

# Exchange Report

Since my Bachelors studies were coming to an end, I decided I wanted to take the opportunity to spend some time abroad. After looking up information on my faculties partner universities for the Erasmus+ programme I ultimately settled on Helsinki as a destination. My decision was greatly influenced by two factors, firstly I knew I could not go south west, since I do not speak any of french, spanish or italian to a level where I felt comfortable needing at least some of it for studying. Secondly I knew I wanted to go somewhere far away and novel. The fact that the University of Helsinki is regarded as a renowned institution came as a welcome extra reinforcing my decision.

I originally planned to spend a whole year in Helsinki, however the COVID-Situation developed rapidly around the time I was due to leave. I was unsure about whether I could stay in Finland long term and the only accomodation I could get was fixed term for the whole year and quite expensive. As I did not want to take the risk of paying for an apartment I wouldn't be able to use I decided to shorten the exchange only going to Finland in Winter. In retrospect, going earlier would have been even better. Nontheless I am still very satisfied with how everything played out in the end.

So finally on January 4th, I boarded the Ferry to Helsinki. I choose to go by ferry because it allowed me to take everything I needed. My apartment was furnished, however the information on the housing company's site claimed that nothing else like cooking equipment will be present. Further I knew that due to COVID all my studies were going to be online. Since I study computer science I am even more dependent on my computer and having a good workflow. With that in mind I decided to just load up a car and take everything I might need. When I left Germany I was not sure if that decision made sense financially but looking back at it now, the expenses for the car like taxes, insurance, parking in the end balanced out with no need to buy anything for the apartment and the money saved on rental cars for day trips and holidays.

When I arrived to Finland after a long 29 hour ferry ride, I did not really have any problems or questions to be asked. The University of Helsinki has great online material for all matters and I knew beforehand what I was getting into. Accomodation was provided as a part of their mobility online process. However one could say still not everything went "according to plan". At the housing companies office, waiting for my key pickup I met the first few of many fellow exchange students. We all were new to the country and talked about our travels and

expectations for our stay in Helsinki. So after getting my key, instead of going to my new home and getting desperately needed sleep, I found myself having lunch in some restaurant with my newly found friends. Only going to my new apartment for the first time in the early evening.

And this first experience is reminiscent of the whole exchange. Every week I met new people from all over Europe and sometimes even all over the world. And every time this happened we did something unexpected and spontaneous to get to know each other and each other's cultures better. And this is also exactly what I expected off of my exchange. The only thing that was a little disappointing is that I never really got to know someone local. I expected at least to somewhat get to know some Finnish people. However I think the online classes and no in university activities made this even harder.

When it comes to the actual studying part in Finland there was a common theme that also most people I talked to agree on. It is quite a lot of work also during the semester, however it is not very hard. Also getting good grades is basically a given, when passing. It probably is harder to pass with a bad grade but still pass than just getting a good grade from the get go. I attended a variety of courses on Cyber Security, Web Development, Quantum Computing, Machine Learning and Natural Language processing. But all of them followed a similar pattern of more practical tasks than one is used to from German university. So a typical day for me looked like getting up at some time to catch a live lecture. After that do some work on the accompanying projects or tasks until the early evening and then meet up with other international students to do something together, be it cooking, watching a movie or going to some interesting place or the nature.

Since daytime in Finland is all over the place you are never really sure what time it is or should be. In the winter there are maybe 3 hours of light outside, so most days I took some of that precious time to get outside, catch some air and sun and get to know Helsinki. However to be fair I really could not see too much since in the first three months of staying in Helsinki I literally only saw the ground on three days. It was covered in snow for the rest of the time. However approaching the summer, all of this turns around and my normal schedule of starting to prepare dinner when it gets dark amounted to me going grocery shopping at 2am on a Sunday morning, to see what I might have for dinner. Don't get me wrong, that was great. Only now that I have lived for 2 months straight without any mentionable sun, I can really appreciate it when it is there. It also made me go outside a lot more.

And so far I have only talked about what I did in Helsinki, but Finland is huge. There are many places we visited, all of which have mainly stunning nature in store like Lapland in Finland's north or the Åland Islands. If you happen to do an exchange to Finland you need to

give them a chance.

The end of such a long chapter in life is always hard. I stayed in Helsinki as long as I could, even some time when university already finished. It was not nice having to say goodbye to all of the great friends I made. I hope most of them were not a good bye for good but rather a see you soon. So in the end, would I choose to do an exchange again? Of course yes, I think it has been one of the best decisions I made so far. I can only recommend everybody doing an exchange if possible!