

Erasmus+ Staff Mobility – Visit to Jyväskylän yliopiston avoin yliopisto (the Open University of the Jyväskylä University)

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Four members of staff from the FernUniversität in Hagen visited the Open University of Jyväskylä in Finland from 30 January 2023 to 3 February 2023 as part of the Erasmus+ Staff Mobility program.

Purpose of the visit

The staff visit to Jyväskylä fulfilled a number of objectives. At a more general level, it provided an unparalleled opportunity to experience how colleagues at a foreign university work and interact. In addition to this, it offered a chance to see how a university in a different country approaches some of the same, and also some quite unique, problems. At a professional level, my motivation for visiting Jyväskylä was twofold: on the one hand, I was interested in seeing how staff in Finland approach the issue of internationalization in terms of their integration of the English language into daily life (in terms of teaching and marketing). As an English translator at a German university, this was of particular interest. Firstly, in terms of the volume and types of texts that are translated, and secondly in terms of the practical implementation. My second main motivation was to meet and get to know some of the Finnish colleagues that I had already met virtually via the online English Conversation Club that I co-host at the FernUniversität in Hagen with my colleague Daniel Löhlein (who also accompanied me on this visit) and which provides an opportunity for staff at the (distance-learning) universities of Hagen, Jyväskylä, and Barcelona to practice their spoken English.

The University of Jyväskylä

Initially founded as a teacher training college in 1863, the University of Jyväskylä (JYU) was established in 1966. The Open University was set up in 1984 as an independent institute within the university to offer learning opportunities to students that were looking to supplement their existing learning or as a stepping stone to a later university degree. Now the most popular open university in Finland, it provides education for around 16,000 students from all over the country every year. The university as a whole is modern and agile, reacting quickly to changes in society, demographics, and global demand. It offers an impressive range of teaching in various languages for students from all over the world, including a number of different international master's programs.



The Open University of the University of Jyväskylä is located in the modern Ruusuapuisto (Rose Garden) building, completed in 2015.

The program

Our host from the Open University, Dr. Virpi Uotinen, took great care to design an interesting and varied program for the week that not only provided us with general insights into the state of education in Finland but also points of specific interest to us as visitors. Following a very long and arduous journey to central Finland on Sunday, we were glad that Monday's program was not too strenuous and involved meeting some of the key staff at the Open University as well as a walking tour of the campus. Afterwards, we had a chance to finally meet some of our friends from the English Conversation Club in real life in a relaxed café setting. Dr. Uotinen arranged a series of talks and seminars for us over the course of the week which were fascinating, instructive, and entertaining. Starting with a historical overview of higher education in Finland, a general presentation of the Open University, an absorbing talk about the Centre for Multilingual Academic Communication, and presentations on quality work at JYU Open including the EADTU's E-xcellence Label, and also the Digivisio 2030 program.

In addition to these events, we also had the chance to visit the remodeled and modernized university library and organize our own events. The foremost of these was a presentation in which all four visitors presented interested members of JYU with information about the FernUniversität in Hagen. Another interesting and useful encounter was our meeting with the JYU translator, Mr. Taneli Takala, who explained how JYU deals with the large amount of translation that is required at the university, also how the university approaches internal and external communications issues.



The mission of the university library "Lähde" is to be a repository for all the books in Finland. Lähde is the Finnish word for "source" or "spring".

Lessons learned and impressions of Finland

In terms of the large amount of information we received, the contacts we made, and what we learned about the philosophy and everyday running of the university, the visit was a great success. Learning how our colleagues abroad approach the challenges of modern society, the global pandemic, and changes in the political climate, as well as their enlightened approach to language teaching and integration of foreign languages into their education program was a very positive experience. We were also heartened by the large audience and the positive resonance from the Jyväskylä staff members from both the open and the main university who came to see our presentations about the FernUniversität in Hagen. It was also very interesting to hear about the university's approach to internationalization.

At a more informal level, the personal contacts we made with colleagues at JYU were very encouraging. The staff at Jyväskylä were both warm and welcoming and we were made to feel at home from the very outset of our visit. In addition to this, being able to meet our Finnish colleagues in various informal settings outside of their work environment was also a huge highlight, allowing us to experience social encounters and Finnish cuisine firsthand. Neither disappointed.

Another important aspect of the visit was the opportunity it gave all four visitors from the FernUniversität to bond at both a professional and personal level. In this respect, I believe that the experience was invaluable for us all.

As the icing on the cake, our program allowed us enough free time to take in some of the highlights that Jyväskylä has to offer. I, for one, very much enjoyed the Museum of Central Finland (located on campus) and the Craft Museum. On our way home, we also had a chance to enjoy some of the sights of the country's capital, Helsinki. Despite the somewhat wintry weather, this was a highlight I will remember for many years.

Conclusion

All in all, the staff visit was a success on many levels. The new and old contacts, made and renewed in Jyväskylä, will hopefully be maintained for some time to come. In addition to our colleagues from the Conversation Club, we plan to maintain and expand our professional contact with the language professionals at the university, hopefully developing this into a meaningful and fruitful exchange.

Finally, I would like to express my thanks to the friendly and highly competent support that I received from both the FernUniversität in Hagen (in the person of Kerstin Langhein from the International Office) and our host from JYU Open University, Dr. Virpi Uotinen, who invested so much of her own time and energy into making our visit an experience that we will always look back on with much fondness.



On the last day of the staff visit, we exchanged small personal gifts with our hosts (right: Dr. Virpi Uotinen, left: Dr. Jukka Lerkkanen, Director of the Open University)