

Pia Vervoorts – Term Abroad in Helsinki

After a lot of discussions I decided to spend my term abroad in Helsinki. But why have I chosen Finland? A frequently asked question during the last month, combined with stereotypes like “Isn’t it cold and dark there?” or “How do you want to manage it without speaking Finnish, it is such a difficult language.” or “Aren’t Finns reticent people?”. Despite these questions I did not change my opinion; even I was not able to give any answer to all these questions. Maybe, it was my fascination by the Scandinavian countries with their vast landscapes and open spaces, their cold and dark winters and the snow, which outweigh possible problems that might occur.



What would be a report about Finland without a picture of snowy forest and a frozen lake in the winter?!

At the end of August after everything was planned, I started for Finland. The university organized many events and activities for exchange students like tutorial groups, a rally for the new students called “Fuksiaset” and more. We chemistry students had our own tutorial group. Our tutor explained a lot of stuff relating to the university or to Helsinki and went with us to the Welcome Fair, where we got our student card and tickets. Also he showed us

the most beautiful places in Helsinki and where you can get cheap food (it is important because Finland is a very expensive country in comparison to Germany). The week before the lectures started was full of discovering Helsinki the first time, meeting new friends and getting stuff for the apartment. A tradition of the University of Helsinki are the so-called overalls. Every faculty has its own colour, so it is possible to identify the study subject of the person who wears an overall.

The study system in Finland differs from the known German system. They have an autumn term (from September to December) and a spring term (from January to May) and each term is divided in two study periods which are followed by an examination week. In every period other lectures take place and it is possible to choose from more general and basic topics like polymer chemistry or organometallics or smaller topics like chromatography or vacuum technology. I had some problems that the courses I chose did not take place but it was no problem to find other courses. Most of my courses were very small and most of the students were exchange students. It was no problem that I did not speak Finnish because all the lectures were given in English. I took a lot of courses in polymer chemistry and also I decided to do an in-depth practical in polymer chemistry because this field is not really represented at our faculty (RUB). In this practical we did not get a project, they give us the experiments to demonstrate the problems of synthesis and characterisation of polymers because small changes can cause big differences of the products and the polymers have some specialities, which have to be considered for analytical characterisations. Our supervisors taught us a lot about polymers.

Another thing that enriched my stay in Helsinki was my participation in the university orchestra. It took the first rehearsals getting used to not understanding anything that the conductor was saying. However, the conductor announced the most important things in English and sometimes even in German. Also the other musicians helped me, when I had questions. A famous stereotype about the Finns is that they are reticent. Maybe, they are not as

loud as people from other countries but it was no problem to get in contact with them and get to know Helsinki from the “Finish view”.

During my time in Helsinki I gained many positive experiences; learnt much about the Finnish culture and their relaxed manner; visit cities and the Finnish nature; got in contact with students from countries all over the world, not caring about your origin or how good your English is. Experiences, I never want to miss and I have fond memories of to remember.