



AALTO UNIVERSITY, FINLAND

# EXCHANGE REPORT



SPRING 2022 // CHAN YING XUN

## JANUARY

We landed in Helsinki on 2nd January which was a Sunday. Since it was the Christmas season, everything in downtown Helsinki was decorated for Christmas and looking festive. We stayed in an Airbnb for the night since we could only pick up our keys for student housing on a working day. It took me a while to get used to the January cold as temperatures were sub-zero most of the time.

On the first week, I joined my friend's tutor group for a trip to Suomenlinna, a sea fortress in Helsinki. The wind was extremely strong when we were there but the view was stunning especially during sunset. Later in the week, I went ice skating at an outdoor rink in Tapiola and visited LUX Helsinki, an annual light art festival happening across the city.

Period III classes started the following week. As lectures were still online due to the pandemic, we mostly stayed and cooked at home. Nonetheless, we still managed to visit some attractions in Helsinki such as Cafe Regatta, Oodi Library, Design Museum and Helsinki Art Museum. We also had a reunion dinner on Chinese New Year's Eve and celebrated among the exchange students.



## FEBRUARY

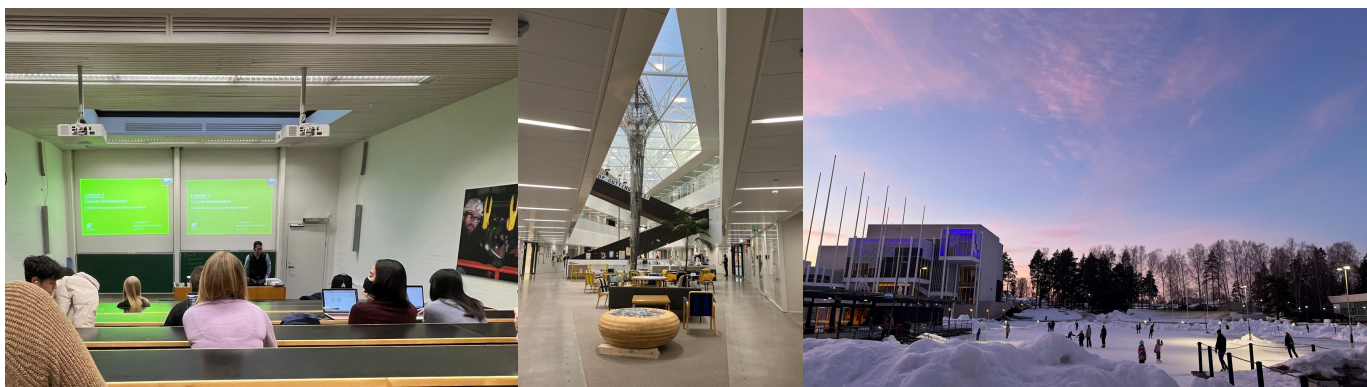
First travel of the month was to Lapland - we flew from Helsinki to Rovaniemi, and rented a car to travel to Levi and Inari. The weather was heavier in the North with much more snow and temperature that can get down to  $-21^{\circ}\text{C}$ . Although the Northern Lights did not appear during the 5 days when we were there, we were fortunate to have spotted one right in Helsinki the week after.

After finishing my Period III exams, I went to Turku, the oldest city of Finland. We spent three days there visiting their market hall, castle, and trying cross-country skiing. Later in the month, I joined this traditional student event in Finland called Sitsit to experience the Finnish student culture. It is basically a seated dinner with some performances and a lot of guided singing in between. I recommend joining if you have the chance to since the atmosphere was fun and you get to meet a lot of other exchange students.



## MARCH

March was when the road turned slippery with the snow starting to melt. The new period of classes started and was finally switched to in-person mode. This month we decided to hop on a 4-day trip to Estonia and Latvia. The ferry crossing between Tallinn and Helsinki was pretty straight-forward so almost every exchange student here would travel to the Baltic countries at least once. I also went ice skating for the last time before the rink closed in late March when the ice started to melt.



## APRIL

During the first week of April, I travelled to Norway which turned out to be my best trip because of the scenic view! In mid-April, I finished my only exam on campus, after which I spent my Easter holidays in Belgium. I also went to sauna for the first time this month. Since it is a major part of Finnish culture and practically every Finn enjoys it, it is easy to find a sauna place. Most HOAS apartments (where most exchange students stay) have it and you can easily reserve a slot from their website.



## MAY

This was the month we realized there wasn't much time until we left so we tried to explore as many places in Finland as we could. After spending first half of the month in Italy and Sweden, we returned to Helsinki to a lush green landscape - which means the real Spring has begun! This was also when the cherry blossoms started to flower at the Roihuvuori Cherry Park. The blossoming period lasted only one week so you would see many people gathering to picnic at the lawn while enjoying the the pink spectacle while it lasted. Later in the month, I watched an ice hockey game for the IIHF World Championship, which so happened to be held in Finland this year. Finland ended up winning the championship and we were so glad that it happened while we were on exchange here.



## JUNE

I went on my last trip to Copenhagen and visited several places in Finland before leaving on the 14th. Overall, the past six months have brought many more experiences than I expected. Hope to revisit someday soon.



## **VISA PROCEDURES**

If you are not an EU/EEA citizen and will stay in Finland for more than 90 days, you must apply for a residence permit. The exchange coordinator from Aalto will send the instructions for application together with your admission letter. It is recommended to start applying once you receive your admission letter.

For the permit application, the following documents are required: -

- a valid passport
- a letter of admission
- a clarification on income (can be your bank statement, make sure it indicates you as the account owner)
- a clarification on tuition fee or scholarship, if applicable
- a certificate of health insurance

After submitting the application online, you will need to authenticate yourself at the Consulate General of Finland in Hong Kong since the application will only be processed after this step. You can email to schedule an appointment with them beforehand and remember to bring a passport photo during the visit.

## **ORIENTATION ACTIVITIES**

Due to the pandemic, my orientations were held virtually on Zoom. There were two orientations held over two separate days. The first orientation briefed on the practicalities and all practical information for new arrivals while the second session was about Aalto services.

## **INTERNATIONAL SERVICES & ACTIVITIES**

Activities are organized throughout the semester by KY-Sub which is the association for international Aalto business students. Some of their more popular events are Lapland trip, cottage trip, international Sitsit and Wappu. Before your arrival in Finland, your exchange tutor will invite you to join their Telegram/Facebook group and all KY-Sub events will be circulated there.

## **ACCOMMODATIONS**

The university does not itself own any student housing. However, you can apply for accommodation from two providers - HOAS and AYY. I only applied for HOAS since AYY provided only unfurnished apartments. On HOAS application, you can indicate your preferred room and apartment type (single/shared) and input your friend's name so that they can assign you to the same apartment. I lived in Kitarakuja which was half an hour by bus away from Aalto. For a single room in a three-room shared apartment, my rent was approximately 400 euros per month, which included all furnitures, utilities, internet and laundry charges.

## **COURSES REGISTRATION**

Courses registration can be done on Sisu - the exchange coordinator will drop an email on the instructions before the registration period. Spring term is divided into three periods (III - V) so the registration timeline for courses in each period will vary. There is no official add/drop period so if you have registered for a course and decide not to continue, you can withdraw anytime via Sisu. For credit transfer, the course syllabus can be found on both Sisu and MyCourses.

## **TEACHING & ASSESSMENT METHODS**

Assessment methods and workload can vary a lot depending on the course but the most common grading components are assignments, projects, learning diaries and exam; attendance is usually optional. All courses are graded on absolute grading.

## **SPORTS & RECREATION FACILITIES**

UniSport is where you can find practically any sport you would like to play. They offer reasonable prices for students and have several locations around the city including one in Aalto. If you are into adventure sports you can also look out for events organized by Aalto Adventures student club.

## **FINANCE & BANKING**

The currency in Finland is euro. Credit cards / Apple Pay are accepted almost everywhere so I mainly used them for day to day transactions. I did bring some cash which I ended up using in some cash-only shops in other Europe countries. As for HOAS rent payments I mainly used Wise. It is generally difficult for non-EU students to set up local bank accounts because of the strict requirements and long processing time.

## **HEALTH & SAFETY**

Finland felt safe to me as I have not heard of any crime or danger happening to people around me. However, this doesn't mean that it is non-existent so just be careful always.

## **FOOD**

Every student in Finland will be provided with a meal subsidy card which allows you to get student-priced meals from any university restaurants. This will cost around €2.7 to €5.35 per meal depending on your choice of main dish and it usually comes with beverage, bread and salad. There are also some student restaurants (UniCafe) in the city centre so you don't necessarily have to go to campus. Dining out on the other hand will be more expensive (approx. €13 per meal) so I usually opt for one of the student restaurants or cook at home.

## **TRANSPORTATION**

Public transportation in Helsinki is very convenient and is usually on time. It gets you everywhere in Helsinki so I never had to take a cab. All modes of transport (mainly train, metro, bus and tram) are under the same company (HSL) and you can download the HSL app to plan your journey and buy tickets. Helsinki is divided into 4 zones (A, B, C, D). Zone A is the city centre area and Zone B is where Aalto is so you will mostly be travelling within these two zones unless you are assigned an apartment in Zone C. I mostly purchase season tickets which cost €35.90 per month for Zone AB.

## **CLIMATE**

During winter the temperature hovers around 0 (-10°C to 10°C) with January being the coldest month. However, there is indoor heating everywhere so layering is the way to go. During this period the daylight is short and the ground is always covered with a thick layer of snow. The darkness will last until middle of February and from then onwards the weather gets highly unpredictable with occasional snows. May is when the weather gets warmer with longer hours of sunlight and people will start to head outdoors more frequently during this time.

## **COMMUNICATION**

The official languages in Finland are Finnish and Swedish but most Finns speak fluent English so there will be no language barriers. However, the grocery items in stores are mostly labelled in Finnish and Swedish so Google Translate will come in handy.

## **CAUTIONARY MEASURES**

Be careful of the slippery roads when the snow starts to melt - this is going to be around March and April.

## **ITEMS TO BRING**

- Travel adapter
- Ethernet cable / router
- Winter boots
- Down jacket
- Heattechs
- Hand & toe warmers
- Gloves
- Swimsuit
- Cash & credit cards
- Travel backpack

## **USEFUL LINKS & CONTACTS**

- Residence permit application: <https://enterfinland.fi/eServices>
- Sisu: <https://sisu.aalto.fi/>
- MyCourses: <https://mycourses.aalto.fi/>
- HOAS for exchange students: <https://hoas.fi/en/applicants/exchange-students/>