

Exchange Helsinki autumn '16 – Rogier Blokland

In the academic year of 2016-2017, I studied at the University of Helsinki in Finland during the period of August until December.

Housing

Before I left, I had to arrange for example the housing, but also some administrative things. First of all, the housing system is really easy and you only have to enter 2 things when you apply definitively for the exchange at the university itself. In Helsinki, a few organisations exist who are in charge of the housing for many students (not only exchange students). You just have to enter which organisation you want to use and what kind of apartment. It really depends on your preferences, since there are 2 really good options. First of all, the main 'centre' for all exchange students is at Domus Academica. It is located in the city centre, a 5 minute walk to Kamppi. The central railway station is only 15 minutes away and the university is about 20 minutes away, although another university where you will probably have to follow at least 1 course is only 2 minutes away (skip to the courses part). However, it could be a major downside (depending on your personal preferences), you're situated in a studio. Even though the studio is really nice, it gets cleaned every 2 weeks, you'd have a common room and a sauna (!), it also costs 600 euros. If you want to get in here, say you want to be at Unihome and have a studio.

Another option is in Pasila. That option is from HOAS and you will live with 4 or 5 flatmates. It is 5 minutes away from the railway station (with train) or 20 minutes with bus from the city centre. Also at night, busses will be present, except for the period between 2.30am and 4am. This is also cheaper, about 400 euros a month.

I suggest to try to get in somewhere via the university, since arranging housing on your own will be really expensive (700 euros is standard) and also really difficult.

Arrival

As I was situated in Domus, I immediately got in touch with a lot of other exchange students, as I think there are about 200 exchange students living in Domus. In the first few days you get in touch with a lot of other students via the university as well, as the university has 2 introduction days, where you need to take care of your learning agreement. You will be placed into a group with students who are studying in the field of economics as well. During the first week, a lot of events are organised and you will get to know the city quite fast as it also isn't very big.

A practical note, on these days, the university also hands out prepaid sim cards for your phone. I would suggest to take one of those, as internet in Finland is very cheap. These are also available at the R-Kioski, but then you won't get a free 7 euros starting pack. It costs about 1 cent per MB (and also unlimited internet is cheap, about 16 euros if I'm correct).

Courses

The courses in the field of economics at the University of Helsinki are really limited. At the department of economics, in my year only 2 courses were available in the first semester, with a total of 11 credits. Since that was not enough, I had to arrange something else. The University of Helsinki has a shared master programme with the Aalto University and the Hanken University. Most of these courses are given at the Aalto University (a 2 minute walk from Domus) and is also a necessary option to get those credits in the field of economics. To be able to follow courses at the Aalto

University, you need to fill in a form to ask for access to the courses and get in touch with the coordinator to be able to get a student number. Then, you can use the WebOodi of the Aalto University. Arrange this as soon as possible, as it might take 2 weeks. I also switched courses after 2 weeks, because a course was too hard. The 2 courses in economics I took were the following:

Microeconomics: pricing (6 ECTS): This course is given at Aalto and as the name suggests is about pricing in microeconomics. The basics were really easy and the course had some overlapping with microeconomics in Bachelor 1. Of course it was a little bit harder, but I thought it was very easy. This was also because you have to write 2 essays about something that has to do with pricing (which both account for 20% of your grade). The teacher in my year was very kind, as people who completely failed the exam also could pass the course (with good essays of course).

History of Economic Growth and Crises (6 ECTS): HoEGaC is also given at the Aalto University and is just as the microeconomics course pretty easy. It doesn't really require any background knowledge, but is really interesting if you're interested in some theories about the history of economic growth (where it mainly is about). Again, you would need to write 2 essays with both 20%.

The level of both these courses were pretty low, and you don't need to work hard to pass them, making sure you can enjoy your free time. Other courses I took were:

Finnish for exchange students (5 ECTS): Finnish is not hard, it is really different. If you're good in remembering and following rules, passing this one will be really easy, as the level is not high at all. It is cool to learn some Finnish, as you can use it in everyday life and are finally able to say a few words in a bar or at an ice skating rink. Just make sure you are present at more than half of the lessons, make your homework sometimes and you'll be fine.

Nordic Welfare States (5 ECTS): In my year, we had 2 of these courses. One running from September to December and one only in November and December. I took the latter. I had to write a lecture diary of about 8 lectures and was able to pass the course. As the name suggests, the content is about the Nordic welfare states. You will learn a few things about the systems in the Nordic countries.

Introduction to Finnish Culture and Society (5 ECTS): This course was at first one of the better courses. Although the lectures were boring, you will work in groups, which is nice as you will get to know other exchange students, not only in the same field of studies. The title of the course is a little bit deceptive though, as the emphasis was more on psychological things as values and they compared the importance of those things in countries in the world, instead of focussing on Finland itself. I do think they will improve this in the upcoming years.

Finances

My room cost me in total 2240 euros (in December you don't need to pay the full 600 euros if you leave earlier). Furthermore, eating isn't cheap in Helsinki. However, the university has some UniCafe's where you can have a meal for 2.60. Those meals are the same amount as our dinner would be, as in Finland they eat warm meals in the evening. You just have to show proof you're studying at the UoH and you get the discount. In total, food will be roughly 150-200 euros each month (more if you will have dinner at a restaurant more regularly).

In case you want to buy a bike, one of the better options is Greenbike. It sells used bikes for round 60 euros. Do this in the first couple of days, as the cheaper ones are limited. Also buy an extra lock (for example at Class Ohlson). Even though Helsinki is a safe city, a friend's bike got stolen in Kallio. An unlimited public transport card in the area of Helsinki costs 90 euros for 4 months. As you will travel a lot if you want to explore the city, it is worth it. However, in the city centre everything is in walking distance, if you don't mind walking for 25/30 minutes.

Nights out are also pretty expensive, as a beer of 0.4 litres will be 7 euros. Together with the entrance fee and mandatory cloakroom fee, a night out can easily cost you 30 euros. I'd suggest to not drink that much in clubs if it isn't a student party. The cheaper neighbourhood for going out is Kallio, which is the home for a lot of students as well.

Daily life

The Finns are really kind and will help you most of the times with everything if you ask them. Most of them even speak English. Beware that you won't find anyone talking to you quickly, as almost all Finns are quite introverted. The public transport in Helsinki is really good, but if you go to other places than Helsinki, there aren't that many places. Trains are quite cheap compared to the NS, so if you want to travel to for example Oulu (more up north), that won't cost you that much money. There's also a company Onnibus, which sells even cheaper tickets for a bus ride. However, since most of the cities are really small and you aren't really able to go to places with public transport, I would recommend renting a car at least once. This way you can explore 'the land of a thousand lakes' by for example renting a cottage near a lake. Ice swimming after the sauna is something you must experience (either in a cottage or in Lapland).

Trips to other countries are also really easy, as Timetravels organises trips together with ESN to for example St. Petersburg, Lapland & the fjords in Norway (Lofoten).

I suggest to also explore the small islands in Helsinki, as there are many and they are really beautiful. Especially in late September/early October, when most leaves are beginning to drop, and later on in November or December when a thick layer of snow has fallen. The same holds for the national park in Espoo, which is really easy to get to (train to Espoo and bus 245 to the park). Halfway November I was already walking in 20 cm of snow in, literally, a winter wonderland and standing on a lake as big as at least 5 times the Kralingse Plas, considering only the part I was able to see. In the week before I left (late December), even the sea was frozen.

Last but not least, ice hockey!! This is one of the biggest sports in Finland and Helsinki even has two teams. One playing in the KHL (with teams from Russia) and the other in the Finnish league. You should definitely go to Jokerit (the one in the KHL), cheaper tickets are even available via ESN (for some matches). Another amazing thing is that since it is very cold already in November, there are multiple ice skating rinks in the whole city. I especially liked the one in Kallio (called Brahe Sports Rink), as a football field was frozen. It is possible to play ice hockey on one half of the rink. Ice skates and hockey sticks (and a puck of course) are available for a small fee (6 and 2 euros). Playing with Finns however will be harder, as they are most of the times really good. And a very good tip, don't try too hard, I had to go to the hospital and got stitches in my eyebrow.

I would definitely recommend Helsinki to everybody, but keep in mind that for the full experience you would want to see the beautiful nature in the country. If you're not a big fan of the nature, you still have a lot of possibilities to explore neighbouring countries, as Helsinki is kind of the centre of the area with Russia, the Baltic countries & the Scandinavian countries.

Would you happen to have any questions, you contact me via email; rogierblokland@gmail.com.