

LAPPEENRANTA UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY

School of Business and Management

Strategy, Innovation and Sustainability (MSIS)

ERASMUS Exchange Report 2018-2019 Fall semester – Trento, IT

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1 INTRODUCTION

This report accounts for my exchange period in Trento, Italy, in the fall semester of 2018. For some context, this experience is my fifth time living outside of Finland for an extended period of time and the circumstances surrounding this period were perhaps not the most conducive to as positive an exchange experience as could otherwise be expected – thus I advise the reader to treat my account herein with a degree of healthy scepticism.

2 HOUSING, PREP., AND PRACTICAL ISSUES

First, my arrival to Trento was not exactly seamless. If arriving from Lappeenranta, the best route to arrive is probably flying Ryanair to Bergamo and take the FlixBus from Bergamo (which goes straight to Trento). Personally, I flew in to Malpensa/Milano and took a series of trains, which was a rather inefficient option in the end. I had retained accommodation from *Opera Universitaria* - the university's own housing provider/association – which fell a bit short of its service promise. A list of issues encountered during my brief stay at Opera facilities follows:

- The keys provided for the initial flat did not work for the external hall door on the first day of arrival
- After gaining access through a neighbour kindly letting me in the corridor, I discovered the flat in a rather questionable state – mostly it was not properly cleaned, but also the condition of the flat in general was rather insufficient in terms of quality (rather an understatement); these circumstances led me to request a replacement apartment after some time spent in an emergency-hotel
- I had some items stolen from the subsequently assigned dorm room (2nd provided accommodation)
- I was then relocated to a third 'emergency room' at the dorm complex due to reporting an issue with the bathroom door in the previous room, which did not close at all (3rd provided accommodation)

All of the above happened in the course of the first week or so, prior/during orientation days, after which I luckily found a different housing provider and spent the rest of my days there. This change was welcome due to at least having some basic things covered, but the service level was still quite poor. Namely, the laundry machines were out of use for a month and a half, and there were quite a few extraordinarily strict rules of conduct that were enforced by threat of fines. I also know I was not the only one with some issues regarding housing, and in fact numerous students had to switch apartments during their stay and some had trouble finding

housing in the first place. All of this speaks toward a general shortage of housing and a sellers' market mentality for landlords in the city, who have plenty of incoming customers regardless of their behaviour.

For accommodation, I thus recommend arriving some week or two earlier than most, and perhaps look for both online options with a possibility to confirm a contract on arrival (which may be a rarity in itself). In addition, taking advantage of the social media channels seems to be a popular route, albeit many of the notices there appear quite desperate. Arriving on the days suggested by the international mobility office may cause you to be somewhat stranded if looking for a comfortable stay – for particularly sociable youths, the dorm-option at San Bartolomeo may well be worth it as the location has quite a few people and facilities; however the kitchen facilities and so on are a bit limited, so those that enjoy cooking it may not be the best option. In the event of late arrival or on-site flat-hunting, I would further advise going through the university's notice boards in all faculties, which tend to have a selection of housing notices (though in many cases you'll probably have to communicate in Italian if adopting this route).

The international office itself appears to run relatively smooth, though its opening hours are less than convenient (open 10-12am twice a week only). However, I would advise going early to preserve a spot as during popular times the queue may grow a bit unmanageable and the wait-times can become quite long. Regarding specific services for exchange students I'm not so sure as I wasn't all that active in soliciting for assistance once on location; I have no reason to believe they would not render them properly though, but as I have no basis for claiming they would either I cannot really comment more precisely.

Regarding free-time, there are usually some sports activities and ESN organized trips and little parties here and there; regarding the latter, the tickets are usually being sold at funky hours in the evening at their office located in the economics faculty only – here again, the queues tend to be long and level of organization, frankly unimaginably poor at times (it being a volunteer-driven student organization may explain this to some degree). Due to these, I never managed to attend these events, so once again cannot comment on how lively or wonderful they may be in action. For those residing at the dorms of San Bartolomeo, there probably will also be some sports activities organized by students such as playing soccer and so forth.

Regarding the ‘nightlife’ there isn’t that much to say. There are quite a few small bars and such around, but not really a whole lot of vibrant exchange student scene (especially if compared to e.g. Valencia). Trento is therefore probably not the best choice for the big party people, but may well be a downhill skiers paradise due to proximity to the northern mountain ranges. The old town area in the centre is quite nice at first but is seen thoroughly rather quickly. The non-local Italians were also quite convinced the pizza here was not of sufficient quality to be thoroughly called Italian, so those looking exclusively for culinary experiences in their exchange period may well wish to adventure further south.

Regarding getting around town, students meeting certain criteria are eligible for a one-off 50EUR payment (if I remember the amount correctly) that enables free travel on public transport in the region for the duration of stay, which is quite handy.

3 ORIENTATION DAYS AND ACADEMIC CALENDAR

With the initial hick-ups handled; the academic calendar runs from late September to around mid-December, with exam dates ranging from late December (pre-exams) to mid-February. The orientation days were in general somewhat organized – the arrival ‘groups’ are determined by the chosen language course preference in the pre-registration. People opting for intensive Italian courses are received before those choosing the extensive ones – if one wants to do both, it is advisable to choose the INTENSIVE one in the pre-registration as otherwise it may be too late to register for that (I arrived in the ‘wrong’ group per instructions from the mobility office, but managed to negotiate my way through bureaucratic barriers with a bit of luck – this was by no means a certainty).

Regarding holiday dates, I believe there was only one long weekend during the semester at the beginning of November, and some of the dedicated graduation days at faculties were also free.

The orientation materials and information sessions were ok-ish, though a lot of doubts remained throughout. A USB stick with some PDFs regarding the primary procedures was given at the initial info session which explained the majority of the items necessary to get started. However there were some things that weren’t so clear and took some further clarification from either the international office or other students. The exam registrations in

particular were quite confusing, and I understood these practices may also vary per faculty. Hence it is safest to ask others in the faculty for pertinent details.

4 LANGUAGE COURSE

I recommend doing both the intensive and extensive Italian courses for best gains. I admit having some advantage from previous knowledge of Spanish making the intensive course at the basic level a bit simple, yet it was quite quick paced and though the content was basic, the familiarity with the language provided was invaluable at the start for simple survival. Most locals in Trento do not speak English outside of the university, so it may be difficult to get by relying simply on English (at least if you desire to be understood by the general population to some extent). Of course, waving hands and pointing will get you quite far already, but generally the perceived attitudes and perceptions toward non-Italian speakers (even those trying their best) seemed to at times be limited in terms of amicability. There may be some geopolitical history that explains this, as the region appears to suffer from a kind of identity crisis between Austria and Italy; supposedly Trento is the first city on the North-South axis that identifies as properly Italian, which may explain some of the ‘coldness’ toward migratory visitors. Contrasting my experience here to that of e.g. in Valencia, Spain, Trento appears a proverbial freezer in terms of receiving strangers. However, I’m sure there are positive exceptions as well, and this perception is probably enabled and further exacerbated by my own negative experiences at the beginning which I assume produced a kind of internal attitude-artefact for the duration of my stay (i.e. I was probably just as cold towards them, possibly leading to simple reciprocity).

The levels of the language courses vary – for fluent speakers of other romance languages the language centre offers a ‘false beginners’ full A1 course as well as a full A2 continuation course, while for most others these are split to A1a and A1b (likewise the same split for level A2). I personally took the A1a (intensive) and A2a (extensive) courses; skipping levels is enabled by recommendations from the teachers in combination with completing a placement test, or having other proof of acquiring sufficient basis for attending higher level courses.

5 COURSE DESCRIPTIONS

I took all in all three courses at the faculty, each worth 8 ECTS – these were titled **International Entrepreneurship, Intellectual Property Rights and Competition Law, and Information Systems and Knowledge Management**. Each of these courses had their quirks and peculiarities, and the workload in comparison to a standard 6 ECTS course in LUT is a bit difficult to assess due to differences in their structure.

5.1 International Entrepreneurship

The International Entrepreneurship course was perhaps the most practical of the three – the professor had strong grounding in practice and wasn't too theoretical, and participation in the course offers some real-life opportunities for promising projects by providing access to 'next step' contacts, challenges, competitions, investors and so forth through various channels (especially for those staying for longer than a semester). While the course content itself was somewhat tuned to the individual preferences of the lecturer, it was nevertheless quite informative and probably mostly valid and useful as well. The primary assignments here were coming up with an 'investor pitch' about a business/startup concept developed during the course; other assignments included random mainly ad-hoc presentations and group works, idea pitches at the group forming stage, a 'video CV' (which was particularly painful for myself, an antisocialite and a hermit of the first-order), and a final exam on the course contents.

It is difficult to give an exact account of the contents here, but the topics ranged from practical considerations regarding negotiation tactics, ideation process and translating those ideas into plausible business ideas, and various tools for managing and steering such projects to their successful execution.

Would recommend.

5.2 IPR and Competition Law

The IPR and Competition Law course was quite overloaded with information, which was all relevant anyhow, but the amount of readings assigned for each week was a bit intensive for a

standard course. However, there were no assigned presentations nor an explicit paper to be prepared, so the workload was sort of evenly spread throughout the course via the readings – during the course that is. The assignments that were done during the lectures were quite light and quick, but the final exam took a non-trivial preparation with the amount of information handled over the semester. While the content of the course was extremely informative, the flow of the teaching was rather stream-of-consciousness and at times difficult to follow, leading to a significant loss of relevant information for myself.

The topics ranged from trademarks and copyright law to antitrust issues, but mainly the focus was on the ‘data economy’ and all of the competition and IPR issues that are sort of emerging and not yet well accounted for just yet, e.g. copyright in the ‘digital age’ such as the EU-planned ‘meme ban’ article; algorithmic collusion; privacy and personal data usage, and so forth. This made for quite interesting discussions.

Would recommend.

5.3 Information Systems and Knowledge Management

Lastly, the Information systems & knowledge management course was much too theoretical for my personal liking – the examples used in class were rather repetitive and generic (I believe Amazon was the topic throughout most lectures in varying contexts), though exceptions were made as well. This course does teach the THEORY of information systems, but having worked with, to an extent designed, and crafted processes for real-life systems, I at times had a difficult time grasping the practical relevance of the things discussed. The structure of the lectures also appeared quite arbitrary, and the sheer amount of information of questionable relevance in this course made me rather doubtful of the value provided. The primary assignments in this course were two presentations in pairs of two (with the simple initial instruction of ‘do a presentation’ without any further specifications, followed by similarly arbitrary grading with some after-the-fact feedback of what we should have done).

The content was so diverse that it is difficult to establish a clear frame of reference to the main ideas. Some topics include: organizational sciences’ historical perspectives toward technology; oriental vs. western views on knowledge management; different types of information systems;

theory behind crowdsourcing / collective intelligence; failures of information systems; phenomenological vs. objectivist views toward technology; ‘laws’ of modern information age (e.g. Moore’s Law, Gartner hype cycle, network effects, law of disruptive innovation); and a rather interesting guest lecture on machine learning, which to me was the highlight of the course. My overall impression here was that the course was trying to teach way too many varying things without sufficient focus on the core, rendering said core obscure and somewhat inaccessible to the learner. This led to fragmented learning outcomes and a general confusion toward what it was we were actually learning; and I believe this view was somewhat shared by at least some others attending the course. Of course, it may well still be just my own ineptitude and personal preference that led me to this conjecture.

This course I would not recommend to incoming exchange students, though I recognize there may be some value in its contents to those with specific interests in theoretical applications of the organizational aspects of information systems.

6 EXAM PROCEDURES

All the exams themselves were traditional pen and paper exams; one was initially planned to be done on the computer, but upon arrival this turned out to have changed without any apparent reason or any advance-notice. Supervision was rather light and the sessions rather informal as opposed to those at LUT, though a sense of some ‘importance’ was instilled regardless. For the language course exams, the format in the lower levels that I took (A1a and A2a) was a spoken exam and a written exam, in one session in the first one and in two split sessions for the second, slightly more challenging one.

The economics faculty exam registrations were done on a system called “Esse3”, which is the local Moodle/Weboodi hybrid. This system appears quite confusing at first when it comes to exam registrations; in my case the registrations only opened some 4-8 weeks before the exams were held, though initially I understood I’d need to register for them at the beginning of the semester. Some professors hold a so-called “pre-appello” or pre-exam before the registered exam dates, and only turn in the results on the system after the official exam date. Once the exam results are put on the system, the student has to either accept or reject the score given; if accepted, the grade will later be migrated over to the ‘record book’ where final grades are

recorded. A rejection is therefore an indication that a student will re-take the exam later; typically there are two exam dates within the exam period for each course (+ the possible pre-appello if applicable). If neither one of these is passed, the exams can be redone during the next exam period (which isn't ideal for exchange students I admit). However, the exam grades seemed to hover along the higher end, so perhaps this mechanism is mainly for improving grades; I have the impression that failing courses here is not exactly common.

There are further administrative peculiarities regarding the exams that I didn't myself quite understand, so I encourage vigilance and exaggerated curiosity toward these further details when choosing the exam dates (I understand there may be some scenarios in which a newer exam session completely invalidates an older score etc.).

Regarding the exam contents though, my understanding and appreciation of the local system sort of breaks down. Numerous times the professors during lectures noted something along the lines of "I have to see *how much you have studied*" as one of the primary instruments of what the exams are actually testing for, suggesting the goal here is simply to memorize as much factually presented information as possible rather than learn to apply any of it in any reasonable way. This paired with the way information on the lecture slides and reading materials is typically presented (wall-of-text, little to no synthesis or conciseness etc.) really breaks down and destroys a lot of the good the often-valuable raw content would otherwise do. At least for myself, a relatively old man in this context, this type of memorization exercises are unproductive at best, representing a sort of pedagogical backwater the likes of which I hope to never see again. As an example, for the information systems exam preparation the total amount of readings easily exceeded that of all of the courses in my entire previous year at LUT, and I assuredly learned a lot less in comparison here (in practical terms that is; worth noting is that I'm not usually much of a diligent study). Not only that, but the process of studying for the sake of remembering facts also destroyed a good portion of my willingness to actually learn about the subject matter.

The somewhat disappointing observation here is that while the courses do include a significant amount of interesting and valuable information, this information is often packaged and sold in a way so sub-par to northern standards that it is extremely difficult to recommend to anyone of Nordic or Finnish origin. This leads me to conclude there is a certain quantity-over-quality

mentality prevalent here. That being said, I also understood that the University of Trento is somewhat progressive in these matters in comparison to other Italian ones, so perhaps I'm being too harsh and not sufficiently culturally open-minded here; I'll leave this to the reader to evaluate.