



European collaboration at the University of Helsinki

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The Erasmus scheme and ISEW Library

The [Erasmus](#) programme (European Region Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students) is a European Union (EU) student exchange programme established in 1987. In recent years it has been expanded to support the development of university staff.

Traditionally, Erasmus programmes take one of two forms: either a single individual organises a visit to an international institution, during which you work and experience life at the other organisation; or an 'exchange week', which involves a group of attendees spending a week learning about and from each other, as well as about the institution you are visiting. The University of Helsinki has run [International Staff Exchange Week](#) for years. We attended the [library strand of ISEW](#), which involved an application process in which you state what you hope to get out of it as well as what you are prepared to contribute. Attendance is funded by the Erasmus budget handled by each participating institution.

Themes for the week

The week was divided into four themes, which were attended by everyone on the programme:

- changing library space and service design
- library enabling research: visibility, open publishing, data management
- licensing and acquisition of digital content
- information literacy - what's new and what works for you?

Each participant was required to participate in at least one theme by presenting a project or idea, or hosting a discussion. This breadth of knowledge meant that everyone was able to contribute, as well as sometimes sit back, absorb and learn something new.

Libraries, glorious libraries!

A big pleasure of this week was the opportunity to visit a number of beautiful and diverse libraries in a short space of time. The first day was a blend of old and modern, with tours around the [National Library of Finland](#) and the stunning [Kaisa House](#), Helsinki University's newest library,

completed in 2012.



Staircase at Kaisa House Library

The other Helsinki University sites visited during the week were the Minerva ELE (Engaging Learning Environment) and the Kumpula and Viikki Campus Libraries, as well as Aalto University's Harald Herlin Learning Environment, and the Töölö Library.



Reading pods at Kumpula Campus Library



Seats at the Harald Herlin Learning Environment, Aalto University

At this latter one we learned about [plans to build a new public library](#) to mark the 100 year anniversary of independence from Russia.



Reading room at the Töölö Public Library

Seeing a range of spaces designed for different users, subject disciplines, and purposes over a period of time confirmed that the Finns have been leading on design for a very long time indeed. All the buildings were tasteful, elegant, and functional. Particularly impressive was the effective zoning of study spaces – which is something that UK libraries seem to struggle with - and the forward-thinking approaches to service design – from virtual reality rooms equipped with the latest technology, to cushioned seats carved into the wall!

Research services

The research theme was a key feature of the week, with so many contributions that the sessions were split over a full afternoon and morning. The team from the University of Helsinki shared their service model and successes with both open access publications and data, as well as their impressive metrics services.

In the UK, the REF has a big impact on activity around research, and the push towards more open access research publications has been led by recent policy changes in the run up to REF 2021. While it is rare across Europe (at least based on the knowledge of other ISEW participants) to have a similar countrywide periodic assessment that holds such an impact on the way universities approach open access, there are similar feelings towards the importance of open access all over, and the emerging policies of publishers and funders are making themselves felt. None of this information comes as a surprise, but it serves to confirm a theme that reoccurred throughout the week – everyone experiences the same core issues, no matter where they are.

Other shared issues and initiatives

Whilst research services were the hot topic of the week, we found many other areas of commonality. Like many UK universities, Helsinki has consolidated a number of smaller subject libraries into cross-disciplinary learning centres. They used customer profiling in order to design services, showing how the modern library is shaped as much around the needs of users as it is around the physical collections. We had also some highly interactive and very enjoyable sessions on information literacy methods, including the opportunity to storyboard a video tutorial, and experience an innovative approach to teaching students to question sources. A talk from Anu Alaterä at the National Library of Finland on the FinELib consortium was instructive; they negotiate licensing agreements on behalf of their users, similarly to Jisc in the UK, but they take it one step further by making recommendations as to whether or not member institutions should take out a subscription.

Social events and networking

ISEW Library is a great opportunity to network with a variety of library and information professional from diverse backgrounds. This year we had delegates from ten EU countries, and one from Canada (the week is also open to those who fund themselves). Social events were organised for three evenings, and for the others we were left to our own devices, which normally meant exploring and finding interesting places to eat! The events were entirely optional, but great fun, and a good opportunity to truly immerse oneself in the local culture - in our case, local cuisine, a brewery, a sauna, and a freezing leap into the Baltic sea!

Conclusion

We felt that the week was intense and intensive but very worthwhile. Delegates were given the opportunity to suggest topics as part of the application process, and the opportunity to contribute a talk or activity was useful. We both felt that it would be an excellent space for new professionals to have the opportunity to present in a relaxed environment, and to gain feedback on current initiatives. We certainly have a great deal in common with our EU colleagues, and we have continued the conversations that we started during the week. We hope very much that the Erasmus programme is safeguarded if and when the UK exits the European Union. To lose it would be a shame indeed. We end with a rallying call to encourage international collaboration – and to consider taking the opportunity to go on such trips while you can!

(Photos courtesy Luisella Zocca)



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