



# Inclusion into Academic Life

A GUIDE FOR PEER SUPPORT  
GROUPS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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HEI LIFE- HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS' SUPPORT FOR  
INTERNATIONAL ACADEMICS AND STAFF - LIVING, INTEGRATION,  
FAMILY, AND EMPLOYMENT IN FINLAND.

# Foreword

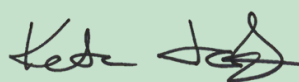
Professional supervision groups have been routinely offered to researchers at the University of Turku since 2015. University's Human Resources and Well-being Services coordinate an internal network of professional supervisors who provide professional supervision services to the staff members and affiliated researchers. Drawing from these experiences, a pilot of HEI LIFE Guided Peer Groups was created and is described in this Guide.

Finnish HEIs recognize the importance of supporting diversity and inclusion within their institutions. One of the focal points for HEIs is the internationalization and retention of international talents. However, despite HEIs' best efforts, international academics often face hurdles that impact their ability to integrate. The Guided Peer Groups aim to improve the well-being of the incoming international staff and researchers by offering them a platform where they can discuss their matters in a safe setting.

This guide gives practical examples and tools to promote a more welcoming and inclusive environment in HEIs. It was created together by professional supervisors and former participants of peer groups. As such, it offers unique insight into how international academics need and want to be supported in their journey towards finding their sense of belonging in Finland.

At the University of Turku, seven Guided Peer Groups worked as part of the HEI LIFE project. The experiences presented in this Guide were drawn from more than 90 h of sessions. We present here three alternative forms of Peer Support services: Instructor-Led Guidance, Tutor-Led Guidance, and Peer-to-Peer Guidance. The Guide gives suggestions on how groups can be established, how they work, what principles are useful to follow, what the sessions look like and what topics are often discussed during meetings. We also present the experiences of the individual members which can be further used as a starting point for discussions within peer support group meetings.

With this Guide, we wish to reach staff and leadership at HEIs to inspire them to further develop support and well-being services directed to international members of their communities. We also believe this guide will be of interest to potential tutors, instructors, or peer group participants who want to learn more about the concept.



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## Esipuhe

Turun yliopistossa on vuodesta 2015 säännöllisesti tarjottu ryhmämuotoista työnohjausta tutkijoille. Yliopiston henkilöstö- ja hyvinvointipalvelut koordinoi koulutettujen työnohjaajien sisäistä verkostoa, jonka jäsenet antavat työnohjausta niin henkilökuntaan kuuluville kuin yliopistossa muulla rahoituksella tutkimustaan tekeville tutkijoille. Näistä ryhmistä saatujen kokemusten pohjalta kehitettiin HEI LIFE -hankkeen ohjatut vertaisryhmät, joiden toimintaa tässä oppaassa on kuvattu.

Työyhteisön monimuotoisuuden tunnistamista ja inklusion tukemista pidetään suomalaisissa korkeakouluissa tärkeänä. Yksi keskeinen tavoite korkeakouluilla on houkutella Suomeen lisää kansainvälisiä osaajia ja saada heidät myös viihtymään ja viipymään Suomessa. Vaikka korkeakoulut tekevät parhaansa, kansainväliset tutkijat kohtaavat usein kotoutumista haittaavia ja estäviä tekijöitä. Ohjattujen vertaisryhmien tarkoituksena on edistää kansainvälisen henkilöstön ja tutkijakunnan hyvinvointia tarjoamalla heille luotettava ja turvallinen foorumi, jossa keskustella vertaistensa kanssa.

Opas sisältää käytännön esimerkkejä ja työkaluja, joiden avulla voidaan edistää sitä, että kansainvälinen henkilöstö kokee korkeakoulun vastaanottavana työympäristönä. Oppaan ovat luoneet yhdessä jo päättäneiden vertaisryhmien työnohjaajat ja osallistajat. Siksi opas tarjoaa ainutlaatuisen näkökulman siihen, millaista tukea kansainvälinen akateeminen henkilöstö kokee tarvitsevansa ja minkä asioiden he kokevat edistävän suomalaiseen yliopistoyhteisöön ja yhteiskuntaan kuulumisen tunnetta.

Osana HEI LIFE -hanketta Turun yliopistossa toimi seitsemän ohjattua vertaisryhmää (Guided Peer Group). Oppaassa kuvattujen kokemusten perustana on yli 90 tuntia työnohjauskeskusteluja. Oppaassa esitellään kolme vaihtoehtoista tapaa järjestää kansainväliselle henkilöstölle vertaistukea: koulutetun ohjaajan vetämät, tutorin vetämät ja itseohjautuvat vertaisryhmät. Oppaasta löytyy ohjeita ja vinkkejä ryhmien perustamisesta ja organisoimisesta, hyödylliseksi havaituista periaatteista, ryhmätapaamisten kulusta ja ryhmissä usein keskustelluista teemoista. Oppaassa on myös osallistujien omakohtaisia kokemuksia, jotka voivat toimia virikkeinä vertaisryhmien keskusteluille.

Toivomme, että oppaamme tavoittaa korkeakoulujen henkilöstöä ja johtoa sekä innostaa heitä kehittämään edelleen työyhteisönsä kansainvälisten jäsenten tuki- ja hyvinvointipalveluja. Me uskomme, että opas myös kiinnostaa mahdollisia vertaisryhmien ohjaajia, tutoreita ja osallistujia tuomalla esiin vertaistuen merkityksellisyyttä ja antamalla käytännön ohjeita vertaisryhmien toteutukseen.

Turku, 18.08.2022

  
Johanna Mäkinen  
Hyvinvointisuunnittelija ja työnohjaaja

## Förord

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Åbo Universitet har sedan 2015 erbjudit sina internationella forskare en möjlighet att delta i arbetshandledning i grupp. Universitets enhet för HR och välmående koordinerar ett nätverk av professionella handledare som erbjuder arbetshandledning till universitets personal och internationella forskare. Guiden som nu publiceras bygger på erfarenheter från ett pilotprojekt med handledningsgrupper för internationella forskare (HEI LIFE Guided Peer Groups).

Behovet av att stöda inklusion och mångfald i högskolornas enheter har varit ett aktuellt tema i Finland under de senaste åren. En central fråga är hur högskolorna bör stöda och hjälpa sina internationella forskare att känna sig inkluderade i det lokala akademiska livet. Trots att mycket gjorts inom högskolorna vittnar ändå många forskare om svårigheter i samband med att integrera sig och känna sig välkommen. Handledningsgrupperna för kollegialt stöd (Guided Peer Groups) förbättrar den inkommande internationella personalens och forskarnas välmående genom att erbjuda dem en plattform för diskussion och utbyte av erfarenheter i en trygg atmosfär.

Den föreliggande guiden ger praktiska exempel och verktyg för arbetet med att skapa en mera välkomnande och inkluderande miljö i högskolorna. Den har skapats tillsammans av en grupp som består av både arbetshandledare och deltagare från HEI LIFE handledningsverksamheten. Den erbjuder också en unik inblick i de internationella akademikernas förväntningar på stöd och hjälp under sin färd mot en känsla av tillhörighet i Finland.

Som en del av HEI LIFE projektet har sju arbetshandledade kollegiala grupper (Guided Peer groups) förverkligats vid Åbo universitet. Guidens innehåll bygger på erfarenheter från mera än 90 arbetshandledningstimmar i grupperna. Vi presenterar bland annat tre alternativa modeller för kollegialt stöd i grupp: Handledning med en professionell arbetshandledare, handledning med hjälp av en tutor och handledning via kamratstöd. I guiden kan du läsa om hur grupperna kan etableras, hur de fungerar, vilka principer det lönar sig att följa, hur träffarna kan se ut och vilka frågor som ofta kommer upp i grupperna. Vi presenterar också enskilda gruppmedlemmars erfarenheter som kan användas som en utgångspunkt för diskussion i handledningsgrupperna.



Kia Lundqvist

Arbetshandledare och utbildningsplanerare

Åbo 18.8.2022

## Introduction

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The need for more inclusiveness and diverse approaches in higher education is widely acknowledged in Higher Education Institutions (HEI). In 2021, the University of Helsinki together with the University of Turku and the University of Tampere received financing from the Ministry of Education and Culture to start the HEI LIFE Project. *HEI LIFE stands for Higher Education Institutions' Support for International Academics and Staff – Living, Integration, Family, and Employment in Finland.* The project focuses on building national models for Finnish HEIs to support the integration of international academics, staff, and their families.

The project produced concrete, practical and adaptable input to:

- support the retention and integration of international talent and their families,
- enhance collaboration with cities and regional parties,
- encourage employers to hire foreign talents by increasing partnership with working life and employers in Finland.

The approach should be comprehensive and take into consideration the diversity of both the international talents and Finnish HEIs. The project was funded by the Ministry of Education and Culture and runs from 1 Sept 2020 until 31 Aug 2022. Each region coordinated its subproject, which focused on various aspects of integration. As a part of the HEI LIFE project, a three-layered model for peer group support was produced at the University of Turku, jointly by the Brahea Center, the University Study and Work Well-being Services. Additionally, former Peer Support Group members and professional supervisors were invited to form a focus group, which served as a starting point for the subproject.

More information on the HEI LIFE project:

<https://www.helsinki.fi/en/cooperation/international-cooperation/hei-life#maingoals>



Since 2015, the University of Turku's HR and Well-being services have organised Guided Peer Groups for international doctoral researchers and academic staff. The Guided Peer Groups are designed to support staff and international researchers with their academic, social, and professional well-being. The University of Turku groups are led by trained professional supervisors (työnohjaajat).

The ongoing international discussion on diversity and inclusion in HEIs calls for a better understanding of the challenges that international talents, researchers, and university staff face in their work. To address these issues, a focus group was formed to further develop the Guided Peer Group support. As a result, a new model was co-created through a discourse between the various actors involved in the former Guided Peer Group work, including international group members, professional supervisors who had guided the groups, and other university representatives.

As part of the HEI LIFE project, seven HEI LIFE Guided Peer Groups, re-modelled by the focus group to meet the project's objectives, were piloted at the University of Turku. They were guided by professional supervisors, and this form is described in this Guide as Instructor-led Guidance. Besides professional supervisors, other qualified professionals may be instructors for such groups. However, we recognize that the professional-led model might be resource-consuming. Therefore, to provide a wider spectrum of peer support, this model was expanded with two possible alternatives: Tutor-led and Peer-to-peer Guidance.

This Guide is intended for

- peer group coordinators: members of staff with tasks related to HR and work well-being services; members of staff providing services for incoming researchers;
- peer group instructors: members of staff in teaching, guiding, coaching, counselling, and advising work;
- peer group tutors: former generations of incoming researchers, ex-pats, internationally minded Finnish staff members, or anyone interested in organizing a peer group;
- peer group participants: incoming researchers or staff members, who may become interested in peer support and who will find out about peer group opportunities at their institution or start a peer-to-peer group themselves.

We are aware of similar activities taking place in various Finnish HEIs and we hope that this guide will provide resources for anyone involved in such projects.

Throughout this Guide, we often refer to international members of the university community as “academics” or “staff members”. By these terms, we mean all members of the community relocating from abroad to work for or at a Finnish university. Their employment status may vary (salaried or grant positions) and also their career experience (research fellows, doctoral and postdoctoral researchers, tenure track positions), but most often they face similar struggles regarding their relocation to Finland.







## The importance of use of a common language in the University environment

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The importance of using English in the work community has been frequently brought up by the participants of Guided Peer Groups as a source of significant emotional distress and feeling of exclusion. Inability to participate in conversations during work meetings, but also lunches, coffee breaks, and other social outings cause unnecessary alienation of international members of the community. Participants stated that situations like this cause not only social but also professional inequity since they lack access to the same level of information as their Finnish-speaking peers. Many HEIs offer Finnish language courses for staff, and participation in such is encouraged as a part of the slow process of integration, especially for those who plan to stay in Finland for longer. Acquiring basic Finnish speaking skills shows a positive attitude and makes everyday life easier. However, we need to acknowledge that many international academics come to Finland with an offer of a short-term fellowship contract or a grant. Given the uncertainty of their future career, it might not be their priority to learn the language, and it might take time before they gain the ability to participate in conversations in the work environment.



*"Moving to another country is scary, moving to a country where you don't know the language is simply terrifying. When every piece of information around you is in an unknown language (warning signs, information on the door of the toilet at work, evacuation plan from your floor in the office, etc, etc) it gives you the feeling of lack of control. Information keeps bypassing you, although everybody else considers it "common knowledge". I felt embarrassed each time I had to ask my Finnish-speaking colleagues about something that I considered "obvious". I kept thinking I am wasting their precious time, but at the same time I knew there is no other way than ask. This loss of independence was quite unexpected and honestly frustrating."*

*Doctoral researcher, University of Turku*



## Modelling Peer Support Group Services

### -SUPPORT FOR WELL-BEING AND INCLUSION IN THE HEIS

One of the main goals of Finnish HEIs is internationalization. This process introduces a diverse range of students, staff members, and doctoral and post-doctoral researchers to Finnish academic life, which has had a distinctly national character until recently. International academics provide Finnish academia with much-needed fresh perspectives. The exciting process of starting academic work in a Finnish HEI is frequently accompanied by the practical challenges of relocating to Finland.

Starting a new life and initiating sustainable social networks in a new country might be time and effort-consuming. In many cases, the Finnish HEIs have not been well prepared to accommodate and support the diverse needs of new academics. Universities in Finland need to be better in both welcoming and including new members who have various needs and challenges.



*"Moving to a new country where people speak a different language and have a different culture could be stressful and lonely. It might be challenging to not understand the culture, language, or to constantly be seen as a foreigner. But remember you are not alone. Attending the Peer Support Group would give you an opportunity to talk to other people who are in the same boat as you. It would also help you to establish a support system."*

*Doctoral researcher, University of Turku*

## Long term goals

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Peer support groups' mission is to not only provide a comfortable setting in which people may develop a support system but also boost the formation of social networks that can last long after the peer support group has ended. Throughout academic and professional careers, international researchers and staff members will face various challenges. Therefore, connecting with other participants, especially with similar experiences to share and draw upon, is crucial for their long-term well-being. Helping members understand their rights and directing them to other supporting services provided by the University is another important goal of the peer support group.

The goal of the peer support groups is to increase international academics' integration into Finnish academia, Finnish working life, and Finnish society as a whole, and to improve international talent retention in Finland. Because HEIs are a part of Finnish working life, peer support groups at these institutions are a useful starting point for greater integration. Improved academic integration via peer support networks may also stimulate networking outside of academia. The peer group discussions are an excellent opportunity to consider career prospects – both within and beyond academia – and to identify skills and competencies that have already been acquired or that need to be developed further to achieve desired career options. The topics of discussion vary based on the group's objectives. Based on Turku's experiences, questions like career planning and competency building, as well as the realities of the Finnish working environment, and channels of information about employability in Finland, are frequently discussed and shared in the group discussion. In addition, information on university services (eg. mentoring programs), may be given as further support for participants' career development and recognition of their professional skills.



*I was able to make friends with people who were in a similar circumstance to me thanks to the Peer Support Group. The group discussions brought us closer together because we were all in a safe environment where we could share practically everything. We are still in contact and have a WhatsApp group to connect with after a year of completing the Peer Support Group. It's reassuring to know that when you need to talk after a hard day or when you're feeling overwhelmed, individuals in your support network will be there for you. I also know that if I need any professional assistance related to academic challenges and even wellbeing, I may contact the correct personnel or places within the University."*

*Doctoral researcher, University of Turku*

## THREE DIFFERENT FORMS OF POSSIBLE PEER SUPPORT GROUPS

From an educational science perspective, peer guidance for international academics and staff members is a form of instructional scaffolding. Scaffolding is a temporary form of assistance or support provided to international researchers, teachers, and other academics, to facilitate their integration and sense of belonging to the academic community. Ideally, such assistance fades away after a set program, and participants continue their integration and participation in the work community on their own - thanks to a better understanding of cultural and social circumstances and improved access to networks, groups, and services. Understanding refers to a two-way approach to integration in which newcomers and older members of the community learn from one another and contribute equally to the understanding of internationality. Peer guidance can be offered by trained instructors, tutors, or peers.

### 01 INSTRUCTOR-LED GUIDANCE

Instructor-led guidance is a form of guidance that is provided by a professional supervisor or another professional instructor. The instructor leads the goal-oriented and time-bound process. The instructor's role is to facilitate appreciative dialogue between the participants and to steer the discussions toward developing personal strategies for integration and a sense of belonging. The pilot groups were led by trained professional supervisors, but the instructors can be other professionals with competence and training in group guidance and facilitation.

### 02 TUTOR-LED GUIDANCE

Tutor-led guidance is provided by a tutor. This form of guidance is provided to newcomers by more experienced staff members. Tutors can be e.g. international academics or staff members who already have an established network of colleagues in the institution and know their way in the community. Many HEIs already offer so-called "buddy programs" to assist international members during their first months after arrival in Finland. A "buddy", or local resource person, is a volunteer supporting usually one individual international newcomer. If several newcomers arrive at the same time, a tutor-led peer group could be built and tutored e.g. by a "buddy".

### 03 PEER-TO-PEER GUIDANCE

Peer-to-peer guidance refers to collaborative guidance between colleagues. Peer-to-peer support groups sometimes come into being spontaneously, but forming and coordination of such groups may also be facilitated by the HEI. Potential participants can be invited to a starting session, or a kick-off or they may be asked to reply to an email inquiry. The HEI coordinators then form peer groups of individuals with similar interests and provide general guidelines for peer group management. For example, the group needs to agree on how it will be chaired: either one member will be the chair, or the role may rotate among the members. The chair's job is to schedule meetings and chair the session, among other things agreed upon. The HEI coordinators may also receive and collect information from the group participants to the HEI on challenges identified and potential solutions developed in the groups.

# Professionals provide instructor-led guidance

The HEI Life Guided Peer Group pilots in 2020-2022 [and the instructor-led model presented here are based on experiences of professional supervision groups (ryhmätyönohjaus) that have been regularly offered for researchers at the University of Turku since 2015 – both in Finnish and in English. The Brahea Centre has offered professional supervision training for more than 30 years. Partly due to this, among Turku University staff there are several qualified professional supervisors, trained at the Brahea Centre and elsewhere. Since 2013, a network of internal professional supervisors has been summoned by the university HR and Well-being services to participate in providing professional supervision services to the staff and affiliated researchers. At the HEI Life pilot in Turku, the internal professional supervisors worked as the instructors of the Guided Peer Groups. The instructor-led groups may, however, also be guided by other professionals, e.g. members of the teaching staff, study psychologists or counsellors, or any professionals with training, knowledge, and skills in group coaching, guidance, and facilitating.

## Basic principles of the Guided Peer Support Groups

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- Time and place – to reflect upon one's work situation – to mirror the others' experiences.
- A goal-oriented and reflective process
- Appreciative and respectful dialogue – everybody has an equal opportunity to be heard and everybody's view is equally important.
- Active listening – we focus on the speaker, show interest, and ask questions to ensure that we understand.
- Confidentiality – what others disclose in the group stays within the group.



## Instructor's role

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- Steers the discussions toward the identified goals, adds depth to the issues by asking questions, and does not give advice but may summarize the points made in the discussion.
- Ensures that everyone has an equal opportunity to be heard and the dialogue is appreciative and respectful. The instructor may divide the available time into an equal number of minutes for all participants and in a friendly way remind the more talkative speakers of this principle.
- Listens carefully and is open to comments and suggestions that come from the group – the process is theirs!
- The instructors must design and define the purpose and theme of their group to be in line with their expertise and competence.

## Scheduling the meetings

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- Duration 90 min, or 120 min if the group is large.
- Optimally every 3-4 weeks, or as feasible for the group.
- The group members agree on the days and times so that everyone can attend.
- Dates can also be announced well in advance to allow everyone to fit them into their calendars.
- Ground rules are agreed upon within the group for situations where overlapping engagements arise. Meetings should ideally be postponed to a time that is convenient for everyone, but it is sometimes important to meet despite the absence of one person.



## Tips for coordinators and organisers

The following practical tips and suggestions are written for organisers and coordinators of peer support groups. These principles have proven useful when peer support groups have been offered as part of the staff training program or as a service offered and coordinated by the graduate school or doctoral programs.

### Advertising and reaching the target groups

The HEI Life Guided Peer Group advertisement was written with the input and experiences of a focus group of former participants in the English-speaking professional supervision groups (see Appendix 2). In the advertisement, it is good practice to arouse participants' interest by depicting an array of potential themes that can be worked on. It is, however, important to stress that the actual themes and questions to be discussed will arise from the concrete situations, needs, and objectives of the participants themselves. It is advisable to keep the registration to the groups open for at least a few weeks and to distribute the advertisement along several channels to catch attention widely within the target group

For example, the following channels may be used:

- the staff training calendar
- news on the Intranet
- a mailing list or other information channel for international academics and staff members
- direct email to doctoral and post-doctoral researchers through graduate school and research collegium coordinators
- newcomer orientation event or other training events
- administrative or thesis supervisors of newly arrived members of staff
- University's social media channels addressing international members





## Forming the groups

Groups of 4-6 have been found most functional. The minimum number of participants is 3, but it may prove problematic, if - for any reason - somebody decides not to continue in the group. In groups bigger than 6, the time for each participant's thoughts and experiences becomes very limited, although this problem can be alleviated by using small group discussions within the peer group. The bigger the group, the more difficult it is also to schedule meeting times that suit all participants.

Because of group dynamics, it is not advisable to change the group composition in the middle of the process. If there is enough interest and resources to build several groups, it is strongly recommended that enough effort is put into the forming of potentially well-functioning group compositions. The aim is to build groups of "peers", in other words, participants with similar circumstances and shared interests in topics to be discussed in the group. For this purpose, individual or group interviews can be used. At Turku, a short questionnaire is sent to all those interested in attending. The meaning and purpose of the group are clarified, and the potential participants are asked to briefly describe a) their work situation and career stage and b) the themes they are interested in working with and their expectations towards the peer group. This information is handled as confidential information with the sole purpose of forming peer groups. This needs to be clearly stated in the interviews or the questionnaire. After the groups are formed, because of their personal and potentially sensitive contents, the received information is deleted (see the Appendix 3).

Before the group starts to work, it is advisable to confirm from each participant individually that the planned group composition and the instructor are suitable for all. This can be done, for example, on the phone or by email (using the bcc: function). This is important to ensure that there are no acquaintances, close links, or tensions between group members, or group members and the instructor, that could jeopardize open and confidential discussions in the group. If several groups are starting at the same time, the group compositions and instructors may be changed. If only one group is starting, the solution may be that the one who signed in first may attend now, and the other one needs to wait for the next occasion. It is necessary to emphasize the need to maintain confidentiality concerning the identity of other potential group members.



## Special considerations concerning the group composition

When determining the goals and purpose of the groups, it is necessary to consider whether Finns will be admitted to the groups. At the pilot groups in Turku, some Finnish researchers applied for and attended the HEI Life Guided Peer Groups. For them, participation in the group functioned as a form of everyday internationalization. For the international members, this was an opportunity to network and make friends with Finnish colleagues. A mixed group may provide more insights into Finnish society, as the instructor is not the only Finnish member in the group. If the purpose and goal of the group are to support “surviving in Finland”, a group composed only of international participants might be preferred, since the presence of Finns in the group might make some participants overly cautious in talking about their experiences, which could work contrary to the purpose of the group: to create a safe space where people can openly discuss their experiences, both positive and negative, and learn from them.

The interviews or questionnaire responses also allow the organiser or instructor to assess in advance whether another method, service, or supporting action would be more appropriate for some applicants than peer group work. If, for example, the circumstances and themes described by a participant are very particular or even exceptional, a more personalized approach may be required. Alternatively, if a person's health or job ability is in jeopardy, the participant may and should be referred to specialized services instead.



## Face-to-face or online meetings

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Before the Covid-19 pandemic, Guided Peer Groups only met face-to-face. When the pandemic started, the meetings were taking place online. Although some elements of face-to-face encounters are lost – and can also be missed – many benefits are gained from meetings organised remotely, such as:

- Participants can attend from different geographical locations – even doing fieldwork in a different country does not prevent participation in the peer group meetings. Therefore, participants do not have to live in or travel to the same location, which saves time and energy or opens new opportunities for building groups.
- Suitable rooms or facilities for confidential discussions do not need to be arranged by the coordinators/instructors
- It is preferable to initiate the sessions with an in-person meeting. However, we acknowledge that the group might choose to meet only online for various reasons. Feedback acquired from former participants showed that they considered in-person meetings superior to online meetings, especially when they had a chance to experience both.
- Participants should arrange for themselves a peaceful and quiet setting, a “safe space” when the meeting is conducted online. Outsiders should not be allowed to overhear or see the group participants due to the confidential nature of the discussions. The creation of an open dialogue requires that the cameras are on whenever possible, however, they can be turned off when individual reflection tasks are given. “Breakout rooms” can be used for small group or pair discussions.

The essence of human encounters still lies in face-to-face meetings. Therefore, when possible and safe for all participants, peer group meetings can be organised in a quiet, peaceful room where the discussion cannot be overheard by outsiders. It is important to have enough space to allow safe distances. A good setting for open and equal dialogue is created if the participants can all sit around a round table or on chairs in a circle. It is good to have a notebook, flip chart, or technological means available for taking notes or visualizing the points made in the discussions when needed and found useful.

## Peer Support Group meetings: step by step

We present here an example outline for sessions. We acknowledge that different instructors, tutors, or chairpersons might have their preferences on how to conduct the sessions to lead the group into a reflective discussion. The following model is based on experiences collected from the groups supervised at the University of Turku and it can be used as a framework and an example. However, we encourage the instructor, tutor, or chairperson not to tightly adhere to a pre-build discussion model, but rather allow the discussion to follow the interests and needs of the group members.



*"I particularly appreciated our Guide not forcing us to "present" any certain work-related topic, but rather allowing the conversation to oscillate around that topic. Sometimes things are more subtle than they seem- you might ask people to talk about competition, and they will tell you about racism and sexism in their workplace. You might want to discuss time management but will hear about anxiety and uncertainty about their future. I think it is crucial that there is space to voice such concerns. Otherwise, it might feel fake. We can easily access online resources to read "10 tips on time management at work". Peer group must offer something more authentic than that, otherwise why would we commit to participate?"*

*Doctoral researcher, University of Turku"*



A set of ground rules must be established and followed by the group. They can be discussed and written down during the first meeting. They might include rules about how to express appreciation and respect for other members' opinions and emotions, as well as what topics are beyond the scope or considered sensitive in the peer support group.

Since peer support groups are based on regular meetings of a small group of people who share their experiences, differences in views or potential conflicts might arise throughout the process. Participants need to stay perceptive and sensitive about discussed issues. Communication should be kind and focused on personal experiences rather than the expression of political or religious views.

At the University of Turku, the Guided Peer Groups start with the prospect of 5 sessions, but the groups are offered a continuation of 2 to 5 sessions depending on the group members' needs. Most often the groups choose to continue for a full 10 sessions.

## Ground rules

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It is vital to discuss and agree on the set of rules to be followed throughout the sessions. The suggested topics to be discussed are listed below:

- Confidentiality
- Let's "be present at the moment" - no telephones or laptops (when we meet in person), no multitasking (when we meet online).
- Practice attentive listening to others and reflect upon their experiences respectfully.
- Everybody can use their voice and take part on equal terms in the interaction of the group.
- Remember - this is not about achievement, but about personal growth and sharing.
- All kinds of views and feelings are welcomed, as long as a respectful dialogue can be assured.



## SESSION 1

**A) Aim of the session:** the formation of the group, establishing the goals and the ground rules, getting to know the group members

### **B) Opening of the session**

- Icebreakers for opening the dialogue and and grouping. You may, for example, use cards or pictures: Pick a card/choose a picture that somehow describes or depicts you, your work situation, your feelings today, etc. *Why did you choose that picture?*

### **C) Core of the session**

a. Examples of questions to start with:

*What do you know about instructor-led / tutor-led or peer-to-peer guidance?*

*Do you have previous experiences with peer groups?*

*What brought you to the group?*

- Discussion about expectations and goals of the peer support group:

*What are the topics you would like to be discussed in these meetings? What would you like to take out from these sessions?*

- Discussion about the ground rules - it is vital to discuss and agree on the set of rules to be followed throughout the sessions. The suggested topics to be discussed are listed above. The ground rules should be written down so that later the members can easily be reminded of them if needed.

### **D) Concluding the session**

a. Examples of finalizing questions:

*How did you find our discussion today? Is there still something you want to say today?*

b. Wrapping up and suggesting topics for future sessions, as well as deciding on what will be discussed at the next meeting.

## SESSION 2

**A) Aim of the session:** Setting long term goals and choosing the topics to discuss

### **B) Opening of the session**

a. Icebreaker:

*What is on your mind today? (Everybody gets their turn)*

*How did you find the discussions last time?*

### **C) Core of the session**

a. Example of questions to start with: *What kind of topics and issues do you find beneficial to discuss?* Listing the topics

b. Choosing the topics to discuss during the upcoming sessions

### **D) Concluding the session**

a. Agree on the topic to discuss next time. New topics may have arisen.

**SESSION 3**

**A) Aim of the session:** addressing the topics agreed upon in the previous meeting and/or issues that have emerged since

**B) Opening of the session**

**a.** Icebreaker

*How did you find the discussions last time?*

**C) Core of the session**

**a.** Examine the chosen topic together

*What does it mean to you? How do you feel about it? What is there to do about it?*

*Are there different ways of tackling it?*

**D) Concluding the session**

**a.** Agreeing on the topic to discuss next time. New topics may have arisen

**SESSION 4**

**A) Aim of the session:** addressing the topics agreed upon in the previous meeting and/or issues that have emerged since

**B) Opening of the session**

**a.** Icebreaker

**C) Core of the session**

**a.** Examine the chosen topic together

**D) Concluding the session**

**a.** The next meeting will be the last session, but there is also a possibility to continue for another 2-5 sessions.

**b.** Discuss if the group wants to continue sessions or will the 5th time be the last session. Example questions: Have we approached or reached the goals agreed for the peer group? What topics have not yet been discussed? What goals have not been attained? Are we interested in continuing the peer group? Have new goals or topics emerged?

**c.** If you continue, set the goals and topics to be discussed in the remaining sessions. Follow instructions for sessions 2 and 3.

## SESSION 5, OR THE LAST SESSION

**A) Aim of the session:** evaluation and conclusion of the group

**B) Opening of the session**

- This is the last time we meet as a peer support group. Today we evaluate our work together and discuss to what extent we have reached our goals.

**C) Core of the session**

a. Evaluate the group's work together. Example questions:

*What has been the most important for you in our group sessions? What has been the most helpful for you? What ideas will you be carrying with you? What have you learned? What in the discussions has helped you as a doctoral researcher / post-Doc researcher / in your work?*

b. Feedback

*What kind of feedback do you want to give to the instructor/tutor / other members of the group?*

**D) Concluding the session**

- a. The Peer Support Group in this form ends. The end of the process may arouse emotions – it is good if feelings related to ending the group may be talked about.
- b. The topic of continuing to meet or keeping in touch in another way may spontaneously come up in the group. This idea may also be brought up by the instructor, tutor, or chair, but it should be a completely voluntary option for the group members to consider.
- c. End the session by thanking everybody for their contribution to the joint discussions.



# Frequently discussed topics in the Guided Peer Groups

01

## **WORK-RELATED TOPICS**

- time management, organisation of work, self-leadership skills, work-life balance
- clarification and prioritizing of work duties and responsibilities; role, identity, and mindset at work
- identification of competencies and strengths & needs of development
- tackling the “impostor syndrome”
- interaction with the thesis supervisor and colleagues, supervision processes
- uncertainty and stress related to funding, length of the contract, etc.
- motivation, good practices in the maintenance of resources, and the recovery from work strain

02

## **INTEGRATING INTO ACADEMIC LIFE IN FINLAND**

- Loneliness, sense of belonging to the work community
- What has made/would make me feel more at home
- Culture, etiquette, hierarchy
- The feeling of isolation because of language practices at the University

03

## **BELONGING AND SOCIAL LIFE IN FINLAND**

- Social life
- Holidays
- Hobbies and extracurricular activities

04

## **CAREER PLANNING AND PROSPECTS OF WORKING IN FINLAND**

- Career planning and competence building
- Possibilities to stay in Finland and find a suitable position

## Final words

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We hope that the models for Peer Group Support presented in this Guide can inspire Higher Education Institutions to develop their support services directed to international academics, staff members, and researchers to integrate them better into Finnish academia. The welcoming of internationals into the Finnish academic life needs to be supported to enhance their integration and achieve better internationalization in HEIs.

The model presented in the Guide is based on the work done in a focus group established as part of the HEI LIFE project to explore and further develop the support services offered to international members at the University of Turku. The focus group collected experiences, both from professional supervisors and international doctoral researchers, who had been involved in the Guided Peer Support Group activities offered by the University Well-being Services. Although our experiences were based on instructor-led guidance, we wanted to produce a more universal guide that would be useful in various settings, for different target groups and allow peer support to be organized irrespective of financial resources. As potential users, we have identified doctoral, spouse, and mentoring programs, or other training programs for international academics.

The model presented here is based on the work done in a focus group established as part of the HEI LIFE project to explore and further develop the support services offered to international members at the University of Turku. This focus group collected experiences, both from work supervisors and international PhD researchers, who had been involved in the Guided Peer Support Group activities offered by the University Well-being Services. Although our experiences were based on instructor-led guidance, we tried to produce a universal guide that can serve in various settings.

We hope that the model will raise discussion about welcoming and integrating international talents, and be of help in developing support services for international academics in Finnish academia.

## List of appendices

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1. Appendix 1: Personal statements
2. Appendix 2: Model announcement
3. Appendix 3: Model questionnaire

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## APPENDIX 1: PERSONAL STATEMENTS

Below you can find a collection of personal statements from Peer Support participants (with permission to share). This material can be used to encourage peer group participants to reflect on these statements, and share their own experiences.



*"First few months in Finland were thrilling. Sure, it was difficult to adapt to the new system of banking, finding my way to university, and deciding which bus to take home. At the same time, I was busy discovering all the new and exciting things that were available. But after my first Christmas away from family and home, the truth hit me. It wasn't just a matter of getting my bearings in Finland; it was also a matter of making it a home. Even after 5 years of living here, I'm still trying to figure out how to make this place to feel more like home. One of the most crucial steps I took was to attend the Peer Support Group. There, I discovered I wasn't alone. It was a perfect way to get into the right mindset by sharing experiences and listening to others. It was comforting to hear other people's perspectives and receive guidance from a competent supervisor. After all, you should always remember that moving to a new country is more like jumping rather than simply stepping out of your comfort zone."*

*Doctoral researcher, University of Turku*



*"I particularly appreciated our Guide not forcing us to "present" any certain work-related topic, but rather allowing the conversation to oscillate around that topic. Sometimes things are more subtle than they seem- you might ask people to talk about competition, and they will tell you about racism and sexism in their workplace. You might want to discuss time management but will hear about anxiety and uncertainty about their future. I think it is crucial that there is space to voice such concerns. Otherwise, it might feel fake. We can easily access online resources to read "10 tips on time management at work". Peer group must offer something more authentic than that, otherwise, why would we commit to participate?"*

*Doctoral researcher, University of Turku*

## APPENDIX 1: PERSONAL STATEMENTS



*"I was delighted when I first decided to relocate to a new country. Making big life changes are empowering, according to what I'd read and been told. I have been told that the best way to really get to know yourself is to expose yourself to new experiences and new adventures. However, as thrilling as it can be, relocating is not without its challenges. I grew up in a very multicultural country where about 70% of people were coming from different countries around the world. With having that experience and never facing discrimination or racism of any kind I came to Finland.*

*Finland being the happiest country in the world does not make it automatically an accepting country towards foreigners. At the campus and University, you usually do not face racism. For me it was more like isolation. Isolation from co-workers, neighbors, and the society. Even though you might have a lot of people around you like your classmates, co-workers, or roommates but you still can feel very lonely. I believe the language barrier is one of the main reasons for this isolation. I have friends from other country who speak Finnish and are accepted to the society much easier than someone who only speaks English. The university offers a lot of language courses which can be taken. Also, since feeling isolated can cause emotional distress, it is very important to find a support system. By attending the Peer Support Group, I built an emotional support system for myself by talking about my feelings and experiences and listening to others"*

*Doctoral researcher, University of Turku*



*"Moving to a new country where people speak a different language and have a different culture could be stressful and lonely. It might be challenging to not understand the culture, language, or to constantly be seen as a foreigner. But remember you are not alone. Attending the Peer Support Group would give you an opportunity to talk to other people who are in the same boat as you. It would also help you to establish a support system."*

*Doctoral researcher, University of Turku"*

## APPENDIX 1: PERSONAL STATEMENTS



*"Moving to another country is scary, moving to a country where you don't know the language is simply terrifying. When every piece of information around you is in an unknown language (warning signs, information on the door of the toilet at work, evacuation plan from your floor in the office, etc., etc.) it gives you the feeling of lack of control. Information keeps bypassing you, although everybody else considers it "common knowledge". I felt embarrassed each time I had to ask my Finnish-speaking colleagues about something that I considered "obvious". I kept thinking I was wasting their precious time, but at the same time, I knew there was no other way than to ask. This loss of independence was quite unexpected and honestly frustrating".*

*Doctoral researcher, University of Turku*



*"I was able to make friends with people who were in a similar circumstances to me thanks to the Peer Support Group. The group discussions brought us closer together because we were all in a safe environment where we could share practically everything. We are still in contact and have a WhatsApp group to connect with after a year of completing the Peer Support Group. It's reassuring to know that when you need to talk after a hard day or when you're feeling overwhelmed, individuals in your support network will be there for you. I also know that if I need any professional assistance related to academic challenges and even wellbeing, I may contact the correct personnel or places within the University."*

*Doctoral researcher, University of Turku*



*"Moving to a foreign country entails more than just finding a place to live and opening a bank account (which are challenging in their own ways). However, it is not until later that the real challenges begin."*

*Doctoral researcher, University of Turku*

## PEER SUPPORT GROUP - ACADEMIC, SOCIAL AND PROFESSIONAL WELL-BEING OF INTERNATIONALS (HEI LIFE)

### **Aim**

The aim is to help international staff members to find efficient and effective ways to settle their working life at the University and in the Finnish society for best outcome in their academic, social and professional careers and lives in general in Finland.

### **Contents**

Have you lately been thinking about questions such as:

- How to allocate my work time efficiently and effectively to address all aspects of my work?
- How to attain peace of mind and tranquility to concentrate on my work?
- What are the foundations of my competence? How can I build-up my competencies?
- What sparkles my enthusiasm? What gives me energy?
- What is stressful for me? How do I manage stress? How do I recover from work strain?
- What are my career plans? How can I promote my chances for reaching the goals I have set?
- How do I find my own place in Finnish society?
- Where can I find help if I feel alienated and lost, as I do not know Finnish, and I do not understand the culture in and outside the University?

### **In a Peer Support Group you can:**

- pause to think about your work situation, use of working time and career plans
- relieve strain resulting from uncertainties related to research work or career development
- look for and find solutions to current work-related questions, with support from peers // and a trained professional supervisor / [other qualifications of the instructor] / a tutor.

### **A Peer Support Group is:**

- a goal-oriented process based on an open, appreciative and respectful dialogue
- an opportunity to develop one's professional and working life skills
- a confidential learning process among peers // or led by a qualified instructor / tutor
- time and place to reflect upon oneself at work, for example one's thoughts, experiences and feelings related to the work situation, work community and work identity.



## APPENDIX 2: MODEL ANNOUNCEMENT

### **Target Group**

doctoral or post-doctoral researchers working at the HEI with/without an employment contract, international members of staff

The groups are formed of 4-6 participants with similar objectives. Reply the questionnaire below to share more about your personal objectives. The information is handled in confidence for sole purpose of building of a group of peers with similar objectives. Then the information is deleted.

The group will meet 5 times for a 90 min session, the sessions take place at an interval of 3 to 4 weeks. If needed, the number of sessions can be extended with another 5 sessions.

Following the formation of the group, the date, time, and venue will be mutually agreed among the group participants for an active participation and attendance by the group members.

### **Feedback and experiences of earlier participants:**

"In the Peer Support Group I had the chance to talk for the 1st time about my everyday academic life and well-being. The discussions we had and the suggestions helped in the development of my work. Overall the trustworthy and friendly environment that we created was necessary to achieve it as well."

"I think it helped me a lot in my day work. It gave me freedom to express my doubts, ideas and problems with other people in the same position. Also, it provided me with tools and new skills to solve and prevent problems."

"I believe the goals we set were achieved in a very high level because I adapted the suggestions / recommendations that the (instructor) and other group-mates said but also due to my reflections which emerged during our discussions."

## QUESTIONNAIRE FOR BUILDING PEER GROUPS

A peer group is an opportunity to pause to think about one's work and the working environment in an appreciative and confidential interaction with /a qualified instructor / a tutor and / a group of peers. Information given in this questionnaire is used by [contact person's name] for the sole purpose of building peer groups of participants with similar work situations and same topics to deal with in the peer group work. When the groups have been formed, this information is deleted.

1. Give a short description of your work situation? What makes you interested in the peer group?

2. What themes and questions would you like to work with?

- time management and organisation of work
- identification of competences and strengths & areas of development
- good practices in the maintenance of resources and in the recovery from work strain
- setting of boundaries and clarification of one's role, duties and responsibilities
- finding one's place in Finnish society
- understanding the features and differences in academic cultures
- other topics, please specify...

3. Your stage on the researchers' career path?

- R1 Doctoral researcher, PhD
- R2 Post-doctoral researcher
- R3 Independent researcher
- R4 Professor, Leading Researcher
- Other title or role at the university

4. Contact Information

- First Name & Surname
- Phone
- Email
- Faculty / Unit

When the group has been built, each member is asked to confirm that the suggested group composition is suitable. The group members agree among themselves on the time and place and of the first session (the discussion is led by the chair, tutor or instructor). The recommended process is to have 90 min sessions at 3-4 weeks' interval 5-10 times, but it is for the group members to decide what is realistic and suitable for the group.



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