, and often without partner or family. Although, the interviewee continues that they have been able to recruit all kind of international professionals with different backgrounds.

The HR-manager brings up an interesting example of what type of people can be attracted in the area. *"This one person had taken genetic test and found out his origins were partly Finnish…and had felt a bit unbelonging there [in home country] so the person decided to try life in Finland and brought his family too."* In addition, the company has employed for example foreign people who have been studying in Finland or found a Finnish partner, thus international professionals in the area have diverse backgrounds. On the other hand, people who have moved to Pohjois-Savo have also some commonalities, as they are for example keen on nature, sports

and leisure activities instead of metropolis and bustle around them. Educational opportunities are also seen as an important attracting factor.

The interviewee admits that there has been situations where international professionals have visited the area and has been unwilling to stay there due to the size of the town. In the situations where they have had to convince the applicants a bit more about the attractiveness of the company, such arguments as high-quality occupational healthcare, high-level of development work and professional know-how has been used. In addition, some concerns of foreign applicants have been related to that Finnish people are perceived as less social, thus there would be less social activity. Also, the transport connections in the area have raised some questions among the applicants. Interesting point is that the rents in the city of Kuopio are seen as quite high by international professionals. The HR-manager says that the company has not introduced new ways of working merely to attract international professionals, but these are rather aimed to provide equal ways of working, opportunities and methods for everyone.

The HR-manager says that there has not been challenges in interview situations, but continuous development in the processes is of course happening. For example, the company has learned that it is important to tell about Finland, ask different type of questions and tell about the practical matters here. The company B has recruited some 180 persons in the past three years; thus, the interviewee sees that in the company they are quite experienced in interview situations and recruiting.

The HR-manger continues that perhaps in the attractiveness of the area and Finland there are things Finnish people do not often discuss. *"Finns are talking about the know-how in high-tech or so, but we should instead talk about safety…that one can leave the office in 4 or 3pm…you don't need to answer work phone all day…long vacations…relatively good public pension plan…cheap day-care and free schools…these are the things we should talk about."* In the end, the company does not rely on the overall image and communication of the area but is actively creating the employer image by utilizing employer engagement actions and bringing up employee stories.

Reception and Integration

The HR-manager says that there has not been many problems in reception or integration, but at least one person has left the company due to the size of the town. Also, there has been cases

where persons have left because their partners could not find jobs from the area. Thus, according to the HR-manager international professionals would appreciate coordinated work between the local companies in order to employ the partners of them, and in addition it would boost their integration. Furthermore, the company has not had any problems regarding different holidays or vacations, but the interviewee adds that they are of course negotiating special cases according to the needs of their employees.

The company B has recruited many international professionals, which has prepared the organization to be very welcoming toward newcomers. For that reason, it is not a big issue anymore to hire international professionals. In order to support the integration, the company is providing Finnish language teaching for both beginners and more advanced. The aim is not to reach working proficiency but rather be able to use Finnish in daily life and free-time. Due to the global business field the working language in the company is English. The HR-manager explains that they are also expecting English proficiency from their Finnish employees, thus they are not providing English lessons anymore. The company is also supporting for example in finding an apartment, dealing with the tax office and such matters.

One habit the company B has is that after a month in the company the HR-manager sits down with the newcomers and discusses about their settling in process, integration and such. The company also arranges lot of different leisure activities for the employees. The interviewee says international professionals have told that the locals are open and friendly, and that they ask questions and are interested of the foreigners, which might not happen in larger cities.

One interesting problem the international professionals have is related to schools in the area. *"It is challenge when these high-level experts are coming here and their kids are put in school here and there isn't purely English class existing, but they all go in a class for migrants. So, it is a barrier for many that their kid have previously been in some top school…like in Switzerland…and then they come here and it has to go to migrant class where it might not even get to be with kids same age…and it's merely the only class they all are put in."*

Retention and Management

The HR-manager says that one group of international professionals recruited by the company is those who are seeking an adventure and experience and are willing to stay for a year or two.

In many cases such recruits have decided to stay for a longer period, which according to the interviewee is because of the very good retention level in their recruitments.

The HR-manager highlights that from the company's perspective it is only a good thing to have employees with diverse educational and cultural backgrounds. Also, diversity increases the company's attractiveness among the Finnish professionals. On the benefits of the international recruits the HR-manager emphasizes that *"They can bring wider perspective with them, for example by having experience from large organisations, experience from global business…sense on how things are done in the big world."* Other example is when the company managed to recruit a person who had over 30 years of experience from their industry. In addition, from the company's point of view it is a benefit to get people who have different educational backgrounds and experiences, and not only those who have gone through the same local education. Furthermore, the interviewee's tips for hiring a first international professional is to be open as they might bring different expertise and experience which company yet not has and that speaking English in work is not that horrible and it should not be seen as so hard.

The company B is aware of the special skills international professionals have brought with them in the house, for example in communication and cultural knowledge. One example is that the company used to have Japanese employee whose language skills and knowledge of the local culture they utilized in business done there.

Overall, the interviewee sees that the organization is already very well prepared to receive international professionals. In addition, there has not been many cultural clashes in the company B, but the interviewee recalls one case where persons contract had to be terminated as this person did not accept woman as a higher-level manager. The HR-manager states that *"more differences are caused by different organizational cultures…"* Equality and people from different countries are taken in account in the company's plans, and for example in management everyone are viewed equally as a part of the group. About the management related issues, the interviewee adds that it is important to understand that the manager training for international professionals is different. For example, Finnish vacation legislation, working hours and such things needs to be introduced carefully.

Current projects and Future development

The company and the HR-manager has participated in many projects and work committees. According to the interviewee there are many kinds of projects which are often overlapping each other. Regarding the projects the interviewee states that *"There is for example few meetings during the year and some discussion which is done with public funding but is there actual results from these projects is the question?"* Furthermore, the problem with these projects is that they may not communicate with companies, thus the link between the projects and the experiences of the business sector might be missing. According to the HR-manager, things are happening faster in the business life compared to public sector and the need for information is immediate, thus some information and plans might be already outdated when executed.

What would really help the company would be for example one place where all the bureaucracy could be handled, as currently permission matters, communication and information flow is not very smooth between the parties. Therefore, a service for international professionals, where all the bureaucracy, such as the above-mentioned, as well as dealing with the magistrate and police could be handled. Thus, all the files there needs to be sent could be filled in one place. Getting international professionals in Finland is currently experienced to be rather stiff. The HR-manager is aware of the current sites aimed for migrants but says that these are on too general level and do not answer the practical questions migrants might have. Beneficial would be a site where the one who is migrating to Finland could find answers to even for-the-dummies level questions, such as what type of activities there are for my kids and such.

Again, on the projects the interviewee states that *"I have participated so many times in such projects and haven't really seen what the concrete outcomes in these are."* Problem is that the public services are not agile, and neither are the employees in public organisations such as ELY-centre and EURES. One solution the HR-manager brings up could be that these organisations could purchase services from more agile companies. In addition, some of the services and sites available are unfinished, stiff and slowly updated. As an example, few months ago the company heard about the Jobs in Finland -website and wanted to upload job advertisements there, but Pohjois-Savo could not be selected as the area there. Thus, the HR-manager called the customer service of Business Finland, which is behind the site, but they just agreed and said that this is the case and it cannot be selected at this point.

Lastly, the interviewee sees that the city they are operating in is not interested enough about the companies that are actually bringing in these desired new inhabitants, even though it has

ambitious goals in its population growth. Thus, the city should listen the business sector and develop its services, for example the problem with English classes, according to their messages.

4.2.3 Company C

Background

In the literature review it was mentioned that companies from sparsely populated areas can benefit from the internet-era. This company is great example of that, as their product is completely digital and thus, they have no logistic difficulties regarding their main location being in sparsely populated area. The company C was established around ten years ago in Pohjois-Savo, and it is an IT-company operating in a special niche. Currently it has five employees but is also collaborating with the employees of the parent company. Four of the employees are from different regions of Finland, and one is originally from abroad, but has lived in Finland for few years. Thus, the company has diverse workforce and the CEO is familiar with recruiting international professionals.

According to the CEO, having Pohjois-Savo as their location is both an advantage and disadvantage. For example, they stand out by being from elsewhere than the Capital area or other bigger cities of Finland, as their current location is perhaps seen as more sympathetic. In international business their location has not been relevant issue in any way. On the other hand, in their business sector it would be beneficial to have parliamentary connections, thus networks to the decisionmakers are seen as important. According to the CEO it is impossible to attend shorter and unformal meetings, such as breakfast-meetings, from more remote areas. Literature review suggested that former residents of the area may be beneficial for sparsely populated areas, but the CEO sees that personal networking and connections are more important. On the other hand, the CEO argues that networking can be easier in Pohjois-Savo, as fewer calls need to be made and the barriers are lower. Interestingly, the interviewee mentioned that funding might be easier to get when compared to for example Uusimaa region where competition is tighter.

Attraction and Recruiting

As one of the aims of the thesis is to find out are sparsely populated areas attractive for international professionals, the CEO had an encouraging anecdote. When the company published a job advertisement in LinkedIn, they received 36 applications, from which 11 were

from Finland, two from Pohjois-Savo and only one applicant was Finnish speaking. On the other hand, it also shows that the availability of workforce in the area is very low, which highlights the threats sparsely populated areas are facing. The interviewee explains that one reason for the low availability of workforce is because the local graduates are leaving. What the area would need is large and attractive companies to show the graduates that there is opportunities for them. Currently there are some companies, but these are recruiting the graduates straight from the school and after a while the recruits leave and are going elsewhere to seek new adventures.

The kind of professionals the company C would need are developers, salesperson and perhaps customer service representatives in the future, who are committed to the company and its vision, and also have certain passion and a bit ambitions for saving the world. Thus, they need persons who are interested in professional growth within their sector, not the ones who want to try many different sectors and gimmicks.

The CEO also brings up an interesting point, which would deserve an entire research for it, of the too big expectations of Finnish youth have on work life. *"If you come to your first job…it is more learning to work and such…All the bustle…Tesla's in every yard…lemonade shelfs…and craft-beer tastings every Friday…these can be true in Helsinki or somewhere…but the reality is different here…So my concern is that do [Finnish] youth understand the realities of work life?"* This also shows that in talent attraction these themes cannot be the grounding argument in Pohjois-Savo.

The CEO says that the area attracts certain type of people but knows hardly any cases where people have moved there merely because of the area. Thus, career ambitions are the main drivers for people. Although, the CEO continues that it can change due to the ongoing situation. In addition, the CEO would attract people in the area by highlighting the following factors: High-class basic education, services for families, healthcare, clean air and water, housing quality and the work-life balance in the area. In addition, *"…think about how good area this is for families…kids can walk alone to school, babies can sleep outside…and maternity leave and package…this type of things we often forgot in Finland…taken for granted."*

Transport connections are important for the company, and for example the number of daily flights was reduced due to corona-pandemic, which has affected the business. Thus, the CEO strongly highlights how important it is to have an international airport in the area.

The company does not require presence in their main location and remote work can be done from anywhere in Finland. The CEO explains that they have recruited two persons during the corona-pandemic and both have been remote for a year now. In addition, remote work from abroad is seen possible. The CEO underlines that *"…maybe it is this time that has improved [companies'] courage…to bring remote work in use…and it is the modern way."*

The company C has published three job advertisements and all were through social media. The CEO states that they have received a good amount of applications and that there is no need to post job advertisements in general job pages. The CEO recalls that in the latest advertisement in LinkedIn they set the target area as Europe. The company C has not thought utilizing other services such as international recruiting pages, like Jobs in Finland, or live streams regarding recruiting.

In the company C the interview process is structured so that the CEO interviews the applicants first and the whole team is participating in the final round. The CEO has interviewed five international applicants during the time in the company but has also previous experience on doing so. Their last hire was the company C's first international recruit. The CEO explains that international applicants tend to pay more attention in the details are better prepared, and underlines that *"…they [international applicants] are damn sharper."* According to the CEO, international professionals have had some concerns in interviews. These can be seen for example in that it is typical for Finns to have kind of a high trust in the society and in employers. The CEO continues that *"…there [in Finland] is an atmosphere of trust…and quite low hierarchy."* In addition, foreign applicants tend to be more reserved and formal compared to Finnish when asked about free-time or such.

The interviewee has previous experience on failed international recruitment, and there the reason was the differences between the qualifications of the applicant and the details of the job, thus there was a mismatch in these. For example, work on internationalization can be very different in abroad as compared to what it is a company trying to internationalize from Pohjois-Savo.

The CEO highlights the benefits of recruiting international professionals and sums up the positive things it brings. *"…diversity to the team, it steps up the readiness to take on new challenges…we get to use English in daily life which is very nice…it make you view different cultures in the daily life, that is a richness too…also it challenges the autopilot we have on*

every day." The CEO has done two recruitments of international professionals previously and now one in the company C, and adds that of course there are challenges, but there are always challenges and in general, recruiting international professionals is very beneficial.

However, the CEO expresses also controversial thoughts concerning the ongoing discussion about the need for international professionals. *"Yeah, for sure Finns should have courage to hire them [international professionals], but this whole discussion on bringing professionals to Finland is silly, as there are professionals already in the country. For example, this who we hired…graduated from Finnish university of applied science and worked as a Wolt-courier because of companies' language policies…foreign name…was not getting replies to applications."* The CEO calls for an attitude check by the Finnish companies to really have courage and brings up another example how international professionals who are already in the country are not utilized *"…what is a problem is that we have for example…Indian doctoral student coming here to study pharmacy. Then they cannot get a job here thanks to language requirements…therefore they get the education here and got to Norway or somewhere where they get a language certificate in three months and then get a job."* Thus, Finnish processes are taking too long, language requirements are insane, and the society is kind of shutten, rebarbative and afraid to take the international professionals in.

About the integration the CEO adds that the immigrants who come through the governmental processes are sort of imbedded with labour movement thoughts there. The CEO continues that it is an actual problem since there are some cultures where there is actual division between employers and employees, and the situation in Finland is very different. Thus, the CEO questions what kind of image about the Finnish employers is painted in immigration processes and adds that it is a difficult situation since there is a will to provide work but some people are enriching the division between employers and employees.

All in all, the CEO encourages companies to be brave and hire their first international professionals. *"If you have a need and there is a professional who fills it…why hesitate…It is always a human being hired as part of the team…Focus on the expertise and the person."*

Reception and Integration

The company C has not developed any specific soft-landing packages or activities, but the CEO acknowledges that the city offers some services in order to settle-in and integrate. Also, they

do ask the recruits if they want to join their leisure activities and such, and this is actually asked already in the interview phase.

When the CEO is asked if their international recruit has integrated in the Finnish way of working, the answer is *"Well...yes and no."* Even though this recruited person has lived in Finland for a while, there is still present some sort of doubt and ensuring the achieved benefits. The interviewee adds that also how management is perceived is somewhat different. What is needed is communication and guidance. Some questions that have arose from the international recruit are whether one can work when sick, what happens if you do not come to work when sick, what is a lunch benefit, how do you have breaks and when to be in the office. The CEO explains that with a foreign recruit it is like teaching the whole culture from zero and break the certain barriers first, which has been the case in the company C, whereas with a Finn it is teaching the way things are done in the company and showing in one's presence what is the vibe there. But the interview explains that they decided to go as usual with the latest recruit, thus the newcomer integrates in the organisational culture or not.

The company does not expect Finnish language from the applicants, but the first thing they did with the latest recruit was arranging a language course. The CEO explains that the company of course pays it and the recruit can use work time to take the language lessons. The company's unformal communication is in Finnish, for example in Slack, although the work itself can be done in English and critical communication is in English. The CEO sees it more as a fundamental thing to highlight the importance of Finnish language now and in the future. Thus, the CEO says that it is companies' social responsibility to obligate those who come to work and live here to achieve at least free-time level of Finnish.

Retention and Management

According to the CEO, some challenges in leading remote work may have occurred, but active communication and clear routines in practices are helping. One challenge in remote work is that the daily life is happening in different locations and thus there might be less to discuss with the colleagues. Employer engagement is done purely with real encounters between the people and by treating them as individuals.

The company C has already had a change to benefit from the know-how acquired through international recruiting, as by a fortunate coincidence they begun to do business to the same country their latest recruit is originally from. For example, the persons cultural knowledge and

understanding of local practices and such have been important. The CEO also adds that the previous experience has shown that it is always important to hear another opinion, and when it comes from a person from another culture it can bring up very surprising observations. On the other hand, the CEO addresses Finnish workers to be more self-guided and self-imposed.

Current Projects and Future development

The CEO says that the availability of workforce might be an issue in the future, thus it is good that there is some openings to bring in international professionals. *"I believe these openings arise from the businesses…where the companies begin to solve the problems by themselves…as they should…And because they have to."*

As there are many existing projects concerning the demand for international professionals, the CEO was asked if the company has participated or received help from these. In their latest recruitment, they did not receive any help but the CEO has participated in seminars and so on. Furthermore, the CEO states that *"As a company…I don't believe that it is beneficial to put our resources in these [projects]...But I hope there are some good results."* One guideline for the projects is to have less meetings and more action. According to the CEO, the problem in the projects is that they are governmentally funded, which means that they cannot collect money from other sources. This leads to that when the projects are piloted the companies are instructed to use free services. Therefore, when the services are free there are less expectation toward the results. In addition, these projects are often poorly managed. The CEO continues that often these projects are too large, hence it is difficult for the companies to actually see what really the beef is. The solution would be to find the actual need and then seek paid external service provider, like outsourcing in business. Then the results could also be demanded. Lastly, the CEO addresses that if a company has a specific need in certain time, the public sector might not be the best help.

5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The previous chapters presented three different case companies from Pohjois-Savo. In this section the differences and similarities between these companies are analysed in order to answer the research questions of the study. As a broader topic the current situation in Pohjois-Savo is also highlighted. Cross-case analysis enables to separate the firm specific antecedents concerning the companies' organisational situations and needs and capabilities in recruiting international professionals from the ones brought up in the literature review. Thus, the case companies are also discussed through the lens of the literature review, as it will be interesting to see how the existing literature is applicable in these cases and represents the reality of these case companies. In addition, the reality of one specific sparsely populated area is presented and compared to the learnings from the literature review of the thesis. Gustafsson (2017) has stated that one difficulty in a case study is the presentation of the findings in a way that is easy for the reader. Hopefully, the chosen structure and language enables the reader to fully digest the findings of these interesting cases, as there are lot of important views and points in those.

5.1 Cross-case analysis

The cross-case analysis is divided in four sections. The first section compares the case companies regarding talent attraction and recruiting. The second section considers talent reception and integration in the case companies and in the region. The third section discusses how retention and management differentiates and are alike in the case companies. The fourth section focuses on the experiences the case companies have regarding the current projects in the region and how the future is perceived. Along the case companies, the findings regarding the geographical context of the empirical research are compared with the current literature.

It was interesting to see how different the case companies are in terms of size, business sector and structure. Interestingly though, none of the companies are operating in energy, natural resources or tourism sector, which all were mentioned in the literature review as future's possible thriving sectors in sparsely populated areas. The company A is a large globally operating company, the company B is a very specialized and well-known within its business field and the company C is the most recently established and smallest but yet very promising IT-company. What is common with all the case companies is that they are clearly operating beyond the borders of the region they have been established in. All the companies are doing

international business and clearly showing that it is possible to thrive, grow and expand in and from a sparsely populated area, as Dubois and Roto (2012) suggested in the literature review.

5.1.1 Location

Sparsely populated area as a location is agreed to be a challenge and creating some disadvantages. On the other hand, in all cases there are also positive things regarding the location and operating in and from a sparsely populated area is not seen as a barrier for successful business. Only one issue that arose is the remoteness regarding the national decisionmakers, as Pohjois-Savo is far from the Capital region of Finland and most of the decisions are made there, but it was also added that creating personal networks might be easier in less densely populated area.

Thus, as the literature review and the theoretical part of the thesis discussed, this might be due to the differences between sparsely populated areas in general and the difficulties of defining these areas. Perhaps in Pohjois-Savo the environment is suitable for such businesses present in the case study, or perhaps in Pohjois-Savo there are some other reasons that supports doing business. However, as the thesis did not purely examine the business environment in this sparsely populated area, further questions needs to be left for others. In addition, whereas previous literature suggest that talent inflow and the level of innovations are correlating and the international professionals are boosting the companies' performances, this research cannot confirm that.

Transportation between the smaller places, demand for flights and the need for international airport are brought up by the participants, which aligns with the previous literature. On the other hand, transport connections are seen to be satisfactory and not affecting the businesses, which is somewhat surprising. Furthermore, in all of the cases educational institutes and schools are seen as extremely important for the area. For example, the company A thrives because of the suitable schooling paths, the company B was established because there was collaboration between the local institutions and the HR-manager brings up with an example how the lack of suitable schooling opportunities can be a barrier for international professionals preventing them moving to the area, and the company C's last hire was a foreign graduate from the local university of applied science.

In none of the cases there had not been problems in finding accommodation for the recruits, but rents in Kuopio were seen quite high whereas one of the interviewees said that the housing is

affordable and good in the area. This could highlight the megatrend of urbanization in smaller scale, as living is expensive in the city but cheaper in more rural areas, thus sparsely populated areas are experiencing such issues too. Even the governmental services were seen quite good, which might be because of the fact that in Finland the public services are quite good and available for everyone, which indeed suits the statement from previous literature acknowledging that in Nordic countries the infrastructure is nationwide. Thus, in sparsely populated areas from such countries, one can expect to find most of the needed services.

5.1.2 Attraction and Recruiting

As the previous literature suggests, the case companies have turned their recruiting scope beyond their home region at least to some extent. Thus, the lack of talents in the local pool of workforce has affected the case companies. Also, the demand for high-skilled jobs in the area is acknowledged. As Finland has not been a target country for migration for a long time, it was joyful to find out how globally thinking the case companies and their representatives were. The company A and B are quite well-known in their industries and were clearly aware that some talent attraction is happening due to the images and reputations of the companies. As suggested in the literature review, social media can save time and money in recruiting, and for example the company C was clearly advertising solely on LinkedIn. Other case companies were larger companies, thus their resources to put in recruiting are obviously greater. However, what is important is that also smaller companies have nowadays possibilities to reach foreign professionals.

What became evident in all of the cases, skilled workforce is crucial for the companies. There is variation between the case companies whether they have recruited people actually from abroad, but in all of the cases this kind of international professionals had been interviewed or reviewed. At this point also comes the biggest disparity between the themes of the thesis and views of the case companies, as the international professionals are discussed. The aim in the thesis was to purely focus on international professionals recruited from abroad. However, as it turned out that in all of the companies there had been cases where international professionals who had already been in Finland were recruited, it was necessary to include that aspect too and discuss the views of the interviewees. Thus, all the case companies had been in touch with this type of international professionals, and for example the CEO of the company C had very strong statements regarding the current situation this type of persons have in Finland and was

specifically mentioning international students and those migrating through the governmental processes.

Even though there are differences between international professionals who are already in Finland and who are recruited from abroad, I would argue that these groups are in the end quite similar. Furthermore, as there are skilled people already in Finland and in sparsely populated areas, perhaps doing a job they are overqualified to, it would be crucial to utilize their skills better and unwise to not to pay more attention to the matter.

As suggested in the literature review, there are indeed lot of different reasons and backgrounds on the decisions of the international professionals. Thus, too broad assumptions cannot be drawn. However, some commonalities can be spotted from the cases. Solimano's (2006) work introduced two categories of drivers behind migration, and from the cases most of the reasons fell in the first category including economic, cultural and social factors. Furthermore, in talent attraction, all of the interviewees would use arguments considering similar factors. What lacked from the research was a question on whether the companies can attract international professionals with salary or not, as it would have been interesting to compare the answers of such different companies. In the end, there was not really support to state that the area itself is attracting people, especially those who do not have any ties there, thus attraction needs flourishing businesses recruiting people in and to the area. In one of the cases, it was also brought up that the daily work life is perhaps more traditional in Pohjois-Savo compared to bigger cities, thus it is not as glamorous and glittered as it is in some branded IT-companies for example.

All of the case companies had introduced remote work, and it was seen as integral part of experts' work. In the company A the work was most traditionally organized, but this was because the main factory of the company is located in the area, and the HR-manager highlighted that the company employs lot of professionals working in global positions where different ways of working is possible. What comes to language requirements, there was variance in the situations. From this point of view, in the company B the language barrier was smallest, as they do not require any knowledge on Finnish language and all of the work is done in English. In the company C they do not require English skills, but most of the company's communication is done in Finnish, thus they demand active learning of Finnish language. In the company A most of the work in the area is done in Finnish, as most of their processes are in Finnish. In addition,

Finnish language courses were provided by all of the companies and in some cases, it was even obligated to learn Finnish, which is further discussed in the next chapter.

In all of the cases the interviewees brought up the services, nature, quality of life and such attributes found from the area, which aligns for example with the findings from Sturesson et al. (2019) presented in the literature review and highlights that good living conditions can be indeed found from sparsely populated areas too. Although, it was widely recognized that some people are following the current megatrend of urbanization, and Pohjois-Savo does not offer metropoles or bustle for people who demand those, even though Kuopio was associated with some more urban attributes like cultural offering and restaurant scene. In addition, the interviewees brought up very timely points in favour of sparsely populated areas, such as safeness, openness and the high-quality public healthcare. In the literature review these points were also seen as some of the possible attractive factors of sparsely populated areas and were also brought up by the writer of this thesis.

Furthermore, services for families were brought up. On the other hand, perhaps these examples should be used more in talent attraction as one interviewee stated that in the end it is easier to recruit international professionals who are moving alone. What became evident is that there indeed are several factors in Pohjois-Savo that can be used in talent attraction, and in all cases the interviewees did not have hard times to come up with some examples of these.

What comes to the claimed stronger social capital in sparsely populated areas, the examples from the cases on the other hand supports the statement and on the other disagrees with it. Although, the concerns regarding the people and social activities in Pohjois-Savo might have more to do with the overall image foreigners have on Finnish people. Additionally, some of the interviewees stated that people who are looking for more urban areas and bustle, this might not be the right place.

The previous literature suggested geographically and demographically targeted talent acquisition, and in some of the cases such were considered at least to some extent. The company B has been actively targeting experts abroad and the HR-manager was clearly aware of the competition for talents in some places, thus the company is targeting potential candidates in areas where the competition is not that fierce. In addition, this company has also utilized and hired people through international recruiting pages and services, thus the company is clearly a forerunner in international recruiting.

On the other hand, the company C had recently hired their first international professional and is significantly smaller compared to the other case companies, thus it might lack resources and knowledge to do more specific and pursued targeting. The company A has not been actively targeting international professionals to Pohjois-Savo as most of the positions receiving applications from such are located in more densely populated areas, and in their job advertisements they usually have these as location options which probably makes international professionals to choose bigger cities instead. In some of the cases it was mentioned that people from other countries often come with different educational and cultural backgrounds, which were seen as benefits for the companies, and therefore the importance to also get applications from them was highlighted.

What was common between the responses was that all the case companies are seeking for the best persons to join them, which did not really come as a surprise. But in the end, it means that the best match can also be a person from abroad, whether being experienced or potential one, with different cultural and educational background and having other expertise. Thus, benefits of diverse workforce are understood, and this is also discussed in further chapter.

The company B has clearly most experience in recruiting international professionals to Pohjois-Savo. Also, the HR-manager of the company said that during the last three years the company had recruited some 180 persons to the area, which is quite a significant amount. In addition, this person clearly highlighted the experience on interviewing foreign applicants, although the CEO of the company C had also quite a lot of experience on interviewing and recruiting foreign applicants, although most of the experience was gained before working in this company.

Previous literature claimed that international recruiting demands more from the companies and that even though the companies believe that their organization is ready to recruit international professionals the truth might be different. There was some answers in the cases supporting this view, and at least it was seen somewhat different to interview and recruit international professionals compared to Finnish ones. For example, as in the literature review it was found that the time frame where recruiter needs to gain enough information is very limited, it was mentioned that it is important to ask the right questions in the interview and also tell the right things in order to have successful interviews benefitting both the company and applicants. In addition, truthful communication prevents mismatches in recruiting. What comes to the backgrounds and exposure to different cultures of the recruiters affecting the decision making in international recruiting, this thesis cannot confirm whether the previous literature is right or

wrong. Although, as later chapters are explaining, the more the organisation has recruited international professionals the easier it is to recruit them in the future, thus the previously mentioned statement can be seen realistic.

5.1.3   Reception and Integration

In some cases, there had been situations where integration was not successful and recruits had left the company. Unsuccessful integration can be a problem with both international and Finnish recruits. Therefore, companies needs to pay attention in it and monitor how it is going, and the company B offered a great example of such monitoring as its HR-manager explained. Although, it is not merely on the companies' hands whether people are integrating in the area, as some of the reasons why people have left the case companies have been the size of the city and partners not finding jobs. All in all, all of the case companies are arranging leisure activities and different opportunities for their employees, thus this kind of reception for newcomers is seen important. What was also seen as important for reception in the case companies was introducing the colleagues and ensuring the quality of work life.

The case companies had quite similar reception and soft-landing practices. In the literature review it was expected that things like housing, taxation and other bureaucracy can be difficult for foreigner. In all of the cases the companies had at least some sort of soft-landing practices, but the level of it clearly varied based on how many international recruits the company had made. What arose among the participants, especially with the HR-manager of the company B, was a clear need for some sort of "one place for everything" -service where all the bureaucracy regarding migration could be handled.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, some of the case companies clearly highlighted the importance of Finnish language skill. It was said that the demanded level is ability to use it in free-time. Language skill was seen as an important part of integration, and thus all of the companies were providing opportunities to learn it, and in some cases, it was especially mentioned that the company pays for it and working hours can be used. In addition, it was brought up that internet connections make it easy to offer such services also in sparsely populated areas.

Previous literature addressed that highly skilled person tend to seek partners with similar educational and social backgrounds, thus international professionals might come with others in the area. The issue regarding of problems to find a suitable job for the partners of the recruits

was acknowledged, and there has been some collaboration between the local companies, but more work is needed.

One thing worth to mention is the absence of experienced racism by the recruited international professionals. Although the interview questionnaire did not include questions related to racism, none of the interviewee brought up any examples relating it. Even though it cannot be stated that there is not racism in the area, as we all know there is, it might not be that big problem for integration and perceived attractiveness of the area regarding international professionals. One further research direction would be to study how the racism is perceived by different groups of immigrants, thus would international professionals from Asia have different experienced than those from Latin America.

5.1.4 Retention and Management

Social globalisation was mentioned in the literature review and it is clear that the phenomenon has been understood in all of the case companies and is considered for example in management. For example, in the case companies international professionals are viewed as individuals and equals to others, thus they are not grouped as one. Indeed, one interviewee mentioned that in the city they are operating, all migrants are perhaps viewed too narrowly by the local administration. Differences between international professionals from developing and developed countries did not stood out, but some of the difficulties and differences in recruiting, integration and management could be because of different countries of origin. This, however, would need more research in order to be stated as a fact. However, some similar opinions on differences between the management and training of international and Finnish employees arose in the cases.

The benefits of international professionals for the local economy was not concerned, but by benefitting the companies the effects should be clearly positive. On the company level the benefits were however discussed, and in all cases diverse workforce was seen very beneficial for the companies. Furthermore, all of the case companies were pursuing diversity to some extent, and none of the participant stated that diversity is seen as harmful for the company.

What was also seen in the empirical research is that the more company has recruited international professionals, the easier it is to keep on the same track and recruit more of them. With this also the possibility for cultural clashes grows, as the company B had experience from negative case which was clearly cultural related. Therefore, the readiness to hire international professionals could be evaluated in companies and perhaps somehow improved by examining

the companies where the organization is very welcoming and ready to recruit them. Also, diversity management was seen as important, alike it was highlighted in the literature review.

Within the case companies it seemed that the company B was most ready to bring in more international professionals. In addition, the HR-manager of the company B highlighted the most how much they have recruited internationally. Perhaps such companies could be highlighted more as an example of successful international recruiting in sparsely populated areas, as it could encourage other companies to take the leap and recruit international professionals too.

Previous literature suggests that more diverse workforce could for example reduce the barriers in internationalization of the companies and increases the trade efforts overseas, and some of the cases in the empirical part of the thesis can be seen to support these suggestions. All of the case companies are doing at least some business abroad, and benefits of international workforce were said to be such as cultural-related know-how, language skills and different educational backgrounds, thus at least a conclusion that recruiting international professionals do not prevent or harm the companies' abilities to internationalize can be drawn. In addition, the interviewees brought up examples on how the companies had utilized the skills of their international professionals, which shows that there indeed are benefits beyond their expertise international professional can bring with them. Furthermore, as the previous literature suggests, the backgrounds and previous experience of international professionals can be seen as potential resources for the firms (Mohr & Shoobridge, 2011).

5.1.5 Current projects and future development

All of the case companies were familiar that there are many projects and such aimed to boost and help the companies with international recruiting. In addition, all of the interviewees had participated in some of these. Differences arose between the opinions on whether the projects are really helpful or not. What was common is that the projects regarding more general topics, such as improving the overall image of the area and advertising the job opportunities in the area, were seen the most beneficial ones. The message that arose from the cases is that it is the companies who are recruiting people and the responsibility is in the business sectors hands, but the public sector and other instances should carefully listen the business sector and assist the companies accordingly. This way it is possible to create useful projects, services and in the end make sure that it is efficient to recruit international professionals or any other talents to the area.

In the end, all of the participants agreed that further development is needed in order to keep the area attractive to international professionals and others. In addition, and previously mentioned, easier processes for bringing international professionals in the country were highlighted.

5.2 Discussion

As the underlying reason for the thesis was a concern regarding sparsely populated areas, in the following sections the aim is to provide concrete and practical tools for companies and regions aiming to recruit international professionals. Thus, if the thesis wants to actually provide useful information, it is necessary to introduce concrete examples drawn from the other parts of the thesis in readable and informative way. Therefore, relevant learnings from the literature review and the empirical part of the thesis are visualised in textboxes, hence the reader can focus on the most important learnings and features.

As learned in the literature review and the empirical research, sparsely populated areas are hardly similar beside when located in similar macro-regional environment (Dubois & Roto, 2012). Thus, it is difficult to extend the learnings of such limited research to concern all sparsely populated areas. However, as Pohjois-Savo is located in a developed Northern European country, it is safe to assume that for example sparsely populated regions and companies from other Nordic countries could utilize the findings of the thesis. In addition, as some of the learnings are quite universal it is most likely that also decisionmakers from any sparsely populated area can find useful information here.

In the Figure 3, 4 and 5 there are important features regarding the different factors presented. These are easy to understand concepts, and all of the features are based on the previous literature and the empirical research of the thesis. Most importantly these all features are essential for both the companies located in sparsely populated areas and the decisionmakers of the governmental services and institutions. By taking these in consideration, sparsely populated areas can create competitive advantage and improve their situation in the global competition.

Talent Attraction and Recruiting

Active branding of the companies and the region were seen very important in the research, as was creating better image of the things found from the area. Employer branding is relevant, and for example by active participation in relevant public debate can create a better brand in the eyes of possible employees. Thus, conceptions that skilled migrants have regarding rural areas

(Sturesson et al., 2019) are playing a big part in talent attraction and recruiting. Aim should be in creating better conceptions.

Some Swedish peripheral areas are seen as attractive amongst migrants because of such attribute as high amenity or heritage values, leisure and sport opportunities, landscape qualities – for example close to water or agricultural elements, and appropriate distance to urban areas and main roads (Dubois & Roto, 2012). Most of these factors were indeed present also in the answers of the interviewed company representatives. Heritage values were not considered in the empirical part of the research, but it would be interesting to replicate the research and find out whether these values depend on the region.

Dubois and Roto (2012) have highlighted the necessity of adequate transportation development strategies, for example for finding the right balance in needed services in sparsely populated areas. As previously learned, sufficient connections abroad and to urban areas are important for international professionals and their integration. In addition, all of the case companies highlighted the importance of transport connections. Especially international airport is seen crucial for the area and companies there. It is clear that not all sparsely populated areas have the possibility to have an international airport, but at least it should be behind a reasonable distance.

On the other hand, the findings from the empirical research are suggesting that people migrating to Pohjois-Savo have been very different to each other, which differs from what Habti and Elo (2018) said about skilled migrants having specific reasons behind migrating to Finland. It was found that very diverse backgrounds exists among the international professionals migrated in the area, and it is hard to draw any categories of most possible migraters. Only one slightly grouping feature was that those who are coming alone, thus without a family, are somewhat easier to attract. It is more about the things international professionals enjoy in life, as empirical research revealed as expected that metropoles and bustle cannot be found from the area, whereas openness, nature and high living quality were associated with the area.

Social capital was highlighted in the literature review, but in the empirical research it was not that emphasized. In some cases, it was mentioned that people from the area are welcoming, and that networking can be easier as there are less competition, but deeper analyse about the existence of social capital was lacking. However, people or the atmosphere of the region were not negatively underlined, thus there is a change that more extensive research could reveal

whether social capital is indeed one of the attraction features of sparsely populated areas. What was found that educational opportunities and schools in Pohjois-Savo are reasonably good, thus it can increase the social capital in the region as Glaeser et al (2002) have suggested.

Companies needs to actively communicate with the applicants during the recruiting process, as negative experiences easily dims the employer brand and thus can make international recruiting more difficult in the future (Centre for Economic Development/Kokka kohti Suomea -hanke, 2021). This was understood among the case companies. Although the level of experience with international recruiting varied, it seems that also companies from sparsely populated areas can create significant experience in international recruiting. In addition, it also became evident that there can be a steep learning curve in the recruiting and interview processes when the company is actually aiming to recruit international professionals. It would therefore be beneficial for sparsely populated areas to highlight learnings from such companies.

In the second chapter the fierce competition for international professionals was revealed. Thus, companies in sparsely populated areas cannot lower their changes in recruiting by consuming too much time in the recruiting processes. Therefore, these processes should be efficient and well-structured (Centre for Economic Development/Kokka kohti Suomea -hanke, 2021). One way to manage the recruiting process is to use recruiting services, such as EURES. EURES is the European Job Mobility Portal managed by European Commission (European Commission, n.d.). As an employer it is possible to for instance publish vacancies, seek candidates and get assist from the EURES-advisors. EURES also offers monetary support for instance when recruiting over 35 years old Europeans from EU27 countries through Reactivate program, or Eka EURES support for recruiting 18 – 35 years old EU27 citizens (Reactivatejob.eu, n.d.; TE-centre, n.d.). In addition, especially companies seeking internationalisation may find support through Enterprise Europe Network (EEN), which provides consultation for example in partner-acquisition, internationalisation and legal matters (EEN, 2021). Some of the case companies were aware of these or similar services and had even recruited employees through them, but further introduction and case examples could lower companies' barriers to utilize these services more.

In the following list there are action points that arose from the literature review and the empirical research considering the attractiveness of sparsely populated areas:

- Infrastructure investments (bigger and better connected economies)

- Investments and support for educational opportunities
- More support for international professionals and their families in integration to the local culture and life

In the end, however, the real power in international recruiting lays in the hands of the state. Rules and regulations, such as visa policies and categories are set in order to control who crosses the borders. Thus, states are first defining the actual framework for international professionals and second setting up the environment within they can be recruited. (Weinar et al 2020, 9).

-Availability of public services and suitability for families

-Natural amenities and leisure opportunities

-Living quality in the area

-Work opportunities in high-tech and international businesses

• Attraction Factors

-Continuous learning

-Utilization of available recruiting and advertising opportunities

-Courage to consider international professionals

• Recruiting Factors

Figure 3   Attraction and Recruiting factors

Talent Reception and Integration

As learned in the literature review, international professionals in Finland are feeling that the prejudices of Finnish people are unfavourable towards them. Actions affecting this issue should be highly prioritized. For example, more communication about the positive effects of migration of highly-skilled foreigner to sparsely populated areas, their output for the economy and social environment, their achievements and such success stories would be beneficial in changing the prejudices of locals and rising their understanding of migration. However, as the situation is as it is, it would be wise to separate skilled migrants from other groups of immigrants in the public debate and communication, since indeed the international professionals are those who are most needed in sparsely populated areas most.

What arose from the empirical part of the thesis is that there are lot of problems in the situation of international professionals and talents already located in Finland. In high-income countries the ones in least advantageous position in labour markets are refugees (Brell et al., 2020), but examples from the study cases of the thesis are showing that at least in Finland the situation among other groups of foreigners is also difficult. Thus, as international students and other skilled-migrants are not integrating or finding their places in the local labour markets, they are either doing jobs where they are overqualified or are leaving the country. This is not efficient and there should be huge drive to improve the situation.

As Mohr and Shoobridge (2011) suggested, the demographic make-up of the labour pool available has changed due to globalisation, but it seems that this is not yet fully understood in the governmental level. Sparsely populated areas could be forerunners in this, although it needs governmental decisions and changes in the processes and legislation.

Furthermore, when receiving skilled migrants, it should be clear for the organisations and countries that different career development needs exist, and thus an environment for gaining as much career capital as possible should be provided, as this can more likely lead to extended or permanent stay of international professionals. Therefore, rather than evaluating one's possibilities of permanent stay in sparsely populated area or some negative factors, supporting

organisations should focus on creating positive conditions for best possible experience for those who have taken the chance to migrate there.

One thing that was viewed to be sufficient in Pohjois-Savo was housing and living conditions, as these were mentioned in all cases. Indeed, it is very relevant factor in integration, and sparsely populated areas should take care of the housing quality and options in order to attract and integrate international professionals.

-Local language courses (aim in free-time level)

-Inclusive activities and introductions

-Assist in housing, immigration and bureaucracy processes

- Reception

-Employment services for the partners of international professionals

-Actions against racism and discrimination

-Focus on international professionals already in the area

- Integration

Figure 4   Reception and Integration factors

Talent Retention and Management

What became evident in the empirical research is that more the company has experience from diverse workforce, the readier it is to welcome further foreign newcomers.

According to Mohr and Shoobridge (2011), the potential benefits stemming from recruiting international professionals can lead to reduced entry barriers in companies' internationalisation and even be drivers for it. The empirical research of the thesis can confirm that there are indeed benefits in recruiting international and diverse workforce, and these can for example help the companies in overseas trade and in overcoming cultural barriers.

In addition, companies clearly aiming to recruit international professionals were very aware of these benefits. Thus, it is quite evident that by understanding the assets recruiting international professionals brings, some companies can create competitive advantage by doing so.

-Create real interactions and encounters between people

-Understand the differences between Finnish and foreign employees and act accordingly

-Increase the level of bonding in the region

• Retention

-Highlight and utilize the benefits of diverse workforce

-Equal talent management

-Extra attention in explaining work and culture related matters

-Clear communication

• Management

Figure 5   Retention and Management factors

Tips for hiring first international professional

In this short list there are tips from the empirical research in order to courage the companies in sparsely populated areas to hire international professionals. The main message of the literature review of thesis is that recruiting international professionals is beneficial, and this message got support from the empirical part as well.

- Be courageous, open, and go for it
- Think about the benefits
- Speaking English is not that bad

Future and Development of public services and projects

According to Nathan (2014), in order to benefit from migration of skilled individuals, there are some broader implications for public policy. He has named pro-skills migration policy, importance of suitable programs for finding international professionals, more positive approach toward cultural differences of talented workforce, and the threat of adverse distributional impact on local employees and companies. Skill-based migration system is in use for example in Canada, Australia and New Zealand (Nathan, 2014) and it could be one option for other countries as well, although the case might be that highly skilled professionals do not see less-known countries such as Finland attractive enough and thus country and company branding is still needed. Indeed, as learned in the empirical research, the case companies were mostly relying in employer branding as the area was not seen that attracting. Further brandings of sparsely populated areas is thus needed.

Nathan (2014) has also mentioned start-up visa programmes, which were very rare when the paper was published and the situation has not changed a lot. Early-stage entrepreneurs could be another opportunity for sparsely populated areas to develop their economies, since according to Nathan (2014) it could involve also local investors and professionals in the selection phase, which could further improve the business activities within the area. Enhancing the possibilities of migrant entrepreneurs, areas would need to develop suitable environments for such operations, for example by reducing the amount of bureaucracy, providing easily accessible funding and local support. Perhaps in sparsely populated areas the focus could be in certain type of ecosystem for migrant entrepreneurs and professionals, which might result as a positive vicious circle and growing business sector.

Important consideration is also whether migration policies actually have an effect on perceived attractiveness of a place in the eyes of international professionals. One research revealed that for academical researchers these were not very important factors when considered possible destinations, thus they did not see legal difficulties as a big part of their expatriation decision, yet it seemed that migration policies have an effect on retaining these skilled migrants after they had entered the country for the first time (Toma & Villares-Varela, 2019). This research considered either academical students or researchers and their aspiration for migration, thus it would be interesting for those in charge of academical institutes and such organisations. One important issue that rose up in the latter research was the need for post-entry rights, for example more flexible options for working between the destination and the departure countries. However, this might be due to the lack of knowledge of the possible legislation, thus it would be wise to find out how migration polices are perceived by the desired international professionals.

An example for governmental plan for actions supporting immigration is the Immigration Action Plan of Newfoundland and Labrador province in Canada. Their five-stepped strategy consists first informing the potential immigrants, second attracting them to Newfoundland and Labrador, third developing the processes to meet the demands of both employees and immigrants, fourth creating opportunities for integration and fifth responding to the needs of employers (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, n.d.). Further on, this action plan also includes actual examples how the situation is improved, for example by creating immigration portal, more collaboration and events, immigration support region-widely, welcoming communities, more online processes, and pay high attention to in-demand sectors.

The above mentioned example looks very promising and such strategic and fully considered actions should be introduced in other areas as well. In the empirical research of the thesis, it was studied how the case companies are perceiving the current projects and services aimed to boost international recruiting in Pohjois-Savo. What became clear is that there is lot to develop in these in order to suit the needs of companies. What were seen beneficial by the firms were events and fairs and broader advertisement campaigns promoting the whole region. In the following list there are the biggest action points that were brought up in the cases:

- Better planning and management
- Public sector needs to listen the companies
- More concrete actions

- Focus on creating more agile services
- New and even crazy ideas are needed

In addition, it is important have goals and strategic plans for recruiting and development in the regional level. For example, Tampere, a Finnish city, is using the share of non-humanitarian immigration and the share of workforce with an international background in order to compare its situation to other cities (City of Tampere, n.d.). Thus, sparsely populated areas need also active measurement of demographic situation, comparison to other areas, and realistic targets. Realistic targets means that the comparison should be made to other similar areas and to proportional levels of the measured issue, and not to the biggest cities in the country or the world.

The following list consist different possible factors that could potentially help sparsely populated areas and companies to recruit more international professionals. However, most of these need extensive actions from nation level decisionmakers, but in the end by making radical innovations and moves there can be great consequences. These are based in the literature review, empirical research or other sources mentioned and seen relevant:

- Express Visas, other fast tracks for skilled migrants
- Remote work, also for employees of foreign companies and self-employed persons, remote work hubs and co-working sites, and support for these
- So-called drive in/drive out working shifts in order to get necessary professionals to work in rural areas
- Highlight the shifting paradigm in the ways of workings, such as short-term contracts, platform economies, light entrepreneurship (UKKO.fi, n.d.), start-ups, angel investors, and such

As a sidenote, Baruch et al (2013) have conducted a list of 20 different forms of international work. Companies and regions should be aware of the current trends and even trying to be ahead of others, as utilizing for example different ways of working can possibly create competitive advantage. In addition, in Australian rural areas the possibilities of different ways of redesigned work have been used as an attraction factor, such as temporarily housing in more rural area and more freedom on the actual living location (Becker et al, 2011).

One group of international professionals are internationals, which refers to the type of people who have lived and worked in multiple countries and identify as a representants of specific type of cosmopolitan culture, thus are global nomads or temporary immigrants who are not necessary aiming for permanent stay (Cao et al, 2012; Baruch et al, 2013). This type of professionals might settle for a while wherever there are vacancies available, or where they feel they can practice their work. Perhaps, especially after the lessons learned from Covid-19-pandemia, areas such as Finnish sparsely populated areas could be attractive for those *global nomads* who are seeking for safe, clean and less-crowded environment in a well-developed country with well-functioning economy, democracy, and health-care system. This type of migration, especially short- and mid-term, would need a radical shift in the way migration is currently perceived, as taxation, residency and other issues would need reshaping and adjustment. Yet, as a thought, this type of safe-havens for international professionals could be one way how sparsely populated areas could attract vital workforce and taxpayers, and perhaps convince these globetrotters to stay for a longer period.

As learned previously, sparsely populated areas located in same macro-regional environment have similar constitution, thus close collaboration and idea-sharing with decisionmakers and businesses from colleague-regions should prioritized. This has been already done in some ways, such as in NSPAs and European Union, but perhaps with deeper and bilateral connections sparsely populated areas can achieve even more.

6 CONCLUSION

In this final chapter of the thesis, the main findings will be summarized. Furthermore, theoretical contributions to the previous literature regarding international recruiting in sparsely populated areas are presented. Lastly, managerial implications and recommendation for future research directions are introduced. In order to summarize the research findings, it is fruitful to re-visit the research questions of the thesis. This chapter thus presents the main findings of the thesis, but in order to gain deeper understanding on the themes it would be recommended to also visit the case descriptions and cross-case analysis. In addition, these chapters are extremely interesting.

"International migration does not stem from a lack of economic growth and development, but from development itself" (Massey, 2003, 11)

According to Massey (2003), above-mentioned is one of the basic truths of international migration and should be clear for policy makers. It means that those migrating from one country to another do not randomly scatter around the globe, but rely on existing social, economic, and political ties between the countries. Thus, the more there is collaboration between countries, the more there is migration too. Beside emigration, in sparsely populated areas people are moving to the regional centres and other build-up locations (Dubois & Roto, 2012), thus at least the goal in decision-making should be to keep these people within the region and prevent out-migration. Therefore, whichever comes first, attracting migrants or retaining the locals, a lot needs to be done in sparsely populated areas, but by paying great attention in these, sparsely populated areas can maintain their vitality. In the end, this thesis has clear contribution in ensuring the future of sparsely populated areas.

The main purpose of the thesis was to gain deeper understanding on how companies from sparsely populated areas can compete in international recruiting, and what is the current situation in one sparsely populated area. Furthermore, the research aimed to find relevant arguments for example in talent attraction and retention in sparsely populated areas, and thus help these areas in the growing competition for international professionals. Underlying argument of global competition is present in the quote above, as indeed global development is beyond the hands of sparsely populated areas, thus they can either adapt and survive or ignore and vanish.

The theoretical framework of the study was presented in the chapter 2.5 and it was created in order to reach the core of the research phenomena. Framework was created through investigating prior research of international recruiting, international professionals and current research regarding sparsely populated areas. Current theories and concepts were examined throughout the literature review through the lenses of the research questions. The elements of the framework were present through the empirical research process and hopefully guided and structured the research process and data presentation. In the end, the aim was to create easy to follow structure for the reader.

The current research suggests companies can benefit from employing international professionals. Hence, as current research shows that sparsely populated areas are facing dangers, it is justified to state that companies from sparsely populated areas and the areas itself can benefit from recruiting international professionals. Even though the themes of the thesis are somewhat scattered, I was able to develop an understanding of the features regarding first sparsely populated areas, second international professionals and recruiting and third attraction, reception, integration and management.

The empirical research of the thesis was based on multiple case study of three Finnish company located in a sparsely populated area, namely Pohjois-Savo. Interviews were utilized as the primary data collection methods, and all of the interviews were slightly different to each other as the aim was to create an open atmosphere and keep the conversation flowing. Interviews were guided with themes and some questions. All of the interviews were conducted through online platforms. In two of the cases the interviewees were HR-managers and in one case CEO.

Moreover, both the current literature and empirical research of the thesis highlight the importance of available workforce in sparsely populated areas. In addition, the benefits of diverse workforce were first discussed in the literature review and then found out to be true in the empirical research. However, in order to be able to recruit international professionals, companies need competence and plans to do so as it was found out that the more international recruiting is done the easier it is perceived. Furthermore, recruiting processes are developing every time recruitments are done. Other finding was that the companies are demanding actions considering current public services and projects, as these are currently seen too ineffective, broad and badly managed. Lastly, what was found is that in sparsely populated areas there are different type of companies, and these companies have different paths to success. Some of the companies are relying more on the more local sources of workforce and yet operating globally

and some companies are targeting their recruiting and having whole world as their pool of workforce. All in all, in this specific sparsely populated area there are forward-looking and courageous decisionmakers in companies, which is promising regarding the future of Pohjois-Savo.

The research questions of the thesis were the following:

RQ: How companies from sparsely populated areas can compete for international professionals, or can they?

SQ1: What are the main barriers in attracting international talents to sparsely populated areas?

SQ2: What are the main arguments in favour of sparsely populated areas?

SQ3: Are the projects aimed to boost international recruiting seen beneficial by companies from Pohjois-Savo?

The main research question of the thesis is a fundamental one, as it leaves a possibility for a reality where there is no future for sparsely populated areas. As one of the main thoughts in the thesis is that sparsely populated areas and companies there need international professionals, the incapability to recruit them would therefore lead to a tragedy from their point of view. Thus, the future of sparsely populated areas is tied together with the companies located there. What was learned in the thesis is that there indeed is a connection between flourishing companies and international professionals. To answer the research question, the latter part of the question needs to be considered first. It is evident that companies from sparsely populated areas can compete for international professionals. How it is done is however a question that is tricky to answer shortly. Companies from sparsely populated areas needs to (1) be bold and have courage to actively target, or at least interview, international professionals, (2) familiarize themselves with the potential benefits of diverse workforce, (3) create employer branding and highlight the benefits of living in a sparsely populated area, and (4) develop management processes in order to create an organisation where diverse people want to stay.

When it comes to the main barriers in attracting international professionals, the question is rather complicated. One answer could be that companies do not actively recruit them, even though the topic is highly debated. Surprising was that many companies actively exporting

goods abroad and operating globally have not recruited international professionals, nor have considered to do so, at least based on responses I received from the company representatives. As learned in literature review, international professionals can indeed boost trade activities abroad. Also, research has shown that innovation has been boosted by recruiting international professionals. Thus, perhaps the companies in Pohjois-Savo are doing already well, which prevents them to actively consider new ways of improvements. One reason can also be the lack of information available, thus companies have not even considered recruiting them. Therefore, it would be essential to clearly highlight the benefits of international recruiting. Of course, as empirical research showed, some people do not want to move to sparsely populated areas as they are seeking more urban and lively living environment, but situation is not that alarming as I was afraid.

The main arguments in favour of sparsely populated areas were quite expected. Features such as natural amenities, good living conditions, work-life balance, openness and safeness were introduced in the cases. Furthermore, it was suggested that in order to attract people to these specific areas, things like services for families, high-quality healthcare and job opportunities in high-tech and international positions should be highlighted.

 As there are indeed lot of projects ongoing or recently ended focused in boosting international recruiting, it was interesting to find out how these case companies are viewing those. Many of the problems regarding such projects and services are related to the fact that these are often publicly funded and managed. Therefore, in the companies it feels that the management can be insufficient, concrete achievements are missing, link between companies and public sector is missing and operations are not agile enough. What were seen good by the case companies were broader marketing activities, for example advertising the region, and some events where companies can participate.

6.1.1 Theoretical and Managerial implications

In this thesis the focus has been in first finding relevant information on international recruiting in sparsely populated areas and secondly in highlighting possible ways to improve the current situation in these areas. I believe that after reading the thesis, the reader has acquired better understanding on the complex phenomena of recruiting international professionals to sparsely populated areas. If the reader is in a position, where she or he has the ability to affect the current situation by participating in the public debate or as a bearer of a such position with decision-

making power, I encourage her or him to do whatever it takes to keep sparsely populated areas vital and alive. Perhaps this thesis provides suitable findings and applicable suggestions.

There are theoretical implications in the thesis that indeed contribute to the current research. For example, it was found in the empirical case study that companies from a one sparsely populated area are participating in the global trade and operating overseas. Thus, the barrier of being from sparsely located areas is not preventing successful business. In addition, companies from a sparsely populated area were found to be open to recruit international professionals and in some cases actively pursuing it. Lastly, it was found that what attributes companies want to see in public services and projects. Most of these themes are not previously studied, thus the thesis is very timely and provides interesting new findings as well as contributes to the field of international business studies.

The thesis has indeed managerial implications. Firstly, the decisionmakers in companies located in sparsely populated areas should pay more attention on familiarizing themselves with the benefits of diverse workforce, as those companies who are recruiting people with various backgrounds are more likely to gain competitive advantage in this more and more global business environment. Furthermore, utilization of different recruiting channels, such as social media, can help smaller companies to reach international professionals and experts with lower costs. Management needs to understand that with recruiting diverse workforce, the organizational culture is shifting, which needs extra attention in order to ensure the equality and suitable talent management. On the other hand, recruiting diverse workforce turns the organizational culture more welcoming toward newcomers and increases the retention level. Thus, in order to stay competitive, companies from sparsely populated areas needs to turn their eyes to international professionals abroad or already in the country. Final lesson therefore is that have courage and recruit international professionals.

Centre for Economic Development has introduced and relatively new campaign called *Kokka kohti Suomea,* which is indeed aimed for companies recruiting international professionals. Regarding to this, a guide for international recruiting has been published. It is full of relevant information, and companies considering recruiting international professionals could find it highly beneficial. Thus, I would recommend decisionmakers in such companies to explore it. At the moment, it is unfortunately available only in Finnish. (Centre for Economic Development/Kokka kohti Suomea-hanke, 2021).

Secondly, this thesis also gives managerial implication for those executing power in supporting organisations, such as governmental institutions. There is clear demand for support for the families of international professionals, for example in house acquisition, work opportunities, local mentors, relevant groups and other factors in order to help international professionals to integrate. What should also be done are actions to prevent racism and alienation of foreigners, education about international professionals and the benefits of them and cross-cultural encounter options for Finnish people. Furthermore, innovation and encounter hubs for idea sharing and collaboration in order to keep the local environment vivid and forward-looking could be useful. Perhaps the most important lesson would be to pay attention to the messages from the companies, as they are aware of their needs. In the end, it is business sector which ensures the future of the area, whereas public sector is there to provide assist and help the businesses to thrive. Thus, in new openings and projects, active collaboration is needed.

6.1.2 Limitation of the study

The thesis is prone to certain limitations, especially considering the empirical study and conclusions. Firstly, the scope of the study remained limited and only one person from each company was interviewed. Thus, the data collected is relatively limited. Furthermore, each interviewee are expressing only their personal view whereas multiple interviewees from each company could have provided more reliable results. On the other hand, as the time and resources were limited, further interviewee acquisition would have been difficult for me as a researcher. One limitation is that the core of the study is consists of companies from only one region from one country, thus the context of the study is rather limited, but finding more participants could have been difficult as problems occurred even in gathering these ones. Due to the fact that the whole research was planned, conducted and translated by only one person, there is possibility for biases in the results of the thesis. Furthermore, the explanations of the findings are solely based on the researcher of the thesis, thus there is a possibility that other researchers would have done something differently and achieve different findings.

6.1.3 Suggestions for future research

Study of international business is most likely going to only increase over time, and therefore this thesis is highly relevant. More on, I believe there is clearly demand for more research on different topics regarding international professionals. For example, research on experienced differences between international professionals working in different sparsely populated areas in different countries would be necessary. Also, deeper research on the benefits of cross-cultural

encounters and diverse environment in companies, regions and other communities in sparsely populated areas would be an interesting direction, as existing literature highly supports that there are indeed good benefits in these. As this research shows, international recruiting in Pohjois-Savo is already discussed, yet actual recruiting is small in numbers. Thus, I believe further research within few years would be worthwhile.

Whereas this research was highly qualitative and focused on small number of cases, I would argue that there is room for quantitative research regarding some topics mentioned previously. Therefore, based on more extensive study, some more theories and hypotheses for even further study, could be drawn. Overall, I would argue that indeed there is demand for future study and research on the topics of this thesis. My firm believe is that the thesis highlighted how important and interesting research can be done regarding sparsely populated areas, and that due to the current situation these are facing there is demand for more. Finally, I personally believe that themes of this thesis are essential and important to be introduced in business schools in even larger scale, since internationalisation indeed will not decline over time, nor will the existence of sparsely populated areas, too.

The potential of economic growth in sparsely populated areas lays in the local firms and their capacity of doing business in other regional economies (Dubois & Roto, 2012). In addition, according to Solimano (2006), migration creates stronger human capital base in the area. Therefore, internationalisation is extremely important in the development of sparsely populated areas and in strategies addressing these. Thus, more research on internationalisation in sparsely populated areas would be interesting to see, as I believe, and evidence supports it, that internationalisation and active participation in global trade is crucial for the economies of sparsely populated areas. As world has recently shown, strange and sudden things can happen, and thus the story of sparsely populated areas is far from over.

In research conducted by Ramani et al (2013), educated health workers in India named their most desired monetary and non-monetary incentives to lure them to migrate to rural areas. These were higher salaries, improved living conditions for the families, opportunities for career growth, better tools for work and decent organisational support policies – These things can be found from Pohjois-Savo, thus it as a sparsely populated area can be attractive for international professionals!

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APPENDIX 1 – CASE QUESTIONNAIRE

Finnish version: semi-structured interview with themes. (Questions asked only if needed)

Haastattelurunko:

1. Infoa
- Montako työntekijää teillä on? Entä ulkomaalaistaustaisia?
- Onko toimintanne muuten kansainvälistä?

2. Pohjois-Savo toimintaympäristönä
- Pohjois-Savo kotipaikkana, hyötyä, haittaa vai ei kumpaakaan?
- Vaikuttaako Pohjois-Savon maantiede ja väestö kv-osaajien (entä suomalaisten) houkutteluun? Onko teillä ollut haasteita työvoiman saamisessa?
- Entä tulevaisuudessa, uskotteko että tarvitsette kv-osaajia?

3. KV-osaajat
- Työskenteleekö teillä kansainvälisiä osaajia, kuinka monta, kansallisuuksia?
- Palkkaatteko aktiivisesti kansainvälisiä osaajia (onko kohdemaita jne.)?
- Millaisten syiden johdosta kv-osaajat hakevat teille töihin? Entä Pohjois-Savoon? Miten suomalaiset?
- Millaisia haasteita, huolia tai epäilyksiä kv-osaajilla on ollut?
- Onko kv-osaajia lähtenyt teiltä (tai Pohjois-Savosta) epäonnistuneen kotoutumisen, sopeutumisen tai odotusten johdosta? Entä perheenjäsenten takia?

4. Rekrytointi
- Onko monimuotoisen työvoiman hyödyistä käyty keskustelua?
- Miten ulkomaalaisten hakijoiden työhaastatteluissa on onnistuttu? Haasteita? Valmistautumista?
- Millaisia "soft-landing"-asioita teillä on käytössä (tukea, opastusta jne.)?
- Oletteko ottaneet käyttöön erilaisia työtapojen muutoksia, kuten etätyö, drive-in/drive-out, vuorotyö?

5. Johtaminen/hallinto
- Millaisia asioita kv-osaajien palkkaaminen on tuonut teille? Sekä positiivisia että haastavia? Johtaminen?
- Kielikysymys
- Oletteko saaneet apua esim. Pohjois-Savon Liitolta, ELY-keskukselta, EU:lta tai Business Finlandilta?

6. Kehitysehdotuksia
- Millaisia muutoksia tulisi tapahtua, jotta ulkomaalaisia osaajia saataisiin Pohjois-Savoon, ja lisäksi sopeutumaan ja kotoutumaan?

- <u>Vinkkejä ensimmäisten kv-osaajien palkkaamiseen?</u>
- Millaisia tukipalveluita tulisi olla?
- Muita ajatuksia, oliko aihe ja teemat oleellisia/ajankohtaisia?