

Heading to Helsinki



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Sarah Brain, Michelle Bond and **Sarah Kevill** share their experience of visiting the University of Helsinki during International Staff Exchange Week 2015.

THE University of Helsinki is one of the largest universities in Finland, with a student population of approximately 40,000. The university has four campus libraries, all of which have been recently built or renovated. The International Staff Exchange Week (ISEW) has been running for five years and provides an opportunity for university librarians across Europe to spend a week together discussing issues and sharing best practice. Applications opened in January, and those of us fortunate enough to gain a place were notified at the end of February.

The programme for the week was varied and interesting, with sessions on a range of topics at the forefront in academic libraries. This included themes such as learning space and design, social media and marketing, collection development and licensing, and new developments in information literacy. We were also offered the opportunity to give a presentation on an area of our own practice.

Countries represented were France, Spain, Germany, Belgium, Lithuania, Croatia, Portugal, Greece, Austria, UK and Finland. As well as enabling us to understand more about how our respective institutions operate, equally important was the opportunity to share cultural experiences.

Finding trends in common

It was fascinating to discover areas that we all have in common. This included what appears to be a European-wide increase in demand for silent study space and how to balance this need with other types of study space. We also heard that there is often an imbalance in usage between a main university library and smaller departmental libraries, with the latter being underutilised. The University of Erlangen-Nürnberg has created a novel approach to this situation. All available study spaces across a multi-site, multi-city university have been added to a 'Study Rooms Navigator' catalogue, which can be searched according to various criteria. Library users can enter their requirements and the catalogue retrieves records for relevant spaces. The retrieved record includes

contact details, opening hours throughout the year, technical specifications (Wi-Fi, photocopiers, PCs, etc) as well as links to floorplans and to Google Maps to plan a journey.

Another shared issue was that of increasing the visibility of electronic resources and ensuring that students are aware of the database and resources that are relevant to them. The challenge of library renovations on limited budgets was also mentioned several times throughout the week: it was particularly inspiring to hear from the librarian at the University of Zagreb in Croatia talking about how a new library was developed on a limited budget, and the coordination required to make this happen.

Visiting inspirational libraries

One of the best things about the week was the opportunity to visit other libraries. Library visits started on our first day, with a tour of Kaisa House, the main library at the University of Helsinki. The library is stunning, and occupies nine of the 11 floors in the building. It is well-loved and used by students, staff and members of the public. Despite our visit being during the summer vacation, there were plenty of people in the building; a testament perhaps to the fact that the library is open to all, with no barriers to entry.

Kaisa House had many impressive features, from the beautiful spiral staircase, to the balcony with its view over Helsinki, the lovely staff kitchen/dining area, friendly cafe/bookshop and a wide array of different learning spaces. One aspect of the library that was particularly impressive was how quiet it was – for such a big building, with a large atrium, there was a studious air and noise didn't travel.

We visited the libraries at the other Helsinki campuses (and encountered a baffling range of chairs) but it was the Minerva learning space that really stood out. We were introduced to Minerva by Mikko Hakala, who explained some of the technology used in the space and that there is always pedagogical reasoning behind what they do and why they use particular



From left, clockwise: ISEW group; Meilahti campus library; Kaisa House entrance; Viiki campus library.



technologies. We got the chance to try out some of what the learning space had to offer, from a throwable microphone to Flinga, a communal blackboard students can post to using their own devices.

Technology and use of space

Technology and innovative use of spaces were two themes throughout our library visits, and came together when we visited two branches of Helsinki City Libraries – Library 10 and Urban Workshop, a makerspace. Library staff all take the approach that they are not the experts and it is not ‘their’ library; it is a communal resource and sometimes they will discover how to do something collaboratively with a library user. This includes the makerspace, where people can use sewing machines, make signs and badges, and use the 3D printer, all at cost price.

The head of library service explained that when they started out with this collaborative approach, the public wanted library staff to organise various cultural events. However, over time this has changed and users have become empowered to create their own events and use the library spaces as they wish. This extends to the furniture, which is not moved back to its ‘correct’ place at the end of the day but left and then perhaps moved the next day as whoever is using it sees fit.

Experiencing local culture

As well as the opportunity to visit libraries, share and compare experiences of issues in higher education, and network with colleagues from across the continent, the Exchange Week organisers allowed plenty of opportunities to experience local culture. A meal in a very traditional restaurant was arranged, with many delegates enjoying herring, a classic Finnish dish. No visit to Finland would be complete without experiencing a sauna; with an evening at the lovely Villa Vuosanta, we also got a dip in the (very cold) sea and (lovely warm) jacuzzi thrown in. The evening was a great opportunity to relax and get to know each other informally over food, drinks, and the Finnish game *mölkky*.

A free evening in the programme allowed time for us to visit some of the impressive city centre tourist spots and all the delegates were invited to the University of Helsinki’s annual library staff summer party. The final day of the Exchange Week took place on the fortress island of Suomenlinna, which is a World Heritage Site of importance from the Swedish, Russian and Finnish eras of Finland’s history. Many delegates extended their stay over the weekend and took the opportunity to make a trip to Tallinn in Estonia or explore Helsinki’s numerous museums, art galleries, parks and cathedrals. [U]

Helsinki View

Veera Ristaiartano, International Staff Exchange Coordinator at Helsinki University Library said:

Helsinki University Library has organised the international staff exchange week, ISEW Library, every year since the Main Library in Kaisa House was opened in 2012. The new building, its modern service design, alongside the high level of library services on offer in Finland attract constant interest from colleagues abroad.

Since 2014, ISEW Library has been part of University of Helsinki’s official staff exchange programmes. ISEW is dedicated to enhancing Higher Education administrators’ professional development and revising routines via international networking and benchmarking. With Erasmus+ funding, more than a hundred university colleagues from all over Europe have a chance to spend a week in Helsinki getting to know each other and the hosting university.

For Helsinki University Library, ISEW Library provides an excellent opportunity for international networking on home ground. Our staff get an easy – and cost-effective – opportunity to meet international colleagues, share ideas and learn how some of the issues we encounter have been tackled elsewhere.

A successful staff week also serves as an important marketing window; the word spreads far as the participants return to their countries of origin. We encourage all participants to talk about their experience through their domestic professional networking channels.

● **More details at:** www.helsinki.fi/international-staff-exchange/index.html
or email library-isew@helsinki.fi