

Exchange Life Essays

By: Michelle Hu

1) Introduce school & classes that you took (1,000 words)

My experience at Aalto University in Finland was amazing. Aalto is ranked one of the top universities in the world, and for good reason. (Ranking info: <http://www.aalto.fi/en/current/news/2017-06-07-007/>) They really do a lot to help students succeed and have a lot of resources available for students. For example they have:

- Design Factory:
 - <https://designfactory.aalto.fi/>
 - Which if you have ever seen Big Hero 6 the movie, the scene where the students are experimenting and creating different inventions, that is basically what the Design Factory is like. A big playground for creators and inventors with an Electroshop, Printshop, Paintshop, Protobunker, and more. All the tools and equipment are available for Aalto students to use no matter what their major is.
- Fablab:
 - <http://fablab.aalto.fi/>
 - I spent a majority of my time here during my last few months at Aalto because I took an ADD Basics course where I learned how to use a 3D printer. The Aalto Fablab has 3D printers, cutting machines, CNC machines, scanning devices, electronics workstations, computer software for digital fabrication, workshop tools, and more. Plus the people who work at the Fablab are very friendly and helpful and I became good friends with them since I was there all the time.
- A Grid:
 - <http://agrid.fi/>
 - A Grid is a large building on the Otaniemi campus that houses startups, companies, incubators/accelerators, and other resources. It's basically a startup hub and is part of Aalto's startup ecosystem for entrepreneurs which was "rated by MIT among the top five rising stars globally."
- A Grid Impact:
 - <http://impactiglu.org/>
 - This was also my second home while I was working on my Sustainable Entrepreneurship project. It's a cool space for students and startups to work on their business idea and bounce ideas with others, and it is located inside of A Grid on the 3rd floor.
- Startup Sauna:
 - <http://startupsauna.com/>
 - It's a coworking space open to everyone, not just Aalto students. They host events there, pitching competitions, hackathons, and other events related to startups and entrepreneurship. It even has an accelerator program located there. And it is the birthplace of Aaltoes, Startup Lifers, Junction, and Slush.

As for the classes, they were quite enjoyable and useful. The things I learned during my exchange I have plans on actually applying them to my future business plan for my startup company. I took the following courses:

- Business & Society:
 - There was a lot of advertising for this course, and it was said to be one of the best classes for exchange students. All-in-all I don't regret taking this course. However, it wasn't what I was expecting. From the reviews of this course it seemed amazing, and the premise of it did sound good. Considering the professor for the course was the former Prime Minister of Finland and was a VP in Nokia. Those credentials alone made me really interested in this course.

The course itself though, the professor wasn't keen on using PPT slides or any visual notes. He did occasionally write on the board though for lists of what he was talking about. However, I am a more visual person and learn better when I can read words while I'm learning. So it was quite difficult for me to follow along during class. Also he did tend to repeat topics a bit too much. Plus a class with straight on lecture for most of it and not much interaction can get a bit tedious when it is a 3 hour course. Especially when there is not any visual cues too. Though he did have some interesting guest speakers, and most of them did have PPT slides.

The material itself was quite interesting, and the concept of the Bridge Program at Nokia that he helped start was really interesting to me. The topics in class actually gave me some good ideas for my business that I want to start in the future. So I definitely did get something out of the class.

Though one of the parts of the class that I was quite disappointed about was the grading. For the grades 50% of the grade is from the Learning Diaries and 50% is from the Final Exam. And both are graded by the TA and not the professor. I think the grading was quite subjective. For my Learning Diaries the TA was very vague in the description of what she wanted for them. And for me I applied what we learned and wrote how I could use the ideas we learned in class for my future business. And the TA gave me a 2 out of 5 for my Learning Diaries. She wrote that I talked about my future business too much and should have focused on the topics covered. I also wasn't the only one to get a bad grade on my Learning Diaries and Final Exam. In the end I got a 2 out of 5 in the course. And when I asked my friends what they had received, they told me they got similar grades to mine and were quite surprised when they did. Some of my friends went to some of the top schools in Europe where they are used to getting high grades, so to get a 2 was quite jarring for them too. I'm really curious what the class average was because from all the people I asked they received a 2/2.5/3 out of 5 in the course which under normal standards is considered a bad grade. The good thing is I found out that a

1 out of 5 counts as passing for Aalto University. And NCCU goes by Aalto standards for passing, so I still ended up passing the course in the end.

- Sustainable Entrepreneurship:
 - In this course the lectures were just okay, but the projects that we could do were quite interesting. During the class we had to do one major project and we could choose from different options. We could do a research based project, a project where we were consultants for the Helsinki government, or we could choose the Venture tract and come up with our own business idea along with a business pitch. I chose the Venture tract and was paired with a mentor who was the Director of A Grid Impact at Aalto. Because of this course I ironed out my ideas for a business plan, and I have plans to actually start up the company I came up with during this class.
- ADD Basics (3D printing):
 - I think out of all the courses this one was my favorite. The main teacher, Meri Kuikka, was very good and enthusiastic about the subject. I really liked that it was a cross disciplined course with multiple professors from different backgrounds. In the course the students were from different majors such as Engineering, Chemistry, Arts, Business, etc. So it allowed for different viewpoints during group work. And the professors also came from different backgrounds with some with experience in Business, Communication, or 3D printing. I also liked how Meri catered the course to the students, and in the first class she passed out sticky notes for students to write down what they would like to learn in the course. And then she acted accordingly and made parts of the following classes related to what the students wrote down on the sticky notes. Plus it was really cool that I learned how to use a 3D printer and the technology that goes with it. It was a fun experience, and I truly enjoyed my time during this course.

2) Experience with Finnish people/cultural exchange (1,000 words)

Finnish Small Talk

Some interesting things I learned about Finnish people during my exchange is that they don't really do small talk that often. And when they do, they don't quite know what the boundaries are for small talk. For example in the states for small talk we would talk about surface level topics with strangers such as the weather or sports or something mild. However since they don't do small talk sometimes they aren't very good at it.

Finnish English Ability

Also in general Finnish people are quite reserved, though the young generation not so much. The young generation is definitely more talkative and not as much reserved. And one of the awesome things is that most people's English ability in Finland is quite good, especially amongst the younger generation. Part of the reason for that is because they don't normally dub movies and TV shows, so the media they consume is in the normal language just with subtitles. Since a lot of media is from the US they are exposed to English a lot.

Finnish Weather

Finnish weather takes some time to get used to. It was quite cold in the winter, to the point where when it was 2 degrees Celsius outside I would think to myself, "Oh it's "warm" today." And in the summer it can get quite warm especially since most houses don't have AC. Because normally high heat summer days only last for a few days, but maybe because of global warming the heat has been lasting longer, and Finnish homes are not prepared for that usually.

The other thing that took awhile to get used to was the sunlight. When I first arrived in Helsinki at the end of December the sun set at 3PM. Which it was weird getting used to that. It felt like I should be eating dinner and going to bed at 4PM. Then when I left Helsinki around the beginning of June the sun set at 11PM which was also weird because the days lasted so long. Also just in general sometimes it was rare to see sunlight in the winter and it could get a bit depressing.

Finnish Saunas

Finnish saunas are a mainstay of the culture. For every two people there is one sauna, that is how many saunas there are in Finland. Finnish people really love their saunas. They sometimes even conduct business deals in saunas or at the very least have important conversations there sometimes. While I was in Finland I got the true Finnish experience by going to a sauna at the Allas Seapool and then jumping into their ice cold 4 degrees Celsius pool while it was 1 degree Celsius outside. There might

have been a lot of screaming involved, but it was a fun experience and one I will definitely always remember.

Finnish Language

The Finnish language is extremely difficult to learn, and the grammar rules are insane. I made my attempts at learning Finnish in the beginning, but I gave up quite quickly. So far the few words of Finnish I have retained are kiitos which means thank you, moi which means hello, and moi moi which means goodbye. My friends had a bit better luck learning more words in Finnish especially since they took classes for it during their exchange.

Finland's Vappu

Vappu is celebrated on International Labor Day and it is one of the biggest holidays/festivals in Finland and one of the biggest student celebration. There are parades, picnics, parties, and celebrations all over Finland during this holiday. And it is a tradition for graduates to wear their traditional white caps during this day, no matter how old they are or how long ago they graduated. So on this holiday you see a sea of white hats when you look on the streets. It was a really fun experience, and I even got to join in on the student parade for Aalto.

Finnish Gambling

It was interesting to see that gambling was quite commonplace in Finland. It was one of the things that surprised me. They had multiple casinos in Helsinki. And in many places including the convenience stores, grocery stores, and even some bars there were gambling machines near the front doors. The ironic thing is that the money from the gambling machine goes towards social causes such as helping people with addiction, which includes addiction for gambling (sometimes caused by those gambling machines in the first place).

Finnish Transportation

The public transportation system was quite convenient in Helsinki. They had trains, trams, buses, metro, taxis, and public bicycles(only in the summer). Which made it easy to get around in Helsinki with the student monthly pass.

International students

I had a few Finnish friends, but a majority of my friends were other exchange students from different parts of the world. I had friends from Singapore, France, Germany, Sweden, China, Slovenia, and some other countries. It was really interesting to learn about their different cultures and ways of life. While I was in Finland my roommates and I hosted a few potluck parties where everyone brought a dish from their country to share. So I also got to try the different foods from different cultures. Some of my close friends and roommates even taught me how to cook dishes from their country.

So I now know how to cook some French, German, Finnish, and Japanese dishes thanks to them.

Also the people that I was closest to were my roommates. One was from Germany and the other happened to be from Taiwan. So we would have lots of conversations in our apartment and we would get into random discussions such as the differences amongst our different countries. It was interesting to hear about some of the things from Germany. For example, my German roommate mentioned that she felt the education system in Finland was much better than Germany and that she really liked how the classes were structured in Aalto. However she did mention that the cost of living in Finland was much higher than where she was living in Germany so that was one of the big downsides for her.

3) What you want to tell people to notice/good advice/things they might face (500 words)

Public Transportation

To continue on with the topic of public transportation, one thing that was weird was that you didn't always have to scan your public transportation card (HSL card) for some of the public transport if you had a season card. You don't have to scan your card on trains, trams, or the metro. Instead they will sometimes have people that randomly come by and will ask to see your card to make sure that you paid for the ticket or have a season card. Though for buses you usually still scan the card even if you have a season pass.

Restrooms in Finland

In Finland, next to the toilets there is a bidet shower/spray that looks like this:



(picture from: http://www.wikiwand.com/en/Bidet_shower)

In Taiwan, it might be considered to be used for actual showering or for cleaning the restroom. However, in Finland it is used for a different purpose. It is actually used to clean yourself in the nether regions after you use the restroom, which is similar to the purpose of bidet toilets in Japan. And that also explains why toilet paper in Finland is usually pretty harsh and rough. Because it is not meant to be used like normal toilet paper, but instead used for drying yourself after you have used the bidet shower.

Also in Finnish public restrooms there are sometimes these washroom roller towels like this:



(picture from: <https://www.initial.co.uk/roller-towels/>)

It is meant to be used for drying your hands and it is more economical and environmentally friendly. You just pull the towel down and dry your hands, and then it will automatically roll up with a fresh portion of towel roll for the next user. I really liked this concept, and wish more countries would do something like this, because it is a more environmentally friendly option.

Keys in Finland

They have some interesting keys in Finland. For my HOAS student apartment I had a key similar to this:



(picture from: <http://www2.iloq.com/product/key/>)

The reason why these kinds of keys are so special, is that they are all mechanically identical, but the access rights are digitally programmed into the key. So for this one key I was able to open the front door of my apartment building, the door to my apartment, the door to my room in my apartment, the cabinet in the kitchen that was

for me in the apartment, and the door to the laundry room and sauna. All of that with just one key.

However, sometimes with awesome technology also comes headaches. So when I first got my key and went to my new HOAS apartment it took 30 minutes for me to figure out how to open the front door. The keys can sometimes be weird and not work properly. What I've learned is sometimes you need to put the key in the lock and not move it for a few seconds to allow the lock to recognize the key before you turn it. I had problems opening the front door, and my friend I met during orientation had problems opening her apartment door. It took sometime but we eventually got it to work. So just fair warning these keys sometimes take some getting used to, but they are quite convenient for all that it opens.