

Studying in Helsinki a marvellous experience!

Last year around December, I decided to study abroad for a semester. After weighing all the pros and cons of all possible destinations I made up my top 3 of universities in the following order of preference: The university of Helsinki, Stockholm and Essex. After the exchange committee took my preferences into consideration my application of Helsinki was accepted. Before departure to Helsinki, my new university sent me all the details of necessary things that needed to be arranged to be able to successfully complete my studies and enjoy my time in Helsinki. The local student housing, called HOAS, sent me an e-mail with all the details how to apply for housing. After a few weeks, HOAS allocated me an apartment for my full studying period at Hietaniemenkatu, which is a ten minute walk from the city centre. Not everything was already available in the apartment; I needed to buy my own dishes, cutlery and blankets. This was not a problem at all because with the help of Google I was able to find a bus to IKEA, which only took 15 minutes.

What is important to know is the fact that HOAS allocated me a room from the first of September, but the exchange programme started a few days earlier. I needed to book a hostel for the preceding days. I wouldn't recommend any particular hostel because I didn't hear any complaints about the quality of the hostels from other students. Also an important fact is that you need to start as soon as possible with handing and filling in the required documents to change your home address and grant status of the Dutch government. This takes a few weeks for the government to read and approve your change in financial payments. You shouldn't forget to disconnect your student travel card before leaving Holland; this is necessary to be able to receive compensation from the Dutch government. It was also necessary to decide which courses to follow at the university before my departure. I took this task quite serious, but at the end it didn't seem that necessary because the real choice of courses is made after arrival and in presence of your exchange tutor.

Because being on exchange is already a quite expensive happening, a few things to keep in mind to save some money. Booking your flight early will save you significant amounts of money. I would recommend taking an indirect flight because this will save you quite a bit of money and the flights are comfortable and not that long – this is entirely up to you. Another point to keep in mind is the place where you do your grocery shopping. Lidl supermarket is the cheapest and still has good quality food.

So after I made all the necessary preparations, I left to Helsinki on the 26th of August. At the Helsinki airport there is a good bus line at a price of 6euros one way, which brings you into the city centre. You could also take a taxi for 30 Euros. After a few days we had the exchange welcome fair, which was the very helpful for me in getting all my things in order. It made it perfectly clear what I could expect from the university for the following months. After an introduction lecture I met my mentor who was going to guide us through the whole process: from choosing courses, to the places where to do cheap groceries.

Our Tutor also helped us with choosing our courses. The one and only thing that disappointed me at my stay in Finland and the university of Helsinki was the limited supply of economic courses and the bad communication before hand on this topic. I needed to choose a lot of courses that were not part of my original studies, which is Economics. Beforehand this information was not available because the courses of the new study year were not published. On the other hand because it was necessary

to choose some courses from different faculties I widened my perspective and my view on topics and subjects. In Helsinki the grading is done on a scale from 1 to 5 where 1 is a pass. The level of education really depends on the course you choose, so you can make it as hard if you want. My opinion in general is that the subjects can be quite hard but the exams are overall less complicated than at the Erasmus university.

Now I will describe the courses I participated in, the number of ECTS is seen from the number in parentheses.

- **Understanding, Causal explanations and Counterfactuals in World Politics(5).**

As mentioned before, this was one of the courses that I followed outside of my common direction of studies. The central question in the course was, "What if?" so for example what if Roosevelt was assassinated? Maybe America wasn't economically rescued with the New Deal and therefore unable to rescue Europe from Nazi Germany. Another interesting question that was raised in the course was the idea that very small changes could lead to the industrial revolution happening in China instead of in Europe, leading to China as dominant World power with a complete different future as a result. The course seems quite vague but it taught me to place more question marks around the "inevitability" of World history. To successfully pass this exam I needed to pass two exams, one online book exam and a written exam. If I look back at all courses I participated in, this course took me the most effort to pass, not only because the subject was quite new but also because of the large workload. This course also had two lectures a week and you were only allowed to miss one lecture.

- **Preconfigurative modes of democratic participation(5)**

This course was the easiest if you compare the workload to the other subjects. There was no exam but we needed to discuss and prepare a presentation for every weekly session. The subject was the influence of democratic participation on the democratic process. So for instance we looked at the influence of occupy wall street on the democratic process. The discussions were especially interesting because there were a lot of heated discussions because of different views from my economic perspective against mostly political educated students. I would recommend this course to students who are interested in this subject and above all are willing to improve their English and argumentation skills because a large part of the subject are discussions.

- **International economics(5)**

I found this course quite easy due to the fact that I study economics back home. It was about absolute and relative advantages and the offer curve. It was quite basic, especially if you did the international economics course at the Erasmus University.

- **Banking theory in Macroeconomics(6)**

This course was a master course and the teacher recommended me to drop the course due to the difficult level. Nevertheless I passed the exam, the level was hard but if you put enough effort in studying you are certainly able to pass the exam. The course was really interesting but as said earlier you needed to study a lot to keep up with the pace. It was about individual preferences so a lot of Cobb Douglas functions and differentiating. The teacher was really interesting so that help me to stay motivated. At the end I can conclude that this was the most interesting course I followed.

- **Economics and Politics of European Integration(5)**

Again a interesting subject about European integration and its relation to economic and political consequences and policies. For instance we studied the effect of the Common agricultural policy on the economic situation in European countries. So if you are interested in European policies and the history of the development of the European Union, this course is suitable for you.

- **Nordic societies and cultures.(6)**

I followed this course after two months, I later regretted that I wasn't able to follow this course at the beginning of my stay because it really helps you understand the Finnish society and its people. This really makes you able to better understand the culture and why the Finnish people do certain things. I didn't need to write an exam, writing lecture diaries about every lecture was enough the exam if your quality was of a high standard.

My monthly budget was built up from 300 euros a month from the Erasmus grant and 320 Euros from the Dutch Government, which includes compensation for not having my Dutch student travel card. The prices in the supermarket are a bit more expensive than in Holland but if you cook at home especially in groups you are able to have a good dinner for around the 5 Euros per person. Another opportunity is eating at the university restaurants these are located all over the city where good meals are offered for 2.60. Also the university gives you the opportunity to use the university sports facilities for 50 euros for a three month period, which was a good investment according to the people who bought it. What I certainly recommended is buying a student travel card at arrival in Helsinki. I payed around 80 Euros for unlimited public transportation for almost my whole stay in Helsinki. There is a good working tram and metro system present, so you will use public transportation quite often. This was eventually way cheaper than buying single tickets.

As you probably know in the Scandinavian countries, so also in Finland, there are high taxes on alcoholic drinks. This results in the fact that you pay 5 or 6 Euros a beer in a club or pub. If you want some cheaper drinks you should look for student parties, which also will be organized by the exchange student association. What a lot of people also do is to buy drinks in Tallinn, Estonia. You are able to bring the drinks back on the ship. You can easily combine this with sightseeing in the city of Tallinn, which is a must. I spent around 60 Euros weekly on groceries doing my shopping at Lidl. I was planning on buying a Finnish Telephone but at the end this wasn't necessary because all communication was done by whatsapp and facebook instead of calling. Also I didn't need to buy any

study books because the library provided these. The administration to the library is done with the help of you mentor.

My monthly expenses were approximately build up from:

- Rent: 500
- Food: 240
- Nightlife: 200
- Trips: 100

Now I will recommend some places you must see in Finland, Helsinki and neighbouring countries. First of all, I recommend Stockholm. This can be done for just around 20euros booking the trip online. I visited Stockholm during a student cruise on a party boat organised by the student association, this was one of the best things I did during my stay so if you are able to do this you should. Another "place" to visit in Finland is the fantastic nature, I would suggest to visit some natural parks which are located all over Finland. Something that I recommend strongly is rent a cottage in the nature; just look on the internet there are plenty of choice in different places and price categories. Finland is all about the nature so try to visit some national parks and go for a walk or rent a cottage in the middle of nowhere. The Baltic states are reached quite easy, as mentioned earlier. Tallinn is simply reached with a ferry and some of my friends even took a flight for a short weekend in Riga. I would also advise you to visit Lapland, the northern part of Finland. If you read just a small bit about Finland you probably read about the northern lights. These are best visible in the northern part of Finland. I didn't see them because of foggy weather; plan your trip in advance so you won't miss this experience. In Helsinki, I really liked the island Suomenlinna, both cathedrals and the Ateneum museum. If you like football I would advise to visit some of HJK Helsinki or National football team games, the quality of the games is not that good but it's still a good experience.

So you can conclude that Helsinki and the possible places to visit are really beautiful and interesting, everything at the university is arranged almost into perfection except for the limited availability of economic courses. Life is a bit more expensive than in the Netherlands but if you pay a bit more attention to limit other expenses, you will be fine. I never regretted my decision to go on exchange to Helsinki.

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