

# Libraries of Helsinki: Experiences of a German Librarian Trainee

*“Experience is not what happens to a man; it is what a man does with what happens to him.”*

Aldous Huxley

As I gathered information on an international placement at the end of 2004, I could not imagine where my plannings would lead me. I was just about to begin my librarian traineeship and to arrange my placements.

## Librarian Traineeship in Germany

In 2001, I graduated from the University of Augsburg, where I studied mathematics, theology and philosophy. After studying I worked as an assistant lecturer at the University of Lucerne (Switzerland) for one year and thereupon as a reader and editor for mathematics at a publishing house in Munich.

In October 2004, I could begin my librarian career as a trainee at [Tübingen University Library](#). The librarian traineeship in Germany lasts two years. It is subdivided into a one-year period in practice at a university, regional or state library and a one-year period at the library school in Munich for studying library and information science ([subjects](#)).

During the first five months the trainee gains detailed insight to the different departments of an academic library by doing the everyday work assignments there. In this way the trainee gets to know the flow of work and the organisation of an academic library. Apart from these workings in the departments the trainee becomes acquainted with his/her specific tasks as a “Fachreferent” (subject librarian) at an academic library: selection of the printed and electronic media in cooperation with the faculty staff, subject indexing, providing subject specific information services for students, teachers and researchers, managing a department of the main library or a branch library, ...

In the second part of the first year the trainee is given an opportunity to do internships in other types of libraries (e. g. municipal libraries, special libraries, state or regional libraries) or institutions for information and documentation services. Within this time I wanted to gain some international experience. So I gathered information on librarianship of different European countries and on the possibility of getting financial support for such a placement abroad. While searching in the web I came across the Finnish national project “Curriculum Plan for Information Literacy: a Joint Virtual University Project of the Finnish University Libraries 2004-2006”. I was very interested in it at first sight because I would like to launch a little project on

information literacy at Tübingen University Library during my traineeship. The first decision was made: I decided to go to Finland! But how? You must know that librarian trainees in Germany do not earn much money...

## Librarian trainee going abroad?

“Bibliothek & Information International” ([Library and Information International](#)) is an German association that promotes international cooperation and coordinates the international know-how-transfer in librarianship. It is composed of representatives of the member associations of “Bibliothek & Information Deutschland (BID)”. So at the end of last year, I applied for a scholarship (a “professional working visit”) to visit Finland and after some months I received the answer to get the financial support.

I contacted **Kaisa Sinikara**, the director of library and information services development at the University of Helsinki, and **Anne Lehto**, the planning officer of the Finnish national project on information literacy. They welcomed me with open arms. Kaisa provided me with basic information on the Finnish librarianship in general and on the development of the Helsinki University libraries in particular. The whole organisation of my schedule for my placement in Helsinki from 23rd May to 10th June was done by Anne Lehto.



Picture of my planning map in my room in the students' residence with all city maps and bus routes to the libraries.

I wanted to get to know the Finnish national project on information literacy and to learn more about the librarians' activities in the field of information

literacy and information services. As the great changes in the university curriculum in accordance with the Bologna process will be completed in Finland by autumn 2005, I wished to hear which role the Finnish academic libraries played in this alteration and how they were actively involved in implementing information literacy elements into the new curriculum.

## **Experiences in Finland**

For the three weeks of my sojourn in Finland I was released from work at Tübingen University Library and could go to Helsinki by plane. I lived in a room at the students' residence let to me by CIMO (Centre for International mobility) in Koskela, a northern district of Helsinki. In order to get in contact with as many information specialists as possible Anne scheduled visits to several libraries in Greater Helsinki.

But before visiting the libraries I was lucky to attend a meeting on information literacy for all Finnish academic librarians at the University of Tampere. I was asked to report briefly what information literacy means in Germany and what methods of teaching are applied at Tübingen University Library.



After this first contact I visited various libraries of the University of Helsinki on the City Campus (e. g. the Undergraduate Library, Social Science Library, Library of Behavioural Sciences), on Viikki Campus (Viikki Science Library) and on Meilahti Campus (National Library of Health Sciences). I also came to see the Helsinki University of Technology Library in Otaniemi, the Aralis Library and Information Centre at the University of Art and Design Helsinki, the Library of Parliament and certainly Helsinki University Library/the National Library of Finland. Discussions with Kaisa and Anne on further

development of information services and its implications on the scope of duties for the libraries in the future enhanced my knowledge of the far-reaching change of working in academic libraries within the next years.

It is really difficult to put across experiences of an international internship one-to-one. Many Finnish librarians asked me after discussing with them: what constitutes the specific characteristic of the Finnish librarianship from your point of view? What can you pick up from your impressions in Finland? I try to answer these questions by highlighting the permanent impressions of my placement in Helsinki with some keywords:

### Openness

All my encounters with Finnish librarians were characterised by great openness: open-minded to other and new people, open to foreign points of view, open to their library users, open to new developments. Improving services for the users is purposed with priority in everyday workings and this innovation seems to be the basis for thinking how to meet the challenge of the future. Such thinking is also reflected in the architecture of the new library buildings with their wide-ranging and transparent glass constructions.



### Viikki Infocentre.

For example, as I visited the Aralis Library and Information Centre, I talked about public and academic libraries in Finland with Eila Rämö. I used the English word “public library” instead of municipal library and Eila told me that I should not use this expression because academic libraries are public as well: open for everyone. And she is absolutely right!

## Network

One of the permanent impressions of my internship in Finland is the well developed cooperation between the Finnish libraries. The national project of information literacy is an example for the librarians' efforts of approaching important developments together. Thus your working will be effective and powerful. In order to deal with the difficulties of increasing prices for databases and electronic journals the unit for National Electronic Library Services of the National Library of Finland is responsible for FinELib and its negotiations for user-rights agreements for electronic resources nationwide. The use of a common library management system and a union catalogue called LINDA is an expression for the network based working as well. Many project groups were established in the last years in Finland, e. g. the group for the introduction of the ICT driving licence at the University of Helsinki.

## Well-founded practice

In your numerous working groups and departments of the University of Helsinki you developed sustainable and prosperous perspectives based on theoretical evaluation. This theoretical knowledge is the fundament of your practice in the libraries. The willingness of drawing conclusions from evaluation results and not shying at realisation, even if it will lead to great and revolutionising changes in the library system, was very impressing: Establishing new campus libraries, merging smaller libraries to bigger units, trying to implement information literacy in the academic careers at universities, ...

## Internationality

You take for granted working together with other countries, such as the Nordic summer school on information literacy organised by NORDINFOLIT, sharing experiences and matching with best practice libraries. Several librarians I was lucky to meet these three weeks studied for a remarkable period of time abroad and know different European countries very well. This makes it possible for you to look beyond the end of your nose.

## Visions for the future

As you are lucky to have many new library buildings at the University of Helsinki you are also well equipped with latest information technology. In the future learning and studying without new media is unthinkable. You were engaged to build up a new learning centre "Aleksandria" for the students directly next to the Undergraduate Library. What could express the new role of the library within the university better than this: library as a new centre for supporting students to enhance their knowledge in cooperation with other units of the university (IT unit, language centre).

But while heading for the future and its new demands you did not forget to take care of your old books, manuscripts and incunables as treasures of the past. The numerous projects at the National Library and its unit for

preservation services underline this statement.

“verkkari” is the name of your librarian e-journal. I was told that it meant some kind of track suit. I think this naming is done very well:

- A track suit must be “**open**” and permeable to air, if you go in for sports and begin to transpire.

- A sportsman needs a **theoretically** based training programme to be in good conditions for her or his **practice**, the competition.

- Working out as a sportsman means to look **ahead**, to be well skilled for shaping the **future**.

- And certainly in the word “verkkari” there is the root “verkko” which means **net**, if I checked it up correctly in a Finnish-German dictionary.

“Experience is not a matter of having actually swum the Hellespont, or danced with the dervishes, or slept in a doss-house. It is a matter of sensibility and intuition, of seeing and hearing the significant things, of paying attention at the right moments, of understanding and coordinating. Experience is not what happens to a man; it is what a man does with what happens to him.” (Aldous Huxley, Texts and Pretexts, Introduction, 1932).

During my staying in Finland I was lucky to gain insight to the Finnish librarianship. These images will work in my head and be effective in my further librarian career.

Thank you very much for spending so much time with me and sharing your experience with me!

Paljon kiitoksia teille ja oikein hyvää jatkoa! (it is supposed to say: Thanks a lot and all the best for the future!)





Liisa Rajamäki read the aphorism to Simon at Libraries Summer Oppening.

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