



## EXCHANGE REPORT

Name

Year and term for exchange

Qiwei Sun

2021 Fall

Exchange university

Aalto University

Degree programme

Sustainable Urban Planning and Design

## Otaniemi, a Winter of Gain and Growth

### Before departure

Aalto University is located in Espoo, a city attached to Helsinki, the capital of Finland. It is a prestigious comprehensive university and is well known for its Faculty of Art, Design and Architecture. It was not my initial destination, but due to the epidemic, the exchange program outside Europe was almost cancelled, and I finally chose Aalto University, which gave me a lot of surprises and a wonderful exchange program. I am very glad that I chose this place.

Before you go, you need to choose courses that interests you and fits your field of study to make a study plan according to the course descriptions on the university's website. Aalto's course descriptions are relatively complete, up-to-date, and match the actual teaching situation.

Finland and Sweden are both members of the European Union and do not require a visa, but if your nationality is from a country outside the EU you will need to apply for a Study Notification, which is available on the website of the Finnish Immigration Service, and the international coordinator will give you very thorough instructions before you leave.



Aalto campus

### Upon arrival

I arrived at the start of the course, but the housing contract actually started a month before, so you can choose to arrive earlier, like in August. There were a lot of orientation activities in the week before the start of the course, but I didn't participate in many of them because I arrived late. The student union AYY organizes a lot of pre-start activities, such as tours of the campus or some of the famous places in Helsinki. There are also free language courses available before the start of the academic year, including options in Finnish and English, but you need to apply for them separately in advance, I didn't apply so I'm not sure about the details. Each new student receives some small gifts from Aalto University, also a student transportation card for the exchange period and a meal card for the school cafeteria.

Helsinki is easy to get to from Stockholm, my advice is to take the ferry, it's a great experience and if you have friends travelling with you and staying in a cabin then the fares are very good.

## Financials

I received a scholarship from Erasmus+, which helped me a lot. For different countries it has different criteria and the amount is calculated according to the number of days you study. You will receive 70% of the money before the exchange and the remaining 30% after completing all the exchange process. These funds will probably cover the rent, but you will need to use your own savings for daily living expenses.

In terms of living costs, I think Helsinki is more expensive than Stockholm, for example, in supermarkets, the same goods are always about 20% more expensive. In order to save money, I basically cook my own food and I always pay attention to supermarket discounts. However, the school cafeteria is subsidized at noon on weekdays for 2,7 euros per meal, which is a very good value, and I always eat at the school when I go to classes.

## Accommodation

Information on accommodation applications will be available in about May. Aalto University has two institutions that offer housing, AYY and Hoas. AYY housing is mostly on campus but unfurnished and requires student union dues. I chose to apply for student housing at Hoas, and I applied for a three-bedroom apartment with two other friends of mine. In the middle of June, we received the contract for the apartment, which is about 30 minutes away from the school by bus, not in the center of the city, but with all the amenities nearby. The contract was from August 1st to January 1st of the following year, with no rent in August. The apartment was furnished with basic furniture including bed, table, cabinets, etc. The room was spacious and the monthly rent was about 400 Euros. My advice is that if you can find someone you know to apply with, you will have a good chance of getting a place, if you apply alone you may have a long wait (it is possible that you are not assigned a place until the end of your exchange and you need to rent a room by other methods). I loved the house we lived in, having both communal and private spaces, where I spent four happy months and staying with friends made me feel better in the dark winter.



Our apartment provided by Hoas

## University and studies

Aalto University is a public research university located in Espoo, Finland. It was established in 2010 as a merger of three major Finnish universities: the Helsinki University of Technology, the Helsinki School of Economics and the University of Art and Design Helsinki. The close collaboration between the scientific, business and arts communities is intended to foster multi-disciplinary education and research. There are six schools included the School of Arts, Design and Architecture, Chemical Engineering, Business, Electrical Engineering, Engineering and Science.

Since they are both Nordic schools, there is not much difference between Aalto and KTH in terms of school structure and operations, and there are many similarities, such as both are very focused on sustainable research and development. However, in terms of curriculum and learning experience, I think Aalto is more pioneering, the students are more daring and the curriculum is more up-to-date,

involving the application of many new technologies. For my field of study, urban planning and design, KTH is probably more towards engineering and theoretical exploration, while Aalto is more towards artistic design and expression, which is also evident from the faculty to which it belongs



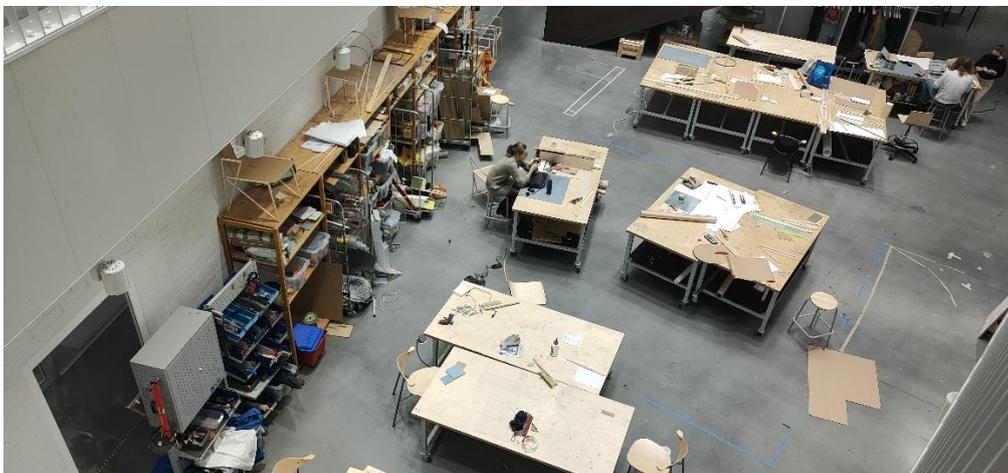
The 3D printing model of my studio

### Courses

Because of my personal interest and consideration of my future career direction, I chose a course content biased towards computer-aided design and application of software tools in the exchange semester. I chose two Lectures and two corresponding Studios, as well as a specialized course in GIS in cooperation with the University of Helsinki.

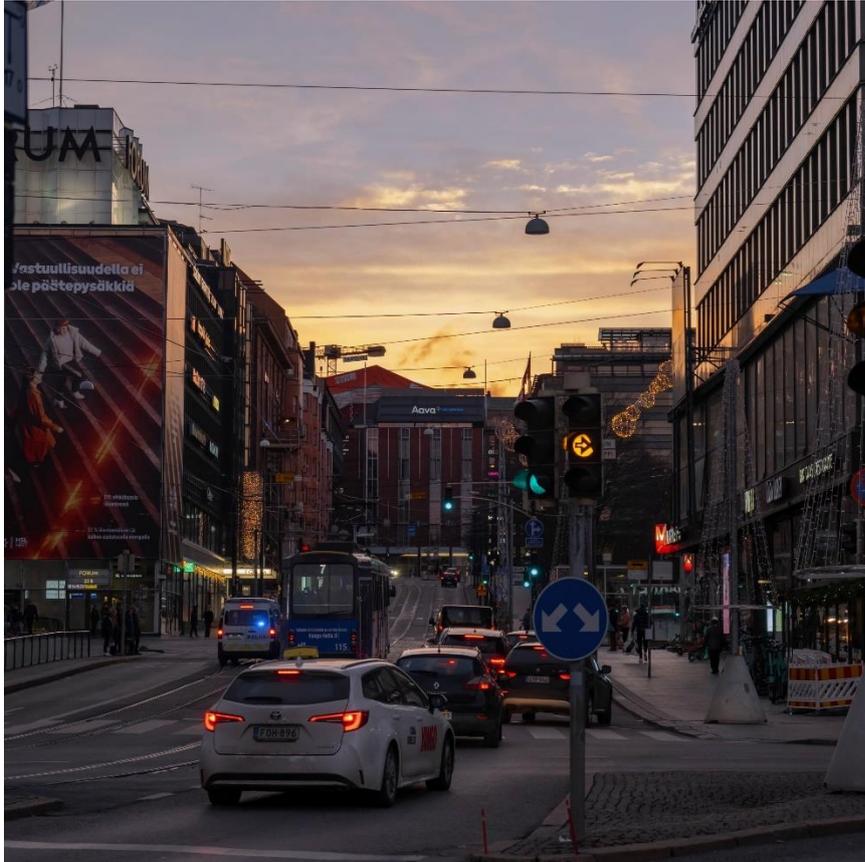
The selection system at Aalto University is flexible, usually on the SISU system, and the institution in charge of the course will sort the students according to certain priorities to select places, but if there are enough places for a certain course, you have the right and freedom to choose interdisciplinary courses, especially some of the art courses are very interesting, for example, some of my classmates chose comics, painting, film production or furniture design.

For urban design and planning students, all Studio courses in architecture are open to us, and there are many themes and types to choose from, which made me feel excited, and I was able to take a parametric design course suit that I had always wanted to study. For the architecture studio, there is an online orientation meeting a week before the start of the semester, where the teachers of the different studios will introduce the content and requirements of their courses in detail.



Working in a studio

## City and country



Helsinki city center

The social climate in Finland is relatively similar to that of Sweden. Finnish people are generally very friendly and helpful, and I have felt a lot of humanity and warmth during my exchange. Helsinki is not a large city, but it has a very well-developed urban infrastructure and its own distinctive cultural features and characteristics that are worth exploring. Finland's nature is also very beautiful.

## Leisure and social activities

Helsinki has many cultural facilities and art galleries to spend your weekends, while Aalto University has a strong art scene and you can often see exhibitions of various faculties in the academic buildings. I really like the Helsinki Library, which has not only the function of lending books, but also a lot of entertainment and office functions, where people can book rooms with different functions to fulfill their needs. Most of the museums in Finland are part of the same system, and it's great for museum lovers to be able to pay for an annual/seasonal pass without having to pay for admission each time.

Also you can travel to Lapland during your vacation, where the nature is very beautiful and there are many snow and ice activities to participate in.

Finns are a bit shy and I'm not a very social person, so I didn't make many friends in Finland. Most of my new friends came from classmates in the courses I was involved in or people from the same country as me.



View in Rovaniemi

### **Sustainability**

Like Sweden, Finland is a country that places a lot of emphasis on sustainability, and there is a lot of exploration and practice in this area at Aalto University. In the courses I have attended, I have been able to experience the professors' exploration and thinking in this area, and I have also been able to see the use of new technologies to support sustainable development in my life. The school's infrastructure also has many sustainability considerations, such as the use of energy. In addition, the school is always open for lectures and seminars to present new research, and invitations are sent to students via email so that everyone can participate. The Students' Union also organises some volunteer activities.

### **Other recommendations and observations**

Although Aalto does not limit the maximum number of credits that can be taken, it is advisable to choose courses of around 30 credits. To ensure the quality of participation in each course and a balance between studies and life, as some of the courses at Aalto are still very difficult and stressful, it is good to have more time get a taste of the local culture.