Partner University: Aalto University, School of Business

Country: Finland

City: Helsinki

Major/faculty: Business/ International Business.

Exchange Period: Spring 2017 (January-May)

There are instructions for everything needed on SFU exchange program website and from Aalto university's emails. It includes how to get a resident permit, how to apply for accommodation, what to bring for the trip and so on. Read them carefully and prepare yourself accordingly. A reminder is to start preparing early in case of anything unexpected happen.

I took Finnair from Hong Kong to Helsinki (I visited Hong Kong before going to Finland). It is a direct flight and Finnair offered student discount for this trip. The price for round trip is about $1,000 CAD.

Otaniemi Campus in January   Otaniemi Campus in May (Same Spot)

It is possible to ask Aalto University to arrange a tutor to pick you up at the airport upon your arrival. I did not ask for it since I arrive at 2am in midnight. Then I spent the next two days with the tutor in a group format. He took me to get to know the campus, both Töölo and Otaniemi. They also helped me to get my travel card, SIM card and showed me around the center of Helsinki. Travel card offer a student discount (50%) when you take bus or metro and I would say the transportation in Helsinki is convenient. Take care of your travel card well if you come to Helsinki.

Helsinki is a credit-based city. I paid with my credit card literally everywhere. I highly recommend you bringing your credit card with you all the time. However, it is
not necessary to get a Finnish credit card. Using a Canadian bank card is totally fine. The cost of living is similar to Vancouver.

I applied for my accommodation with HOAS. HOAS is partnered with Aalto University and they will save some room for exchange student only. My accommodation address is on the Otaniemi campus. It only takes 15-minute walk to the Otaniemi campus or 20-minute bus to Töölo campus. In the room, I have my own bedroom, and share a kitchen, bathroom and a mini hallway with another 2 exchange students. There are also sauna rooms and laundry rooms located in the first floor of some buildings and people live there shared them together. HOAS do not accept cash or credit card payment. The only way to pay rent is through bank transfer. Therefore, It is better to pay the rent in advance before leaving your home. If you do not have a credit card or forget to pay your rent, another way to do is ask Nordea, a Finnish bank to make a bank transfer for you. You then pay Nordea by cash in addition with some service fee.

The education system in Aalto is different from the one in SFU. A semester is divided into 3 periods. Each period last for around 6 weeks. Unlike studying in SFU that students study all courses they take simultaneously in a 4-month semester, I took 3 course over the spring semester but only studied one course in each period. There is a new type of course called “book exam”. Students are assigned two or three books to read in one period and take a final exam at the end of the period. There is no lecture, no assignment, no TA, and only meet your instructor at the final exam. It is an absolutely self-study course.

Also, Aalto use grading system instead of curving to give student grade. The range is from 1-5. 5 is the best and any number more than 1 indicates pass. Students are also allowed to take final exam for up to 3 times if they are not satisfied with their exam grade. Another interesting thing is I took a master course in Aalto as a student studying for bachelor degree. Generally, I consider the course level in SFU is harder than the level in Aalto. We are expected more to get a good grade in SFU.

In Finland, students have more power. Students have their own organization called student union in each university. AYY is the student union for Aalto university, school of business, and its branch, KY-sub are responsible for exchange students' activity. During the spring term, KY-sub arrange a lot of activities including cottage trip, Levi trip, St. Petersburg trip and many night parties for exchange students. I had a bon-fire party and used tree-branches to barbecue sausages; I experienced rolling on ice and jumping into a lake after sauna. The trips are all pretty funny and unforgettable.

In May, one of the biggest Finnish festival, Vappu, was taken place in Helsinki. Vappu is a whole country event and it annually starts on May 1st to mark the end of winter. In Helsinki, on the first day of Vappu, we gathered at market square, drank and danced on the street. The whole city become a party ground. In the second day,
there are picnics at the parks in the city. We tried traditional Finnish food and played some games to enjoy the day.

Vappu Second Day

I traveled to many places during my exchange. In Europe, I have been to England, Demark, Estonia, Germany and Spain. Particularly, I visited Spain with my Japanese friend that we met each other in Vancouver. Everything I thought about it, I felt the power of globalization. Inside Finland, I have been to Rovaniemi to visit Santa Clause Village, Ivalo to experience aurora haunting, Inari to try Husky ride, Snowmobile, and Kemi for the Sampo cruise, and snow castle. Helsinki is also a beautiful city that is worth to explore. In summer, the whole city a wonderland. I personally like to go to market square, Suomenlinna, and löyly. I could spend whole day there just to enjoy the sunshine and the excellent landscape.
Finland is one of the greatest alcohol-consuming country. I am not an alcohol guy, but during my stay in Finland, I learnt to drink wisely and have more knowledge about all kind of wine, beer and vodka.

Living in Finland is actually my second time going abroad for study. The first time is of course coming to Vancouver. Therefore, I like to compare between these two experience. There is too much to say. One thing I am sure is, every time I step out my comfort zone, I learn a lot, I grow up and I become more mature. There are experience that will be unique everyone. For me, every time I talk to my friend about my Finnish life and every time I see myself become more independent in daily life, I know going to Finland is the smartest decision I have ever made in my university life.

Finnish Refrigerator