Preparation for exchange

I attended the University of Jyväskylä from May to June 2019 for their short term program in human sciences. This program runs every year from mid-May to mid-June and is comprised of interdisciplinary courses in culture studies, education, social sciences, psychology, communication, sport and health sciences, business and marketing. I was interested in going on exchange to Finland because I was drawn to their strong social welfare systems and strong education system, and wanted to experience how this affects day to day life of locals there. The short term nature of the program also drew me in as I wanted to go on exchange but not for a full 4 month semester – and I would recommend short term exchanges for any students who are also coming from the same perspective.

Academic details

For the short term summer program, each course lasts a week. Some courses entail a final exam at the end of the week, however this isn’t the case for all courses. Most have group projects, papers, and assignments throughout the week. I found the educational experience more laid-back than at SFU. Although there sometimes are master’s students in your undergrad classes, and the classes should be more intense as they only last a week, they were still less demanding than SFU classes. Professors are extremely approachable, friendly, and always open to chat about the course with you. They generally really encourage group work and discussion in class.

Packing, what to bring

I would recommend students to pack lightly, if possible – especially for this case of a short term exchange. In the city, it often rained so waterproof/ water resistant clothing and
footwear, and an umbrella were helpful to have. I also advise to pack lightly in case you’d like to do travels in-between or after your term is completed.

Travel and transportation

I flew into Helsinki, the capital of Finland, as flying directly to Jyväskylä was far more expensive. I took a train from Helsinki to Jyväskylä, which was a few hours in length and cost about $40 CAD to book; the price fluctuates depending on when you book the ticket. I booked the train via the website VR.fi – this website allows you to book long distance trains in Finland and Russia. There is also a low-cost bus service that can take you to closer cities throughout Finland at very reasonable costs – the bus company is called Onnibus.

Financial details

During exchange

Arrival and orientation

The university has a “tutor” program, which is extremely helpful to exchange students. The tutors are local students at the university who are paired up with you for your time on exchange. I was met by my tutor after my long distance bus ride to the city centre. My flight into Helsinki was delayed by several hours and thus I didn’t make it into the city centre until after midnight. Even so, my tutor graciously came to meet me and take the last local bus with me to my dorm and ensured I felt comfortable and had everything I needed until the morning. The tutors are all incredibly kind and friendly and were a highlight of my exchange experience. The school plans an orientation session which provides information on the city and school; this session happened in the second week.

Accommodation and living
Most students on exchange reserve accommodation in an area called the Kortepohja Student Village, which is about 2.5 km away from the main campus. Each dorm room comes with a shared kitchen and bathroom, bed, bed linen, pillow, and study desk. Some students cooked in their dorms with the shared small kitchen, but I found eating at the student cafeteria was not only easier but cost effective, since the meals were subsidized. Paying for residence in the student village also includes the gym membership at Rentukka gym and breakfast every morning at the student cafeteria located on the residence area.

Campus building

Country information

Sauna is a big part of Finnish culture. (Fun fact! Finland has a small population of about 5 million, but there are an estimated 2 million saunas across the country – meaning a lot of families have their own private saunas as part of their homes.) Exchange students have lots of chances to try out sauna as there are electronic saunas in the campus gym, and there are free-time activities planned to go to a nearby lake where there is a wooden sauna. Finnish culture is very
laid-back and quiet. Locals prefer to keep to themselves, but are still very friendly and approachable. They locals in the city centre typically are aware that exchange students come to Jyväskylä every summer and are very helpful and accommodating if you have questions.

Social and extra-curricular activities

The university plans an extensive “free-time programme” with activities that exchange students can take part in after school hours or on the weekends. These included field trips to national parks, to nearby lakes, or potlucks throughout the week to spend time with other students and tutors. Participating in these activities is a great way to meet other students and make friends for your semester abroad. The city centre has plenty of restaurants and bars to check out as well. The city is also super bike friendly, so it’s lots of fun to bike around with your friends on a nice day out.

Travel

I would recommend students try to squeeze in some travel to nearby cities and countries while on exchange. During my term, I did short day trips to Helsinki, Tampere, and to Estonia with other students. Our trip to Tampere, a city a couple hours away from Jyväskylä, was accompanied by one of the school tutors. He brought us to a few restaurants and touristy spots, and was kind enough to bring us to his family’s private sauna (picture below).
Sauna in Tampere

Cathedral in Estonia

Meals
The Finnish government subsidizes the student meals on campus so the price per meal for students is at an affordable 2.60 € for all meals, which includes main courses, a drink, and a salad bar. The accommodation fee, if you live on the dorm, includes breakfast – so you won’t have to worry about the cost of breakfast each morning. There are several campus cafeterias across the campus, and they all accept cash or credit. From my experience at several cafeterias, there are options that accommodate several dietary restrictions, including vegan, vegetarian, and gluten-free. Finnish people also love their bread and butter – so there is always abundant bread and butter at all meals. There is also a vegan soup restaurant called Katriina, which offers the student pricing for their meals. One thing to note is that I found restaurants and shops in the city centre often closed early, so be sure to search and plan ahead.

*Student meal on campus*

*Reflection after exchange*
I would recommend doing a study abroad to any student. I would advise you to research about the culture of the city/ country you wish to go to as well as the academic aspects of your exchange. If I could do it again, I would more deeply research the city in which the university was in to see if I was a good fit with the culture. Something I wish I had done before leaving was make more intentional plans for travel whilst on my study abroad semester. My plans to travel within Finland and outside were done spontaneously during my exchange. If it’s something you’re interested in, I think you would have more fulfilling travels if you researched about how to go about these plans before embarking on your exchange; however, it’s still possible to plan them throughout your exchange, especially if your exchange is longer than one month.

Although there are things I think any exchange student would have done differently, I still think going on exchange is a great experience for any student. It builds independence for travelling alone, you get to experience a different education system, and make new connections and friends.