Relazione di fine scambio

Scuola del Design

Istruzioni

Indicare di seguito tutte le informazioni che possano essere utili ad altri studenti che parteciperanno a uno scambio. Preferibilmente in lingua inglese, lunghezza min. 2500 parole + possibili immagini, file di max. dimensione 2 MB in formato PDF. Questo documento sarà pubblicato nel sito web della Scuola.

Informazioni generiche

Anno Accademico di Scambio:	2019/2020	Nome della Sede in scambio:	Aalto University
Cognome e Nome:	Salot Elena	Stato:	Finland
Matricola:	915320	Codice Sede:	SF ESPOO12
Corso di Studio:	Interior and Spatial Design	Tipo di scambio: (Semplice o Doppia Laurea)	(Semplice)
Anno di Corso:	2°	Semestre di Scambio:	1° and 2° semester
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Racconta la tua esperienza di scambio:

I have always had a passion for the wild nature, beautiful landscape and peculiar lights of the Nordic Regions. Therefore, when I learned about the progressed design culture of Finland I felt a strong desire to look for professional and/or academic opportunities. I applied for an exchange at Aalto University and spent a whole academic year there. It has been one of the best choices I could make during these years at Politecnico and I can only recommend it.

Aalto University

If you are reading this report you are probably considering applying for an exchange at Aalto University. Aalto is a relatively young university, born in 2010 due to the merging of Helsinki's schools of Arts, Business and Engineering. Its campus is located in Otaniemi (Espoo), about 20 minutes of public transport from Helsinki city centre. The campus features old historical buildings designed by Alvar Aalto, like the library, and newer ones like Dipoli and Väre, designed by internationally known architecture studios. The latter, Väre is the building of the Art and the Business schools, thus, if you are a designer will be the one where you'll probably spend most of your time. There you'll find both regular and computer classrooms, small bookable rooms to do group work, couches where to relax and even places where to prepare some coffee, tea or heat up your lunch. Every program has an home base, a room with desks, lockers and couches where the students attending the program can meet and stay for studying, or doing group work. It would be like having a room in B2 where students from Interior/fashion/communication/etc… could work and store models. In Väre's "basement" you'll find laboratories where to print, do ceramics, work with wood, 3d print, weave and also a canteen. The building is open 24/7 (at least it used to be before the pandemic) and you'll only need to register your HSL (public transport) card to enter and use the printing machines (A3, A4) available at every floor.

All the main buildings have a canteen where you can have a meal for 2,60 euros. I have heard it has been increased to 3 euros but considering the amount of food you can take (I have seen plates that looked like Giza pyramids) it's a very good deal. Some of my Italian friends didn't like much the canteen food but, as a not picky eater, I found it ok. Some are healthier and less greasy then others but overall I would say that you can eat well and healthy everywhere if you choose your food wisely. If you happen to be in Helsinki around lunch or dinner time (be careful, Finns usually have dinner at 5 or 6 PM thus many places close quite early) you can also go to canteens in the city centre for the same price. My favourite place on campus was Studio Kipsari. It's less crowded than other canteens, has delicious soups and types of bread, and it's somehow "run" by the association of the Arts department "TOKYO". TOKYO organizes several activities, parties, and trips both for regular students and exchange. If you have the chance you should check out their Lapland trip. It's fun and convenient. Also engineers have "associations" and they are called guilds. Guilds are specific for each engineering program (mechanical, energy, etc…) and have many weird and fun traditions related to what they call "Tekkari life". Join a guild, you won't regret it.

The academic year is divided in 5 periods and before each period you need to choose and register for the courses you want to take. Some courses last one period and are usually of few credits or PASS/FAIL, while others, like studio courses, can also last 2 periods and are of around 10 credits. However, for every period is suggested to take no more than 15 credits.

Aalto offers a great variety of courses and as an exchange student you'll be quite free to pick whatever you'll like. My suggestion is to explore well the lists and links provided by Aalto and be brave. Choose something out of you regular studies, something you have always been interested but never had the chance to study and take a language course (maybe Finnish?), it will be fun and culturally enriching. Despite being free to choose anything, if you are part of a program (e.g. Collaborative Industrial Design) it will be easy to enter its courses, but less easy to enter in courses from other programs. Thus, always ask your exchange coordinator from Aalto and the professor in charge of the course if you want to take a course out of your program and not open to everyone. Related to this, make sure to check with the exchange office of Politecnico the programs with which Politecnico have a partnership. I was interested in attending the courses from the Master in Product and Spatial Design but, not having the partnership I couldn't select it. The program from which you'll be able to choose from (if you are a Master student from the design department and things do not change) are three: New Media, Collaborative Industrial Design, Creative Sustainability.

Between these, I chose Creative Sustainability because I have always been interested in sustainability and I thought it would have been an outstanding opportunity to learn more about it in a university context. I really enjoyed the courses and I learned a lot but it was very little related to what I would have done in Politecnico. Nevertheless I am happy of my choice because not only it has been an opportunity to deepen my knowledge regarding design and sustainability and but it also made me meet other sustainably-minded people with different ages, backgrounds and lives. Many, if not all my classmates, already had working experiences in different fields, some were working (not as waiters or babysitters) and studying, others were married with kids. In fact, although I was an exchange student, I was included in the group of first-year Master students of the Creative Sustainability program. This has been very relevant for my experience because it allowed me to somehow live through both the life of a regular student and the one of an Erasmus. Just to clarify, when you are in Erasmus everything goes fast, in 2 weeks you know all the other Erasmus students and you are always going somewhere. Having friends who were regular students made me slow down, discover student association like the Sustainable Business Club and the Test Site, and be more active in campus life.

When the campus closed due to the pandemic the shift form contact to online teaching has been very smooth. All the professors were able to use Zoom/Microsoft teams and myCourses (Aalto's Beep) without any problem. This could probably be due to the fact that the teaching staff is younger than the one we are used to. Professors are not only generally younger, but also less "formal" then the one in Politecnico and thus I have never felt "intimidated" or on a "lower step" when talking to a professor. Even in studio courses professors are less strict, let you very free to make your own choices and design.

I was satisfied with the courses but I was interested in doing an internship and I thus looked for one. I started sending spontaneous application in October, hoping to find something for the spring but I wasn't lucky, or good enough, and I didn't find a place. Nevertheless, some people I know who were doing their degree at Aalto (not exchange) found internships and even jobs. Moreover, Aalto often offers small jobs suitable for students to which anyone can apply.

If you will be interested in developing your thesis while in exchange, Aalto is a good university where to go. Many of my friends from engineering were able to develop their master dissertation in Aalto laboratories and get paid from the university or some partner companies.

Accommodation

I found a home through HOAS in a shared apartment about half an hour from campus and an hour from Helsinki city centre. Yes, it was far, but if you make friends with your flatmates or people in your building travelling is never going to be long and boring. However, if you would prefer staying on campus, you could take a look at the private market or place a request at AYY (the students association). AYY offers are usually closer to campus and cheaper but are unfurnished. However, you can find second hand furniture at the recycling centers or through telegram groups such as "Otaniemi giving away free stuff" and "Otaniemi buy/sell".

Instead, HOAS apartments for exchange students are furnished and often have all the utensils needed for cooking. The rent includes all the expenses (water, electricity, heating, etc…) and the building has a laundry room, a sauna and a parking spot for bikes. In my building, there were many exchange students but also a family and other regular students. I found living at HOAS a convenient option thus my suggestion would be to place a request at HOAS as soon as you are accepted from Aalto (you should get all the info from Aalto). The sooner you place a request the more likely you'll get an offer. Although be careful, placing a request doesn't mean having a home, you'll need to wait for an offer.

Transport

Helsinki and Espoo (the municipality under which Aalto University is located) are very well connected by public transport. The public transport fee is higher than the one in Milano but the service is better. I lived very far away from Helsinki city centre but, despite being a little annoying at the beginning, getting home has never been a problem.

The campus can be reached by metro, bus and in the near future also by tram or train. Moreover, if you like cycling, several are the cycling routes that cross the campus. I personally never enjoyed much cycling but I found very useful having a bike thus I strongly recommend buying one. Finland is mainly flat so there are not many ups and downs that would make cycling less appealing, cycling routes are everywhere and it's unlikely that your bike will get stolen also when unlocked.

Clothing

I didn't get to experience a proper Finnish winter but I'll still try to give you some tips. I arrived in Helsinki at the end of August, when the temperatures were still nice, the sun was shining and I was still able to go around without a sweater. During September the temperatures started dropping and it was a little colder than northern Italy but still quite sunny. Then it started raining. It rained a lot thus I highly recommend bringing boots and a raincoat. Autumn has indeed been grey, humid and every day darker but not very cold. Winters are usually very cold and snowy but this year wasn't the case. The temperatures hardly went to -10°C and we never had more than 10cm of snow. Nevertheless, every winter is different thus bringing some very heavy sweaters, snow gloves and jacket is highly recommended, especially if you plan to go to Lapland. Hopefully, you'll be luckier then me and you'll be able to skate on the frozen sea.

The temperatures are variable but the darkness is a constant. In Winter the sun rises around 9 PM, starts setting around 3 PM and trust me, it's quite depressing. I personally found very helpful going to the gym. Unisport offers several courses, has good facilities and has good prices for students. Check it out if you like going to the gym. If you like climbing bring your shoes. There are some gyms in Helsinki and Espoo and even some places where to go bouldering outdoor.

Since there is not much light you better take some vitamin D. I took it but sometimes I found my self thinking that being in Finland in Winter is basically like being under exams at Polimi. Always in B2/library. Never seeing the sunlight. Anyhoo, taking it is recommended.

Spring was kinda crazy. Every day we had such different weather that it always seemed to be in a different season. Although deciding what to wear hasn't been a problem, we were in a sort of lockdown

so I wore my PJ 24/7. In May many restrictions got lifted and since the beginning of May until the end of June, it has been incredibly hot and sunny. I would thus suggest packing some summer clothes.

Finland and the Finns

Finland is a country with outstanding nature. The coast is studded by thousands of islands, the hinterland is covered by massive forests and numerous lakes. Nature is everywhere, even in the cities. Indeed, if you come from the countryside and you missed nature while in Milano you won't face this issue in Helsinki. Green areas in the city centre look like the parks we have in Italy but, by moving a little bit outside, a park is often a small forest with a few unpaved trails where nature is left doing her thing. Hares welcome you when you get home late in the night, squirrels run on the trees in front of your window and deers cross the path where you are running (at least where I lived).

Finns have high respect for forests and everything that comes from them, timber, paper, mushroom, berries and so on. They also have profound respect for public spaces and infrastructures, they trust their government and they always follow the rules without complaining. Finns are honest and trustworthy people that will unlikely invade your personal space and will not judge you when you will not feel like going out that Friday night, but are also those people with which you will take a sauna naked and get drunk by drinking beer and Koskenkorva. Alcohol is expensive in Finland because they have had quite high levels of alcoholism in the past. Nowadays, some people take the ferry to Tallin only to buy it at a more convenient price.

Finnish is a difficult but intriguing language. I took a small course and I really enjoy it

Overall I am very happy of my experience at Aalto and I am glad I had this opportunity.

I hope you found this report useful and comprehensive but don’t hesitate to contact me if you have any questions.

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