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# Cultural Diversity in

**POKA**

**- Analysis of the current state  
and areas of development**

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# 1 Introduction

The **Cultural Diversity of Study Paths** project is a collaborative initiative involving five higher education institutions in Eastern Finland, aimed at strengthening the multiculturalism of universities and promoting educational pathways for underrepresented student groups, such as immigrants and Romanis (monikulttuurisetopintopolut.fi 2024). For the Student union POKA of Karelia University of Applied Sciences, we will develop **internationalization skills, the involvement of international students in decision-making, community spirit, networking, and peer support services** from 2024 to 2026.

This document analyzes **the current state and areas for development regarding POKA's multiculturalism and services for international students**. For each activity, an introduction and a description of the current state, along with areas for development, have been outlined. The analysis and selection of development areas utilized the Internationalization of Student Unions survey conducted during the project (results presented in the introduction), feedback from POKA staff's functional data collection, a survey conducted by International Business students at Karelia UAS, and the expertise of the project specialist at POKA.

In April 2024, **functional data collection was conducted involving POKA actors**. Six POKA actors, including representatives and staff, participated in the workshop. Initially, observations of POKA's current state were recorded in pairs, focusing on how internationalization and the involvement of international students are reflected in different activities. For each activity, it was noted whether international students were targets and/or actors in that activity. Participants then listed areas for development, evaluating participation numbers, agency, opportunities for influence, group cohesion, integration, and the realization of diversity and equality. Finally, discussions were held regarding the development needs of POKA's internationalization skills, highlighting areas where we are already excelling. These discussions formed the basis for this analysis.



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## Questions used for recording development areas:

- In what ways do you think the influence of international students can be increased at Karelia UAS?
- What actions would improve international students' opportunities to participate in POKA's decision-making?
- What factors encourage international students to join POKA?
- What kind of communication is accessible and reaches international students at Karelia UAS?
- How do you think we can support international students' sense of belonging to the Karelia UAS community?
- What topics should be addressed at the beginning of studies to ensure a smooth start and team-building?
- How would you improve student tutoring to better meet the support and integration needs of international students?
- What factors would encourage international students to apply as tutors?
- In what ways would you develop the VIP (Atmosphere of Caring) activities to better meet the integration needs of international students?

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**International Business students conducted a survey for POKA** in spring 2024, with 86 respondents: 38 from International Business, 17 from Industrial Management, 16 from Information and Communication Technology, 14 exchange students, and 1 from another field. Among the respondents, there were 51 first-year students, 14 second-year students, 17 third-year students, and others in the fourth year. Out of the respondents, 36 were POKA members and 50 were non-members. The results are embedded in this analysis. This document serves to guide POKA's activities during the development work carried out in the project and to direct actions after the project ends. In the final phase of the project, the current state of activities will be reassessed and the implementation of development actions will be evaluated. This document will also be shared with other student unions.



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## Internationalization of Student Unions Survey

In spring 2024, as part of the project, a survey on the internationalization of student unions was conducted. The survey was sent to all student unions via email and Slack, as well as included in the newsletter of National Union of Students in Finnish Universities of Applied Sciences – SAMOK. We received 14 responses from 10 different student unions (out of 22 member unions in SAMOK). The responses have been used to support the documentation of POKA's development areas. This section summarizes the responses from the student unions.

**How is the participation of international students reflected in the administration of the student union?** Advocacy is carried out equally for all students. In some student unions, there are international students as members of the council of representatives. In others, the administration is bilingual, and international students also work in the boards. In some student unions, the working language of the board and the council of representatives is only Finnish/Swedish.

**Are the student union's key documents (rules, action plan, budget, strategy, regulations, etc.) also translated into English?** Among the responding student unions, in two cases, the documents are fully bilingual, in six they are partially bilingual, and in two they are not translated at all. In some student unions, summaries of documents and regulations are available in English. In some student unions, meetings are bilingual if necessary.

**How has accessibility for international degree students been considered in communication?** As a rule, all content produced by student unions is also available in English. The content shared by student unions from partners may only be in one language. Additionally, statements from the student union may be available only in Finnish/Swedish. Internal training sessions of the student union are also organized in English when needed.

**Does your student union provide targeted group activities to support the integration of international degree students? If yes, what kind?** Peer tutoring has been implemented for all student groups. The tutoring for international students is tailored to meet their needs in many student unions. In some student unions, additional funding has also been allocated for the tutoring of international students. Events organized by student unions are open to everyone. Many student unions also organize targeted activities for international students, such as Finnish food nights, Welcome to Finland events, Degree Camp, or language cafés. Some events are conducted solely in English. Some student unions promote activities organized by partners for international students, such as trips. In some student unions, group activities for international students are being developed. However, some unions do not organize specific integration-supporting activities for international students.

**What kind of activities does your student union organize to increase the sense of community between international degree students and Finnish students?**

Student unions organize a variety of events that are, in principle, open to everyone. Some of these events aim to promote cultural awareness and mutual learning. Almost all events are bilingual (with some exceptions like "sitsit"), and some student unions also organize events exclusively in English. Some events are specifically targeted at international students, and Finnish-speaking students are encouraged to participate as well. In some student unions, there are also buddy lunches, separate campus teams, or international clubs, such as CLINT from the student union Tamko, which organizes events solely in English with the goal of bringing together Finnish and international students. Tutors are also key figures in bringing international and Finnish students together.

**How is the tutoring of international degree students organized in your institution?**

In all the student unions that responded, the tutoring of international degree students is organized by the student unions. In four of the responding student unions, the peer tutoring of international students is organized in cooperation with the tutoring of exchange students, and in four student unions, it is organized in collaboration with (also) Finnish peer tutoring. In two of the student unions that responded, the peer tutoring of international students is organized as a separate activity.

**What are the tasks of international degree student tutors?**

According to the responding student unions, the three most important tasks of tutors for international students are organizing activities that foster group bonding and a sense of community (13 respondents), introducing the UAS and student union (12 respondents), and providing support for studies (11 respondents). The next most frequently mentioned tasks were introducing the city and providing practical help for those arriving in Finland (8 respondents) and introducing one's field of study (7 respondents). Five respondents also selected the option "introducing students to other actors in the region," and four respondents chose "tutoring even before studies begin."



**How do the training and tutoring activities for international degree student tutors differ from those for exchange student tutors?** (Tasks of the tutors, timing of tutoring, possible tutoring before arriving in Finland...) In some student unions, the training for international degree student tutors and exchange student tutors is conducted together, and the content is the same. In other student unions, the tasks differ somewhat, leading to certain parts of the tutor training being separated. Two responses also indicate different role descriptions for exchange student tutors and international degree student tutors: tutoring exchange students is shorter and more individualized (providing practical assistance upon arrival in Finland and contacting students before their studies begin), while tutoring degree students is more long-term and focuses on group guidance. One student union's response indicates that international degree student tutoring includes tasks from both exchange student tutoring and Finnish peer tutoring. In some student unions, all tutors undergo the same training and tutor all student groups. Training may also be separated by language, not by the tutors' tasks.

**Do you recruit international degree student tutors...?** In the majority of student unions, international degree student tutors are recruited from all study programs. **Most international degree student tutors are...** According to respondents, most international degree student tutors are both Finnish and international students.

**Free comments on the tutoring of international degree students and the recruitment of tutors.** The number of international students is generally increasing in higher education institutions. Some student unions have identified a need to increase and develop tutoring activities.

**How do you feel that internationalization is taken into account in other services provided by the student union** (advocacy, harassment contact persons, membership recruitment, member services, customer service, sports services, alumni activities)? **What other services or good practices aimed at international degree students would you like to highlight?** In some student unions, all services are targeted at all students. Member and customer services, advocacy, and communication work well in student unions for both Finnish and international students, but only in a few student unions are these services specifically tailored for international students. One response highlights that reaching international students often requires personal contacts, such as through tutors, and visiting classrooms. Some student unions collaborate on services with other student unions, the UAS, or chaplains. One response notes that international students especially make use of the student union's sports equipment lending services and hangout spaces.

## **What kind of international expertise do you think exists in your student union?**

**Student unions strongly strive for equality, internationalization, and bilingualism. Bilingualism and the diversity of different cultures are seen as strengths in student unions. The expertise of both elected trustees and specialists is combined within student unions. The actors are motivated and care about the important work they do.**

International expertise is particularly evident in tutoring and advocacy. Student unions have strong cooperation with the UAS. The UAS' policies, for example, on bilingualism, are strongly reflected in the activities of the student union. Student unions are also seen as playing a key role in integrating international students. The student unions' networks support their work for international students.

## **What development needs do you see for your student union's international expertise?**

Some student unions feel they need more training to support international students, particularly regarding issues related to arriving in Finland, housing, and healthcare. Some feel they need more confidence, for example, in speaking English or in initiating activities. The annual turnover of elected trustees brings challenges to developing or starting new activities. Some see a need for improvement in reaching international students and translating materials, as well as in increasing activities targeted at international students. In some student unions, the working language in the council of representatives and/or board is exclusively Finnish/Swedish, which excludes participants from the activities. Enabling the use of English in decision-making is seen as requiring both investment and a partial change in attitude. Student unions also see a need for cooperation between unions to share expertise.

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# 2 Administration

## A In general

The student union has self-governance. The activities of the student union are based on the Universities of Applied Sciences Act (932/2014) § 41. The purpose of the student union is to serve as a link between its members and to promote their societal, social, intellectual, and academic pursuits, as well as their position in society. The student union's task is to prepare students for active, informed, and critical citizenship. A special task of the student union is to select student representatives to the board of the UAS and to other multi-member bodies referred to in Chapter 4 of the Universities of Applied Sciences Act and to participate in the activities of the UAS. The student union is politically, religiously, and ideologically independent.

The highest decision-making power in the student union is exercised by the council of representatives, which is elected through elections. The term for the council of representatives is the calendar year. In the elections, twelve (12) members are elected to the council of representatives. The council of representatives is elected through a personal, proportional list election from the eligible candidates or in a manner specified by the election regulations. Every member who has paid the student union membership fee is eligible to vote in the council of representatives elections.

Student union members have the right to attend the meetings of the council of representatives unless the council decides by majority vote to limit the right of attendance for the handling of a particular issue, or if the law requires the issue to be handled without the presence of members. Notice of the meeting of council of representatives must be made public in the manner determined at the student union's organizational meeting. The invitation must mention the issues to be discussed at the meeting. Every student union member has the right to submit an initiative to the council of representatives. The initiative is submitted to the board, which provides a statement within a month. The initiative is discussed at the next possible council of representatives meeting.

The executive power and administration of the student union are carried out by the board. The board's task is to lead the activities of the student union and select student representatives for the board and the examination board of the UAS. The board is responsible for the administration of the student union and ensures compliance with applicable regulations. The board's term is the calendar year. The board consists of a chairperson and four to seven (4-7) regular members. The council of representatives elects the board of POKA.

The decisions made by the student union under § 41 of the Universities of Applied Sciences Act and the related documents are public as specified in the Administrative Procedure Act (434/2003) and the Act on the Openness of Government Activities (621/1999). Other student union documents are public to student union members unless otherwise provided by law. (POKA Rules 2023)

## B Current State and Development Areas

The official administrative language of POKA is Finnish. The language of the student union is determined by the official language of the UAS. There have been no non-Finnish-speaking students in POKA's council of representatives or board. During the project, POKA's **most important documents will be translated into English. A keyword list** (English-Finnish) will also be created to support the work of POKA's board, council of representatives, and staff regarding the most important matters and terms related to student union activities. We will benchmark the model of the Student Union of University of Eastern Finland (ISYY), where **an interpreter** is available at the council of representatives meetings. In 2024, **POKA will enhance communication regarding members' opportunities for influence**: the possibility to participate in council of representatives meetings and to make initiatives. International students will also be increasingly encouraged to vote in POKA's council of representatives elections.

Probably the most visible reform regarding the opportunities for influence and participation of international students in POKA's administration is the **establishment of an international division**. The division communicates and operates in English. The division will recruit international and Finnish students from Karelia. Opportunities for the division to influence will be facilitated in POKA's board meetings.

To develop the international competency of POKA's actors (staff, elected trustees, tutors, and volunteers), an **orientation package** will be created related to multiculturalism, diversity, equality, inclusion, and English-language communication. During the project, support will also be provided for the internationalization of student associations operating in Karelia UAS' English-language programs and for the inclusion of international students in these associations.

We will benchmark other student unions to develop POKA's international competency. The results generated during the project will also be shared with other student unions.

### Development Areas:

- POKA's most important documents will be translated into English.
- A keyword list (English-Finnish) of the most important matters and terms related to student union activities will be created.
- Communication regarding members' opportunities for influence will be enhanced, and students will be encouraged to vote in POKA's council of representatives elections.
- POKA's international division will be established.
- An orientation package for POKA's actors will be created.
- Support will be provided for the internationalization of student associations operating in Karelia UAS' English-language programs and for the inclusion of international students in these associations.

# 3 Communication

## A In general

POKA's communication objectives are transparency, inclusiveness, and engagement. In order for POKA to be perceived as an influential advocate and service provider, communication must be appealing, open, and impactful. Through communication, students understand POKA's role and significance as an advocate for students' interests. POKA's communication aims for dialogue. Students have opportunities and channels to provide feedback, share ideas, ask questions, and engage in discussions. POKA emphasizes equality in its communication and always communicates in Finnish and English across all its channels. The goal is for communication to reach all students.

POKA's own communication channels include the Varmasanoma newsletter, pokapoka.fi website, Instagram (@varmapoka), Facebook page, academic calendar, posters, Discord, and POKA information sessions for new students, as well as information stands. POKA also communicates specifically with its trusted representatives via WhatsApp, and with tutors and VIP students through Moodle and WhatsApp, as well as with other active student participants involved in POKA's activities via Moodle, WhatsApp, or email. Additionally, POKA utilizes Karelia's communication channels: the student intranet Pakki, Tuudo, Karelia-intra, bulletin boards, and email.

(POKA's communication plan 2019)

## B Current State and Development Areas

Reaching students is challenging. Students use various communication channels, and much information or advertising does not reach them, spark their interest, or result in engagement or activation. POKA aims to communicate centrally through the student intranet Pakki, but a single channel is insufficient to reach students.

According to a survey conducted by IB students, 60 out of 86 respondents received information about POKA from POKA's introductory info sessions, 20 out of 80 from friends, and 20 out of 80 from webinars. Among the respondents, 78 out of 86 prefer to receive information about POKA via email, 41 out of 86 at stands or posters in the lobby, 36 out of 86 on Instagram, and 32 out of 86 by phone. Respondents were allowed to choose three preferred channels.

In this project, we are focusing on **targeted communication for international students**. We will highlight the project's identity, the progress of the project's actions, and the "**Karelia for all**" concept. We pay attention to the **accessibility and diversity of our communication**. We also aim to communicate as much as possible through face-to-face stands, POKA's office, class visits, and through study counselors.

POKA's academic year calendar is produced in collaboration with the Student Union of the University of Eastern Finland (ISYY) and the Student Union of Savonia University of Applied Sciences (SAVOTTA). POKA provides the materials for the calendar's POKA and SYKETTÄ sports service info pages. **The academic year calendar and POKA's website need to be further developed to better meet the information needs of international students.** International students are one of the most active student groups who collect the calendar from POKA's office or stands.

**POKA's info sessions for new students should be adjusted to better meet the needs of new IB, ICT and IM students.** These sessions should be made more interactive and engaging to attract more students. The sessions will be held in a hybrid format to allow participation for students who have not yet arrived in Finland. Recordings of the sessions will be made, and there may be an English-language info video about POKA to support the sessions.

#### **Development areas:**

- Focus on communication targeted specifically at international students
- Promote the Karelia for All concept
- Pay attention to accessibility and the multichannel nature of communications
- Develop POKA's academic year calendar and website to better meet the information needs of international students
- Improve POKA's info sessions to better meet the needs of new IB, ICT, and IM students

## **4 Tutoring**

### **A In general**

POKA is responsible for organizing student tutoring and training tutors at Karelia UAS. POKA has peer tutors for Finnish-language programs, peer tutors for English-language programs, known as Degree Tutors, exchange student tutors, known as Exchange Tutors and sports tutors. The role of peer tutors is to support students with their studies, help with group integration, and introduce them to Karelia. Throughout the year, peer tutors contribute to events such as UAS Days, entrance exams, and the opening of the academic year. Additionally, in the English-language programs, tutors assist new students with practical matters and questions related to their arrival in Finland. POKA, in collaboration with study counselors, is responsible for recruiting and training tutors. The implementation of student tutoring is evaluated annually in March.

POKA coordinates the peer support program for immigrant students enrolled in preparatory education for higher education studies. The aim is to help integrate students in the preparatory education program into their peer group and into the student community of Karelia UAS. Additionally, students in the preparatory education program are supported in developing their Finnish language skills and study abilities.

(Cooperation and Funding Agreement 2024, Karelia UAS and POKA. Peer Tutor Moodle 2023-2024)

## **B Current State and Development Areas**

The project focuses on the development of peer mentoring for English-language programs, known as Degree Tutoring. One of the major challenges has been recruiting enough tutors. In the 2023-2024 academic year, only two international students served as Degree Tutors. Additionally, it has been difficult to keep tutors committed throughout the year. The project aims to develop tailored **recruitment methods** for Degree Tutors in English-language programs and to expand recruitment from other programs as well.

Due to the ongoing shortage of Degree Tutors, their responsibilities have been re-examined to prevent an overwhelming workload for a single tutor. Tutors have primarily focused on group guidance, with individual guidance, such as assisting students arriving in Finland, kept to a minimum. During the project, the scope of **Degree Tutors' duties will be further evaluated**.

Tutors can play a significant role in fostering community and supporting the integration of students. Through their efforts, the **Karelia for All spirit** can be spread, embedding the project's goals within student peer activities.

Different training models have been tested over the years for Degree Tutors. In some years, Degree Tutors have been trained together with Exchange Tutors. In these cases, the entire training could be conducted in English. In many years, Degree Tutors and Exchange Tutors have been collectively referred to as International Tutors. However, since the responsibilities of Exchange Tutors differ from those of Degree Tutors (such as support in studies and introducing the study field), Degree Tutors have sometimes been grouped with Finnish-speaking peer tutors. In those instances, the training has been bilingual, but this has received negative feedback.

For the 2024-2025 academic year, we plan to conduct Degree Tutor training separately from both Exchange Tutors and Finnish-speaking peer tutors, with collaboration considered where applicable. Instead, **we aim to pool resources with the English-language VIP (Atmosphere of caring) activities** (see detailed description in section 5).

At POKA, a tutor division has actively supported the organization of Finnish-language peer tutoring. As a new initiative, we are establishing **POKA's international division to support tutoring and the VIP (Atmosphere of caring) activities** (see section 2).

### **Development Areas:**

- Explore enhanced recruitment methods tailored specifically for English-language programs
- Review the task description of Degree Tutors
- Experiment with pooling resources between Degree Tutoring and English-language VIP activities for certain training sessions and meetings
- Establish POKA's international division to support tutoring
- Integrate the Karelia for All spirit into tutor training, tutor-led activities, and tutor visibility

## **5 VIP - Atmosphere of caring**

### **A In general**

POKA and Karelia's well-being workers are responsible for organizing and coordinating the VIP (Atmosphere of caring) student activities across all degree programs and student groups at the Karelia UAS: on-campus, remotely, and English-language programs. The activities include monthly meetings, a training day, a well-being event, and related materials. The study counselors, chaplain, and other staff members of Karelia UAS participate in the planning and execution of these activities with student Union POKA.

(Collaboration and funding agreement 2024, Karelia UAS and POKA)

### **B Current State and Development Areas**

VIP activities are implemented in on-campus, remotely, and English-language formats. In the 2023-2024 academic year, there were four international students participating in the VIP program. The on-campus Finnish-language sessions and English-language sessions were organized together, often in a hybrid format with remote participation. This has posed challenges for the arrangements. Not all lecturers or materials have been available in English. In many cases, real-time interpretation and supporting materials have been used. In the 2024-2025 academic year, we will try to **combine resources with Degree Tutoring** (see more details in section 4). However, it is important to maintain contact between the Finnish- and English-speaking VIP students.

The role of VIP students in increasing community and integration can be significant. Through VIP students, the spirit of **Karelia for All** can be promoted and the project's activities can be integrated into student peer activities.

As a new initiative, we will establish POKA's **international division to support both tutoring and VIP activities** (see section 1).

### **Development areas:**

- Try to combine resources with Degree Tutoring
- Establish POKA's international division to support VIP activities
- Promote the spirit of Karelia for all in VIP students' visibility

## **6 Freetime**

### **A In general**

POKA organizes open and mostly free club and leisure activities for Karelia UAS' students. The aim of these activities is to prevent loneliness, increase social connections, and support students' overall well-being. The activities offer a variety of low-threshold opportunities. IntoEvenings are social events held on campus, including board games, movies, bingo, and more. IntoSports are led by POKA's sport tutors, offering sports trials or low-barrier physical activity opportunities. IntoFuns include trips or events, such as outdoor activities or cultural experiences. IntoClubs are student-led groups based on shared interests. In 2023, there were groups for students over 35 and for students with families.

(Cooperation and Funding Agreement 2024, Karelia UAS and POKA. Pokapoka.fi)

### **B Current State and Development Areas**

IntoSports and IntoFuns have been very popular activities, with international degree students being an active participant group. In some activities, international students have been the largest group, such as in golf and Candy Tasting (13/17 participants were international students). In other activities, there have been no international students participating, such as in Megazone, shuffle, or air yoga.

The project is developing **Into on Campus** activities. Into on Campus aims to better engage international students by integrating these activities into the daily campus routine. This initiative brings opportunities for socializing during lunch breaks or after classes, making it a natural part of the students' day.

As part of the Into on Campus activities, we are trying out the **Let's Speak Finnish activities** based on student requests. The purpose of this activity is to address students' needs for practicing Finnish in a relaxed conversational setting.

IntoClubs are also being promoted specifically to international degree students, aiming to encourage their participation or to respond to their requests for new club activities.

During the project, **we will involve students in organizing the activities and strengthen collaboration with local organizations**, other stakeholders, and the Student Union ISYY. Through this cooperation, we aim to expand international students' local networks in the Joensuu area, enhance integration, and improve retention in the region.

During the project, we will experiment with activities that bring together international students and Finnish students, such as a **buddy system**. As part of the buddy program, we will test out the **"buddy class"** concept (pilot in fall 2024 for a language-supported nursing student group and a 2nd-year nursing student group).

#### **Development areas:**

- Enhance the Karelia for all spirit by bringing students together through activities
- Experiment with Let's Speak Finnish activities based on student requests
- Involve students in organizing activities
- Increase collaboration with local organizations, other stakeholders, and the Student Union ISYY to improve international students' networks and integration
- Experiment with buddy and "buddy class" activities.





# 7 Events and trainings

## A In general

POKA's established events include checkpoint events like FAMKY and the Winter Olympics, as well as well-being and hobby fairs organized together with Karelia UAS and the opening of the academic year at Karelia. Alongside these, POKA also organizes smaller events and activities such as May Day week, Christmas parties, bingo nights, table hockey tournaments, and activities as part of mental health day, anti-racism week, or elections. POKA ensures accessibility and inclusivity in its events. Event promotion is bilingual, open, and transparent, emphasizing that proceeds are directed towards POKA's advocacy and well-being work.

POKA's mystery team concept has received positive feedback. Students who do not already have a team can participate in the mystery team, which is led by a trusted POKA representative. POKA emphasizes alcohol-free student activities in its events.

POKA organizes standard training sessions for representatives, tutor and VIP student training, as well as meetings for student associations and divisions operating within Karelia. When necessary, POKA organizes training for all students, such as the equality training held in 2023 in cooperation with Pohjois-Karjalan Setä ry. POKA's staff is also trained as needed.

(POKA's Strategy 2023–2026, POKA's Action Plan 2024.)

## B Current State and Development Areas

International students are an active participant group in POKA's events. Their participation in checkpoint events is about 5%, and in table hockey and bingo nights, it is around 10%. Bilingual event communication successfully reaches international students. However, **informal or peer communication (such as sharing experiences or stories) that is part of event messaging should be better executed in both languages**. POKA's **mystery team activity** in checkpoint events will be further developed during the project to better include international students and bring them together with Finnish students. It is important for event organizers to actively encourage interaction between participants.

According to a survey conducted by IB students, respondents wanted more activities that bring students together, support for studies, study clubs, and social hangouts in POKA's services. The average satisfaction with the student union's activities was 3 on a scale from 1 to 4 (1 = not satisfied, 4 = very satisfied).

During the project, POKA will **develop the orientation of its representatives and the training for tutor and VIP students** to better address international competence development. **International expertise will also be shared with student associations and divisions working with international students at Karelia.**

### **Development Areas:**

- Improve bilingual event communication, including peer or informal communication.
- Develop the mystery team activities in checkpoint events to bring international and Finnish students together.
- Enhance the orientation of POKA's representatives and the training for tutor and VIP students with a focus on international competence.
- Share international expertise with student associations and divisions working with international students at Karelia.

## **8 Advocacy and equality**

### **A In general**

Advocacy for Karelia UAS' students is POKA's primary task. The activities range from local collaboration with Karelia and the city of Joensuu to national influence alongside other student unions and the umbrella organization, National Union of Students in Finnish Universities of Applied Sciences – SAMOK.

POKA's appointed student representatives participate in the activities of UAS Ltd.'s board, examination board, education development group, Research, development, and innovation development group, quality group, and temporary working groups.

POKA operates according to Karelia's proximity principle and encourages students to first contact their teachers when issues or questions arise. However, if the matter is not resolved, POKA provides support to address it. All advocacy cases are handled urgently and with confidentiality. Each year, POKA resolves several issues, including study workload, teaching quality, delayed credits, interpersonal problems, and other grievances.

In addition to advocacy, POKA operates a harassment contact person system. POKA annually designates two to three harassment contact persons who students can confidentially approach if they encounter harassment, bullying, or discrimination in the academic environment. First, students are guided to fill out POKA's harassment and inappropriate behavior form, after which the harassment contact persons get in touch with the student.

POKA's equality work has become increasingly visible since 2022. In 2023, together with Karelia, POKA launched Karelia's House rules for Safer Space. POKA also plays an important role in Karelia's anti-racism efforts.

(Cooperation and funding agreement 2024, Karelia-amk and POKA. Pokapoka.fi)

## **B Current State and Development Areas**

POKA communicates advocacy-related matters using the hashtag **#pokastandsupforyou**. POKA receives very few direct contacts from international students. More often, challenges faced by students come to light through Karelia staff, tutors, or VIP students. **Through targeted communication, we could increase international students' awareness of available channels for resolving issues, while still adhering to Karelia's principle of proximity. It is crucial for POKA to actively listen to the support needs of international students and forward these discussions with Karelia.**

Among the **student representatives** chosen by POKA, very few have had an immigrant background. When selecting student representatives, it is important to identify tasks that do not necessarily require proficiency in the Finnish language. In spring 2024, student representatives for the Invest project were chosen to work in English.

**Equality and anti-racism work** will continue, promoting the Karelia for all concept and diversity themes. As a student representative, it is important to ensure that POKA includes members from all student groups and that international students are well represented.

### **Development Areas:**

- Consider international students in advocacy communications and their channels for influence and contact.
- Encourage international students to join the student union POKA, ensuring that POKA represents all student groups strongly and equally.
- POKA's equality work strongly reflects the principles of Karelia for all, diversity, and anti-racism.



# 9 Membership and custom services

## A In general

All at Karelia UAS can become members of the student union POKA. As a member of POKA, students receive a student card and an academic year sticker, which entitle them to local, national, and POKA-specific student benefits. Members have the right to vote in POKA's representative council elections and can stand for election to the council of representatives or the board. Membership fees support POKA's advocacy and well-being work.

Students can join POKA using the form available on the POKA website. They can choose to pay the membership fee online or at the POKA office. Additionally, students can choose whether to pay for a plastic student card or use only the mobile student card.

Students are welcome to visit POKA offices whenever the door is open or schedule an appointment for services. At the offices, students can pay membership fees, obtain a student card, SYKETTÄ sports sticker, or other products on sale, pick up a plastic student card, or collect stickers for their plastic card or SYKETTÄ stickers. They can also access POKA's guidance and advisory services. From the Tikkarinne campus office, students can pick up a pre-booked Survival Pack kitchen essentials rental kit, and POKA members can borrow sports equipment and board games. Nearly all membership and customer services are also available electronically.

(pokapoka.fi)

## B Current State and Development Areas

At the end of the previous reporting period on November 30, 2023, POKA had 1,545 members. Of these, 4.4% (59 members) were IB students, 2.3% (31 members) were IM students, and 1% (14 members) were ICT students. The data does not reveal how many students are immigrants, how many are Finnish, or how many are exchange students. As of January 24, 2024, 8% (120 members) of all POKA members had chosen English as their language preference on the membership form (Finnish/English). Additionally, among all Karelia degree students, 8% of students who selected a nationality other than Finnish were also represented.

According to a survey conducted by IB students, 36 out of 86 respondents were members of POKA. The most common reason for joining was the student benefits, mentioned by 33 out of 86 respondents. The most attractive aspect of POKA's services was also the student benefits (57 out of 86). The respondents rated their satisfaction with POKA's student benefits on average at 3, on a scale from 1 to 4 (1 = not satisfied, 4 = very satisfied).

The main reason why 31 out of 86 respondents had not joined POKA was financial constraints, followed by lack of information (23 out of 86), limited benefits (17 out of 86), and lack of interest (14 out of 86). The respondents gave an average recommendation score of 7, on a scale from 1 to 10 (1 = not likely at all, 10 = extremely likely).

Some international degree students join as members later in their studies. Many international students need **individualized advice and information on joining the student union**. Since international students arrive in Finland throughout the fall semester, most do not attend the initial POKA info sessions at the beginning of the semester. In this project, **POKA's info sessions will be developed to better meet the needs of new IB, ICT, and IM students**. The sessions will be recorded or made into videos.

Questions related to membership include: how to join, how to pay the fee, what benefits come with membership, what kind of student benefits exist in Finland, and whether to choose a mobile or plastic student card. Typical questions from international students will be collected into a **resource guide**, which will also include ready-made answers to support POKA's customer service.

In addition to questions about joining POKA, international students often ask for advice, information, and support on a variety of topics, such as SYKETTÄ sports services, Karelia's IT systems, public transportation, FSHS, banking services, practicing Finnish, Finnish culture, student culture, events, and employment. These questions and answers will also be gathered into the resource guide. International degree students are the most frequent visitors at POKA's Wärtsilä campus office. In the fall of 2024, POKA will experiment with taking **customer service to the campus halls** to reach students more effectively.

Some international students visit POKA's customer service points regularly for casual conversations and check-ins. The **Let's Speak Finnish activities** being developed in the project may meet this need for discussion among students.

When joining POKA, students can choose between using the Tuudo and/or Slice **mobile student card**, or the plastic student card. The challenge with the Tuudo mobile student card was that it required a Finnish personal identity number to be registered with both POKA and Karelia. As of spring 2024, identification can now be done using the student number. The Slice mobile student card was also introduced in summer 2024.

## Development Areas:

- Increase the membership percentage of international degree students in the student union POKA.
  - Develop POKA's info sessions to better meet the needs of new IB, ICT, and IM students. The sessions will be recorded or made into videos.
  - Create a resource guide to support POKA's customer service, compiling common questions from international students and their answers.
  - Bringing POKA's customer service to campus halls every now and then.
  - Pilot the "Let's Speak Finnish" activities
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This document has been translated using ChatGPT.

## More info:

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