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# A MASTER'S DEGREE AT THREE UNIVERSITIES

## INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE IN FRANCE

Hello! I'm Heini Sundström. I'm a student in the Advanced Spectroscopy in Chemistry Master's programme, which is a collaborative programme between five European universities.

In addition to the University of Helsinki, there are universities from France, Italy, Germany and Poland.

In practice, the way it works is that students selected for the programme start their first semester together at the University of Lille in France, and the following spring they spread out to different universities of their choice. The idea is that each student will be in at least two different universities during the two years of their Master's studies. I have just finished the autumn semester in Lille and at the end of February I will start the spring semester in Italy at the University of Bologna. My second year of studies will be spent in Krakow, Poland, where I will also do a research internship and write my thesis.

The autumn semester was not easy. It was quite different from what I was used to at the University of Helsinki. There were lectures every day from morning to afternoon, sometimes even from 9am to 8pm. There was very little independent work, as even the calculus exercises were solved together in lectures. Laboratory work was included in almost every course and reports were written in pairs or groups. Each course included 2-3 exams and the standard for passing them was high. Fortunately, I had a good grounding in the chemistry curriculum.





Most of the topics were familiar to me, such as mass spectrometry, optical spectroscopy and NMR, and these topics were covered in depth, both theoretically and practically. We also dived into quantum mechanics, with which I have a vague love-hate relationship. A few new topics came up, such as X-ray diffraction and group theory. These courses clearly required me to do more work. However, I felt that the courses had taken good account of the fact that each of us had different background. We started in the autumn with 24 students from 18 different countries and I am not exaggerating when I say that we are from all over the world. However, it has been easy to make friends because we are all far from home and together we have gone through similar experiences, both in getting used to a new life and in working on our studies. We have become a close-knit group and we will certainly keep in touch, even though we are now spread across different universities. In Lille, we lived in the same dormitory on campus, so there was always help for studying or company for a night out nearby.

Lille was a great city to live in and its location is convenient. Paris and Brussels are only an hour away by train, and a day trip to Luxembourg was possible by bus. Some people have travelled even more than me. I, on the other hand, have enjoyed the ease with which I have been able to travel to Finland. Some of the students, especially those from Asia and South America, are planning to go home for the next time only after graduation in summer 2023. I have a partner and two cats back home in Finland, and it's important for me to see my mother and my best friend from time to time, so of course I have come home every holiday. I've done a work placement in Germany before and it was quite easy to adapt. Compared to that, I was surprised how difficult I found it to adapt to France. Now I realise that Finns and Germans have a similar precise and straightforward way of doing things. Things are different in France, where everything seems to involve extra regulation. For example, the grading of courses was not only based on exams and reports, but also on a "jury day", a day when the teachers of the course

meet to discuss each student's performance and then decide on the final grade. There were other oddities in everyday life and in my studies, but eventually I learned to deal with them with humour rather than frustration. I look forward to seeing what Italy and Poland have to offer me. So far, the programme has been exactly what I expected: interesting courses, new experiences and challenges. It's clear that you don't just go here to travel and spend time with new friends, the focus is on learning chemistry. The studies are by far the greatest asset of this programme. With five different universities to choose from, you can choose exactly what you want to study. This is by no means an easy route to a Master's degree, but it gives you a great foundation for an academic career and is particularly good for international networking. An experience like this is life-changing and I wouldn't trade this opportunity for anything.

**Heini Sundstrom**