A fascinating semester in the middle of (k)nowhere

My name is Réka Timár and I study Leadership and Management MSc at Corvinus University of Budapest. This autumn (2018) I was lucky enough to experience a semester abroad in spectacular Finland, thanks to my sending institution, Corvinus, my receiving institution, University of Eastern Finland and especially thanks to my scholarship, called Campus Mundi.

**How did I end up in Kuopio, Finland?**

When people asked me why I had chosen Finland, my answer was pretty simple: I was really eager to experience something culturally different from my home and from all the other European countries, and I really had a goal in my mind to disconnect from big cities and spend one semester in a country, where nature is considered to be the most valuable treasure and has a big impact on everyday life as well. I could not have been more right: Finland is truly the perfect place for fulfilling a dream as mine. As I really wanted to be close to nature, I did not apply for places in Helsinki, but went for a more Finnish option: Kuopio. Kuopio is often called as the capital of the Finnish Lakeland, which really gives you a new meaning of beauty. One cannot be amazed enough by the simple gorgeousness of this area. Some say that it is just about lakes and forests, and they are right, but have you ever seen such a perfect combination of the blue of lakes and the green of eternal forests?

I have always thought that I was more like a city person, but Finland taught me that nature can gift you with new lenses and due to them, your perception of the world completely changes.

In order to get the full picture, I must admit that cities and towns are not really any special in Finland. Kuopio has almost everything, you can arrange there all your stuff and buy whatever you wish (as long as you follow the practical lifestyle of Finnish people), but still it is quite hard to find any pretty thing in the town. However, if you are a person who is into wandering
in the forests, berry-picking, barbecuing, ski-jumping, enjoying spectacular sunsets or attending ice-hockey games, Kuopio is again the best option for you!

What kind of local peculiarities did I have to adapt to?

Prices
The first thing occurring to people in connection with Northern countries might be the expensive life. Yes, Finland is pretty expensive, not only compared to the Hungarian prices, but also to Western-European prices. The food is easily around 2 or 3 times more than in Hungary, and also the services, such as hairdressers and restaurants work with much higher prices. For instance, a package of juice costs around 1,5-2 euros, a piece of cake around 3-5 euros and a main dish starts around 18 euros, a haircut can cost around 20-30 euros. It is an important factor to be aware of. I can highly recommend to visit Prisma, a giant hypermarket where you will find a wide range of products and lower prices. The good news with prices is that once you leave the Northern countries, almost everything will seem to be so cheap.

Transportation
Getting from one point to another is not that cheap in Finland either, unless you have a bike and you are not afraid of cycling even in poor weather conditions, such as rain or snow. However, if you follow a more comfortable lifestyle, a monthly pass is a good option, which costs 37 euros for students. Single student tickets can be purchased for 1,73 euros. In both cases you need to buy a plastic card and arrange your purchase every time with it, which is pretty simple and fast. Of course walking is the best option, but unfortunately Finland is a country with big distances, so it does not always work out that well. Buses are reliable, but you have to wait usually 30 or 60 minutes (mostly in the evening and at the weekend) for the next bus. Connections are not always the best, either, but you can adapt to this situation very easily. (For more information, please visit: https://vilkku.kuopio.fi/en)
Weather
My most important comment on the weather is that do not be afraid of it, it will be fine. I have only experienced the autumn semester, which is actually more pleasant due to the fact that you can experience a bit of summer, autumn and the approaching big Finnish winter as well. I am sure I have experienced the most beautiful autumn in my life. Of course, the average degree is lower than in Hungary, but it is quite easy to get used to. I consider myself as an always cold person, but even for me it caused no problem to wear gloves from the end of September, for example. On the one hand, I was also lucky, as this year (2018) has been super warm in Finland and we had a great autumn, but on the other hand, it was a curse as well, because I could not experience the big winter either due to the warmer average degree.

Accommodation
In Kuopio, almost all (international) students live under the roof of Kuopas apartments. Kuopas is an independent company organising rooms and apartments for students in various areas of Kuopio. I lived in a spacious two-bedroom apartment which had everything, except for a washing machine. All Kuopas apartments have shared washing and drying rooms which work quite effectively. Besides these, you can find a shared sauna in the Kuopas apartments too, I could rent it with friends for 10 euros / month, every Friday. Furthermore, you can attend the free sauna sessions once or twice a week, separately for different genders. You can always find an outer barbecue place as well, where students can hang out. I really liked living in Kuntokuja, Puijonlaakso, which was only 10 minutes far from the university and I had to pay around 310 euros / month. (For more information, please visit https://www.kuopas.fi/en/)
Mentality of Finnish people
Even though people tend to say that Finnish people are hard to have a conversation with, or extremely introverted, I can say that based on my experiences it might be true, but they are beyond helpful and eager to save you in all cases. You can turn easily to anybody if you are looking for something in the supermarket, have some documentation trouble with your university or do not understand the paperwork at the post office – they are always there for you with a smile and usually great spoken English. This is a big plus for Finns.

The place where I learnt so many new things & visited inspiring lectures: University of Eastern Finland

Courses
UEF is an enormous and complex university where you can find anything that interests you. I studied at the business school and followed 5 different MSc courses: International Sales Work, Internationalization of the Firm, Rethinking Leadership and Organisation, Health Entrepreneurship and Finance, Management Control Systems and besides my business related studies, I got to learn some Survival Finnish and passed a serious A1 exam, too. In general, you need to work a lot in groups and solve real case studies for real firms with real problems and challenges, plus you always need to present your ideas and findings in the end. The learning environment is very supportive, the power distance is extremely low between students and teachers, students can easily have a say about the structure of the lessons. In my cases, all lectures lasted for 4 hours with short breaks, but only for 5 or 6 weeks. It is more intense this way, you need to have a focused mindset to finish all the deadlines (there are a lot) with your group or individually. Exams are also liberal, as no matter what, you can write your paper for 4 hours, and the essay questions are usually very broad, letting you know approaching them from lots of directions.

Beyond the practical, student-friendly courses, the university offers quite a lot more!

Canteen
No wonder why the canteens are the favourite places of numerous students. You can get a big portion of main dish (which can be chosen out of 3 main dishes), unlimited salad (5 different types each day) and 4 slices of awesome home-made bread with some butter or hummus. And this only costs 1,92 euros, which is crazy, considering all the other prices. But luckily it is supported by the state and via this method so many students can have delicious and healthy meal for a really low price. All you need to do is register at the Student Union for 60 euros which lets you enjoy the daily dishes and many other discounts through Finland.
Sports
There are so many sport facilities at UEF too, and you can enjoy exercising for a very friendly price again, 17 euros for only ball sports or 30 euros for group sports and ball sports, during the whole semester, unlimited times. Just like in the case of food, it is incredibly good to experience that the system puts a big emphasis on healthy lifestyle.

Travel possibilities
Geographically I find Finland a fantastic place, as I had the chance to travel quite a lot in the area and to visit the beautiful neighbouring countries. Thanks to the organisation of ESN KISA, I could visit breathtaking St. Petersburg without visa and explore beautiful Lapland with a bunch of other international students, where we could try out husky-riding, cross-country skiing, swimming in the Arctic Ocean and meet the real Santa!

It was really nice to enjoy the trips with pre-arranged programs, but from Kuopio it is quite easy to reach other amazing destinations organised by your own. I could visit Tallinn, Stockholm, Helsinki, Porvoo, Olavinlinna and 6 gorgeous national parks which reflect the beauty of Finland very much.

All things considered, I can highly recommend Finland and Kuopio to everyone who is willing to disconnect from the fast-moving daily life of big cities, who would love to experience the amazing Finnish wilderness and get to know the values of people from the North! We can find true beauty in each and every forest and learn to see the world from a whole new perspective – which can be very beneficial in our life when we get back to our home country…
I would like to say a big thank you to my home and receiving university and to the Tempus Közalapítvány, who made it possible with Campus Mundi to seek and find these treasures somewhere far in the North, in the middle of (k)nowhere.

If you have any questions regarding my experience in Kuopio, please do not hesitate to reach out to me via my e-mail address: reka.timar23@gmail.com.

I truly hope that my story will inspire students to be open towards countries of the North, especially Finland!