

LEVERHULME TRUST - STUDY ABROAD STUDENTSHIP - FINAL REPORT 01/2003-04/2005

Andrew Paterson, (07.2005)

Part II

1. Place of tenure

Please give your frank opinion about the institution to which you were attached for your award, including any problems encountered. You may wish to include details of the following: access to and quality of library, computing and other facilities, support and supervision received from the academic staff.

The University of Art and Design (UIAH) is the largest art and design academy in the Nordic region, and an international leader in post-graduate research. The Media Lab of UIAH, where I have been associated as a Doctoral student, contributes strongly to this leading international position in media design, digital cultural heritage and interactive narrative production. One of its key strengths are the multi-disciplinary and highly professional standard of the students, making it an ideal educational environment for collaborative and team-orientated production work.

It is also the most international of all departments of UIAH, with the most foreign students and researchers, and also uniquely where the majority of the courses in English language are situated. As an extremely well resourced department of the school, it has excellent access and support in regards to technology and equipment. In my own experience, the 'Aware' project/platform has in particular benefited immensely from such support, being one of the few non-affiliated project/research groups in the Media Lab which is given full access to continuous operation of 2 servers on the network. This is unusual support, and says much for the support given by the head of department and the technical administrators to successful projects.

Library facilities as a student of UIAH are excellent, and includes Helsinki-wide institution access to other libraries, for example the University of Helsinki network, the Theatre Academy and Fine Arts Academy. In general the whole Finnish educational system is good and flexible, allowing access to study in other

institutions and other courses by making pre-study agreements.

The Media Lab's teaching focus, and conceptual focus has shifted over the years to include less critical media arts and culture studies. This has not suited my interests completely, and so I have had to find such knowledge/practices elsewhere; either within the Helsinki media arts scene (which fortunately is known internationally for its healthy and innovative environment); further afield in the Baltic (particularly RIXC Centre for New Media Culture in Riga); or other locations within the central European network of media culture centres.

Doctoral studies in Finland are based upon independent and flexible study, and in particular art and design research at UIAH is, unlike studio-based PhD programmes in the UK, an academic degree. This means that there is the demand to gain a certain number of academic credits through research activities, before progressing to the work of the doctoral thesis dissertation. For non-Finnish speakers to gain basic research study credits (there are almost no doctoral level courses in English at UIAH), this means that attendance to courses is dependent on what is available, and sometimes basic credits have to be negotiated as solo reading exercises. However, to be fair, there are often academic events across the local institutions in English language, and most lecturers are willing and flexible to negotiate credit accumulation by foreign students and researchers when the issue arises case-by-case.

The doctoral community of new media researchers at the Media Lab has grown over the last 3 years to be one of the largest in the world, with around 30 students. Due to the pace of graduation in the Finnish system (average 6-7 years), there are increasingly others around who share the same issues or research approaches. The doctoral programme has improved in the time I have been associated with the Lab, and gaining support and feedback among one's peers, means also giving and investing one's self wholeheartedly.

However, in parallel to the Finnish national and international situation, there is a lack of professors in-house who can supervise the students. This is particularly an issue in an emerging research field such as new media, but as a flipside, this can

also promote cross-disciplinary solutions to supervision. However, the pragmatic solution of finding supervisors is left to the research students, although they can be multiple and sought in other departments, institutions and indeed other countries.

I have been fortunate in that my quality of support has increased over time, relative to my production and arrangement of knowledge. Admittedly I have been travelling much, and my research structure has often been wayward due to the constantly shifting and emerging field in which I was researching. My Helsinki-based supervisor Lily Diaz-Kommonen, as acting professor of design for systems of representation and digital cultural heritage in the Media Lab, is also a full-time researcher, and organiser of the department's doctoral programme. She is a busy woman, hence, the type of feedback offered is mostly based (appropriately enough) in response to academic texts. Meanwhile my second supervisor, Teri Rueb, who is not based in Finland, but at Rhode Island School of Design -USA, is an internationally-practicing artist in the field of sonic/installation arts and locative media, and also an associate professor of digital media. She gives supervision in the form of regular online text/chat conversations. This complementary combination means that I benefit from different processes of input and feedback as supervision. I would recommend to all, a combination of both local and international supervision for the combined benefit of both perspectives.

2. Country of tenure

Please give some brief details about your general experiences in your country of tenure. If possible please also comment on the following: accommodation, banking arrangements, bureaucracy, arrangements for medical care. Any tips or warnings you can give will be much appreciated by future award holders.

Finland has offered itself as an excellent location for academic study as a foreigner, with flexible and independent study agreements. However, as no-one is pushing one along, this also means that the applicant must have a large and self-replenishing supply of direction, motivation and energy. I have found further support also in the local cultural and contemporary art networks which are small, but a rather dynamic and active scene. Within the student population there are many internationals, and although Helsinki itself is not renowned as a multi-

cultural city in parallel to Western European cities, it is a dynamic demographic, and multicultural activities are promoted well, both at grassroots and official levels.

It is important to find financial support in advance for post-graduate study, as unless the applicant is highly specialised in their field, there are few funding opportunities while in Finland for UK-origin researchers. Unfortunately, as a post-graduate student, there are few student benefits in terms of student accommodation, although health-care can be accessed by joining the student union for a small yearly fee. In terms of accommodation, it is necessary to find a solution in the competitive and relatively expensive private rental sector. The combination of low energy bills, with central heating and water included within rent, means that housing of better standard, and maybe cheaper, than the main cities of the UK, when all costs of living are included. Food in general (and especially ethnic foodstuffs) is more expensive in comparison to other regions of the Euro-zone.

Telecommunications (mobile telephony rather than fixed-line services) and Internet access is very flexible for the end-user, and easily accessible, with Finland being one of the most 'connected' countries in the world. Internet banking is super-modern and efficient, with the possibility to do all banking in English. This is also the case for the availability of most official information online and in personal interface. International telephony services are available, but not as cheap in comparison to western European countries with larger immigrant populations, but Internet telephony is changing this situation rapidly.

Bureaucracy in Finland can be frustrating. It is worth remembering that it is one of the most socialist countries in Europe, and so has a strong welfare system, which can seem cumbersome if one is at the wrong side of it. However it also has an amazingly efficient and sophisticated (almost scarily so) central information system. This means that once one is in the system, has residence status, a social security number etc., everything works super smoothly, but if not, then there can be many delays. A tight immigration policy also means that non-EU citizens encounter an increased and often troublesome bureaucracy.

The seasons of the year (including winter) are more pleasantly distinguished than western Europe, however the northern climate and seasonal pattern does affect social life, and local moods. Transitional seasons such as spring and autumn are most restless, and the longer winter darkness undoubtedly can affect activity and personal mood. Summer, especially June and July, is a time when also things can go really quiet, and people disappear from the cities to the countryside. Getting to know new people, particularly Finns, can be easier or harder according to the time of year, and also a sense of public life accordingly. Passion and appreciation of the Northern and Eastern mind and soul will definitely help.

3. Other matters

Walking on the frozen sea, regular sauna and lakes, piercing blue eyes and large blue skies, midsummer days and mixed berries, clear honesty and negotiation skills, individual strength against the odds (sisu) and a remarkable saturation of nature, technology and connectivity, are other matters worth mentioning.