



My Exchange Evaluation

Basic Information

Host University	University of Helsinki
Semester & Year of Exchange	Otago semester 2, Helsinki semester 1
Otago degree(s)	BASc
Major(s)	Neuroscience and Sociology

Academics/ course load

Which papers did you take whilst on exchange?

Course title	Language of instruction	Otago equivalent
Advanced Research Methods: Quantitative methods	English	Arts 100 Level unspecified
Developing Behaviour Change Interventions	English	Arts 300 Level unspecified
Social Psychological Perspectives on Inequalities	English	Arts 300 Level unspecified
Systems and Cognitive Neuroscience	English	Arts 300 Level unspecified
Topical Issues in Social Psychology	English	Arts 300 Level unspecified
Area, Location and Environment: Sustainable Stewardship of Nature and Indigenous Ecological Knowledge	English	Arts 300 Level unspecified

Total Otago credits gained: 54 points 72 points 108 points _____

Any comments about these papers?

Quantitative Methods was online with live zoom lectures. I really enjoyed this one and the teacher was fantastic.

Neuroscience and Sustainable Stewardship were both online self-study courses (i.e. begin and end any time you like, with no live classes). The workload really varied - Neuro had a huge workload and quite dry delivery, whereas Sustainable Stewardship was fun, fairly easy, and they put a lot into making the delivery engaging.

Social Psychological Perspectives was online but with weekly deadlines and more direct support from teachers, although all the content was pre-recorded.

How did the academic experience/ workload/ style of teaching differ from Otago?

It was actually surprisingly hard to enrol on courses as planned. The semester is split into two teaching periods so there are two different enrollment periods, each opening only a few weeks before classes start. Classes filled up quickly and timetable clashes were tricky to navigate so I ended up rewriting my learning agreement a lot (sorry Tony at student development), and did more online courses than planned.

I'd say the workload was a little lighter on average than at Otago which was nice. It varied between papers, eg I'd say the Neuroscience paper took at least 5 times as many study hours as the sustainable stewardship paper, despite being the same format and same number of credits.

We all struggled with the teaching style in Topical Issues. My favourite quote from the head of the paper in our first class was "You don't have to enjoy your thesis, you just have to finish it," which I think summarises the teachers' enthusiasm levels over the whole course. This was a shame being one of the few in-person classes I took.

Behaviour Change Interventions was entirely based around a group project, and our group became really close. I'd definitely recommend future exchange students take courses that seem fairly interactive.

Accommodation

What accommodation did you stay in? What were the pros and cons of your accommodation?

I flatted privately rather than through university accommodation. It definitely made me need to fend for myself a little more and it was a bit harder to meet people, but I lived more like a local which is what I was hoping to experience. I was a bit further from the city centre too, but able to access uni by a single metro line for the same price as the closer suburbs.

Major pros: living by the sea, two saunas in the house, a house cat, making friends with more locals.

Cons: a bit harder to meet other students, although I met plenty through my in-person courses.

Money matters

Please detail your basic costs, e.g. accommodation, flights, visa, food, insurance

My accommodation cost was about \$1000 per month including bills, but the house was nicer than the average Dunedin flat.

Food was a little more expensive than in NZ but comparable. Eating out and takeaways are much more expensive. The university provides amazing \$5 lunches though - I 100% recommend these!

Flights were about \$1800 each way (including the Canberra detour on my way out).

Insurance was approx \$700 through StudentSafe.

The visa was free because NZ and Finland have an agreement. It cost about \$100 to get the physical visa couriered over though, and I can't remember if there was a fee to begin the process as well.

What means did you use to access your finances? What would you recommend? (Credit card, Cash passport, foreign bank account, etc.)

I mainly just used my NZ debit card. It only adds a tiny fee, and it didn't seem worth the extra paperwork to get a Finnish bank account (I'd have big international transfer fees to put money in it anyway).

I lost my card though, and it took a long time to get a replacement sent over, so I'd recommend having a good amount of cash in reserve, or a backup card...

Visas & Insurance

Did you have to apply for a visa? What was the process?

Yes, I needed a student residence visa.

Process: Apply online → gather and upload documents → go to the Finnish embassy in Canberra to verify documents, fingerprints, photo → about 3 week processing time → physical visa is mailed to you (or pick up in Canberra)

You can't enter the country if you have applied for but have not yet received the visa.

They do check your documents at the border too.

I tried really hard to find another way around it but going to Canberra in person is an unavoidable step in the process. If I had known this earlier, I probably would have chosen a different country for my exchange. It added a big expense (flights through Canberra and two nights' accommodation), and a lot of stress. If anything was wrong with my documents at the appointment then I'd have to cancel and rebook international flights in order to sort it. They couldn't guarantee the processing time, and I couldn't afford to take a separate trip to Canberra earlier, so I had to go to the embassy on my way to Europe and hope that the visa could be processed, approved and sent to me before I needed to enter Finland. Fortunately I planned about a month of travel in Europe beforehand and the visa arrived a few days before I planned to enter Finland so I was fine, but for someone aiming to go straight there this would be a critical problem.

Did your host university have a mandatory insurance?

I think they mandate that you have to have insurance, but don't specify a particular company etc so StudentSafe was fine.

Extra-curricular/Social Activities

What organised activities were available to students? What extra-curricular activities would you recommend to future exchange students?

They assign tutors to all first year students (including exchange students) in groups. These tutors help you through orientation week and there are lots of social activities organised both within that group and with all of the groups in a department (eg social sciences). I didn't actually attend many of these but it's a good way to get to know both exchange and local students, if that's your scene.

I got myself a part-time kitchen job and really enjoyed that as a way of getting to know people. They say it's hard to find work in the city but I actually was hired at the first restaurant I walked into! I think it's difficult and competitive to get a job by submitting your CV in response to an advert, but

walking in and asking in-person cuts past the application process - I think this approach is much more common in NZ than Finland so maybe that gave me an advantage..!

There's a great and very wholesome underground music scene if you can find the right people.

Otherwise, there's loads happening around the city. It can be a little pricey, but the city's big enough to offer basically any hobby you're into.

What was the university/ city like?

The university is really well-equipped. The library is a beautiful space to study, and although my laptop died halfway through the second term I was able to do everything I needed on the library computers. I generally found it easy to get help if I needed it, e.g. about accessing online portals etc. They also seem to really take sustainability and student well being seriously, which was very cool to see, e.g. they offer really tasty and affordable plant based meals all around the city.

I really enjoyed the city. It's big enough to have everything you need and all different kinds of people, but small enough that you don't feel lost and anonymous. Public transport is amazing. I felt a little uneasy in one of the suburbs I needed to walk through and was approached a couple of times at night (nothing ever happened but I would have preferred to have my personal space, walking alone after dark), but otherwise felt very safe.

Any recommendations for things to do, places to visit, places to eat etc.?

Get the ferry over to Tallinn. One of the companies does a day trip deal, and it's so worth it.

Oodi library is amazing! You can rent out musical instruments, use recording studios and equipment, 3D print for free, use sewing machines etc, etc. Definitely worth a visit, even if just to see the architecture.

SompaSauna is the best proper Finnish sauna experience. It's free, just consider chopping some wood etc while you're there. It attracts the best people and it was really fun to find a space where Finns become really chatty and friendly. I was recruited into a band on my first visit..! Just be prepared for extreme temps (one of them was 110C, and they smash through the sea ice so you can still do a cold plunge after...), slightly questionable hygiene, and unapologetic nudity...

Any tips for future students?

People aren't joking when they say the Finns can be quite introverted. Expect it to be a little tougher making connections than it would be in some other countries. I did still make some great local friends though, and found some cool communities which I was sad to leave. It just took a bit more work to reach those than I anticipated.

And be prepared for a lot of paperwork. Everything seems to involve a 6 page, multi-step form with vague instructions.

Overall Experience

Please write one paragraph (or more) about your exchange experience. Please include some photos!

My experience was actually pretty tough. A few other personal things happened while I was away, and it was hard dealing with those in an unfamiliar environment, where it's difficult to make connections and find community, and every decision comes with an insurmountable wall of

bureaucracy. I feel like there are three phases to a trip like this. The first is excitement at being in a new place - the beginning of a big adventure. But that's also tiring, and the next phase is when the excitement wears off a little and lack of familiarity takes its toll. But then the new place becomes familiar, you find your rhythm, you find your community and build some resilience back in. I guess the other challenges that came up while I was away meant that the middle phase was the longest for me, and I was only beginning to find my feet and really enjoy myself when it was nearly time to leave. I still learned a lot, grew from the experience, and made some amazing connections, but I'd be lying if I said it wasn't really hard.

Having said that, I'm really proud of the way I handled it and I feel like I had some amazing experiences while I was away! It's a beautiful corner of the world and it was a huge privilege to have the chance to explore it. I feel I understand what it is to live in that country, I have some sense of Finnish culture, I learned about the social and political context, I met some amazing individuals and became part of some beautiful communities.

