Aalto University Exchange Report Fall 2018

I was nominated for the formal exchange program at Aalto University in Helsinki, Finland for Fall 2018 (Sept. 4, 2018 – Dec.16, 2018). My major was Business Administration with a concentration in Human Resources and Operations Management.

Preparation for Exchange

Visa Process

Make sure you do your research into the Visa requirements for Finland! At the time I went, Finland required all students staying in Finland for more than 90 days to have a Finnish Residence Permit. Keep in mind that Vancouver does not currently have an Embassy of Finland, to apply for the permit I had to travel to conduct biometrics.

Academic Details

Aalto University offers a wide array of courses, majority of them being taught in English. The University is quite flexible in which courses they allow students to take. Bachelor students are often allowed to take Master level courses. They also offer Cross-School Courses, which is open to all students of any field of study.

One semester consists of 2-3 periods which are 2 months long and courses may overlap with courses in the next period. This is often not a problem as long as you talk to the professor beforehand. Depending on certain professors and courses, students can enrol in two courses with overlapping timetables in the same period.

Packing

Helsinki has a similar climate to Vancouver, often a few degrees colder but plenty of rainfall in late October to November. Bring a winter jacket, boots, and an umbrella. If you are planning to travel to Northern Finland or colder countries (yes, there are colder countries!) additional winter gear is recommended.

Travelling/Transportation

Travelling within Helsinki is relatively easy as there are many different options for transportation (trains, metro, trams, buses, and bikes). Walking is also a feasible option as everything within Kamppi area is quite centralized and close together. Tutors will help students buy the appropriate travel plan on their orientation day.

Travelling outside of Finland is a bit more difficult as the country is a bit further from the rest of Europe. However, for those who want to travel budget-consciously, Estonia, Sweden and other Fenno-Scandinavian countries are relatively cheap to travel to.
Financial Details

Finland is a largely card-based society. There are students who open a Finnish bank account, but many stores and restaurants do take credit cards from many international banks. Despite being a card-based society, majority of Finnish store do not take American Express. For the students that do prefer paying with cash, there are Otto machines (Finnish ATMs) that accept cards from international banks.

During Exchange

Arrival and Orientation

Aalto University provides a free optional pickup service to exchange students on their day of arrival to Helsinki. Students will either be driven to their accommodation or take the train to their accommodation (~€5).

Orientation, while optional, is a great opportunity to get to know other exchange students. The students I met during my exchange orientation are the ones I was the closest with during my exchange. Students will also be able to take part in long standing Finnish traditions during the orientation (Their main event for the orientation, Mursujaiset, predates WWII!)

Accommodation and Living

HOAS tries to arrange accommodation as close to the student’s school as possible. However, due to living preferences, location, as well as time application was sent in, not all students are given the ideal accommodation arrangements. HOAS accommodations provide sufficient furniture for exchange students to live comfortably. However, heating in the winter time may not be enough. I lived in a shared studio in the heart of Helsinki and my rent was about (€339/month)

Academic Details

Because courses span over a period of 2 months, they are very similar to SFU intersession courses. Despite the low difficulty of Aalto classes, the school does encourage a lot of groupwork, which can be overwhelming, given the condensed timeframe of classes.

Country Information

Finland is one of Europe’s northernmost countries. While it may seem small, it is actually the 8th largest European country! What is most impressive about Finland is its natural beauty. The country is covered in lakes and greenery. One of the most memorable experiences for me was seeing the Northern Lights from Helsinki!
The Finns are incredibly nice and humble. Many Finnish people have a strong command of the English language but will feel more comfortable speaking Finnish because they believe they aren’t good at English. Despite this, they are more than willing to help anyone as long as long as they are asked.

Social and Extra-Curricular Activities

Aalto University has many student committees. Exchange students can choose to join any committee but business students are automatically enrolled into KY-SUB. KY-SUB arranges many trips for exchange students such as: Estonia, Cottage Trip, Russia, and Lapland.

Reflection after Exchange

What I’ve Learned on Exchange

Going on exchange was the first time I lived alone. During this time, I’ve learned to handle things on my own and be my own person. Not only was I able to learn more about myself, I’ve also come to realize how vast and expansive the world outside North America is.

What I Wish I Knew Before I Left

There are two reasons that motivated me to choosing Finland as my exchange destination. The first one being to see the Northern Lights. However, upon arrival, I was told by my tutor that it was rare for people living in Helsinki to see the Northern Lights. Even many Finns haven’t seen the northern lights.

Another reason was that I chose Finland to go on exchange was that I wanted to experience a stereotypical European Christmas. However, I learned from a local student that nothing is open on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day and many Finnish people celebrate Christmas with their family.

With that being said, while the probability of me seeing the Northern Lights and experiencing a typical European Christmas was unlikely, I still ended up having the time of my life. I didn’t know how attached I would be to the country, its people and all the experiences I had here.

Advice for Other Students

Don’t be afraid to try new things! You’ve made it have way across the globe anyways – why not try something you won’t be able to do back in Canada?
Photos

Orientation Day with the Tutor Group
Front of Old Business Building
Mursujaiset in Senate Square
View Outside my Apartment