

News 7.7.2020 17:21 | updated 7.7.2020 17:22

# Finland's new foreign students face tough choices with pandemic disrupting study plans

Travel restrictions have forced some international students to defer studies, choose distance-learning or give up their spots.

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With their residence permits stuck, international students who secured study spots in Finland are now facing tough choices. Image: Anni Reenpää / Lehtikuva

International students who secured study spots in Finland this autumn face the difficult choice of either cancelling their studies, starting their courses online or deferring studies by an entire year due to the disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Over 700 student residence permits are currently pending in Finland, according to Finnish Immigration Service, Migri. Most Finnish embassies worldwide are closed due to the global pandemic, so students cannot complete the identification process which involves collecting biometric data such as fingerprints and photographs.

**Alejandro Murphy** was set to start school at the University of Helsinki in autumn. Speaking to Yle News from his native Guatemala, he said he's concerned about losing his study spot.

"The nearest Finnish embassy is a two-hour flight away in Mexico City and borders have been closed since April. The Embassy of Finland in Mexico is also not giving out any appointments for student residence permits. This situation has been difficult for me — I am running out of time, I need to secure housing in Finland, buy plane tickets," Murphy said.

The University of Helsinki has accepted approximately 400 students from outside the EU/EEA, who are therefore required to apply for a residence permit, according to Head of Admissions **Sini Saarenheimo**.

"So far, a few students have informed me that they have given up their spots due to the effects of COVID-19. However, not all inform us about their reasons for declining the offered study place," Saarenheimo said.

## Major obstacles for US students

With a cloud of uncertainty hanging over their future plans, international students are also afraid that they may not be able to secure housing and other arrangements in time.

**Laurel Wheeler**, a visually-impaired student from the United States who was accepted into a master's program in Russian Studies at the University of Helsinki, had to give up a student housing offer because of the situation.

The United States is excluded from a [recently published list of countries](#) whose citizens are allowed to travel to the European Union. Students with residence permits can enter Finland, according to the Ministry for Foreign Affairs. However, Wheeler says this means she cannot have a family member accompany her on a tourist visa to help her settle in.

"As a blind person, it is already challenging to secure housing that permits a guide dog at a short notice. Not having anyone there with me for that first week or so to help me figure out the layout of my neighbourhood, shop for home goods and take care of other small practical matters will make this a lot harder."

If she doesn't get her residence permit on time, Wheeler said she is left with no choice but to either settle for distance learning or to defer her studies for a year.

Some like **Steven McGannon**, also from the US, who was accepted into the master's programme in Linguistic Diversity and Digital Humanities at the University of Helsinki, said he may need to shell out extra money to make up for the time lost due to a delayed start to his programme.

"As part of my programme, I need to take a course in my first year which cannot be organised remotely. If I can't do that this year, I may have to pay 6,500 euros for an additional semester, which would obviously be a huge burden," said McGannon who has paid tuition, secured housing, and purchased insurance — but is still waiting to get a residence permit.

Migri said it has resumed limited reception of residence permit applications in a few Finnish missions abroad since mid-June, however processing is still moving quite slowly.

"Just over the last few weeks, with embassies starting to open, we have received around 80 new applications," said **Janne Paananen**, deputy head of the student's residence permit department at Migri.

Migri has now extended the deadline for identification to October 31.

## Online studies offer limited solutions

According to the Study in Finland website, this year, Finnish universities and universities of applied sciences received more than 29,700 applications from international students for autumn 2020 courses, more than 8,000 of whom have been admitted.

They don't all need residence permits, but those that do face a bureaucratic challenge. They are either hoping to get a permit in time to begin their studies or thinking about other options, such as deferral or starting their programmes online.

Aalto University has admitted 1,085 international students into their bachelor's, master's and double degree programmes. Around 813 international students were set to join master's and bachelor's programmes at the Tampere University and the Tampere University of Applied Sciences — a majority of them from non-EU countries.

"Even though some of our programmes offer online options, they are limited. We would like to see all our new international students on campus," said **Joanna Kumpula**, who handles international student recruitment and strategy at Tampere University.

However, even if many of the courses are available online, tuition fees will remain the same, according to the University of Helsinki.

Foreign students from non-EU/EEA countries can shell out from 13,000 to 18,000 euros per academic year.

"However, if a student's studies are extended due to a delayed start, a tuition-fee-waiver will be offered for an extra semester on a case-by-case basis," University of Helsinki's Saarenheimo added.

Most international students are however, not too keen on remote learning as they say it defeats the purpose of studying abroad.

"My plan was to make the most of university life abroad, learn about a new culture, meet new people from my course and enjoy new experiences, something that is not possible with online classes," student Murphy said.

International students can choose to defer their studies by one year — a temporary amendment to the Universities Act allows this provision for students affected by COVID-19-related restrictions on immigration, travel or other processes.

This means that 2020 may see far fewer international students in Finland than in previous years. Most exchange students who were to come to Finland this year have also cancelled their plans.

## Ministry establishes communication channel

The Ministry for Foreign Affairs Finland says it now established a dedicated phone line and email address to help foreign residence permit applicants who are facing difficulties.

"The situation is unexpected and the processes are surely not as polished as they should be at the embassies and consulates," says **Virpi Kankare**, director of visa unit, consular services at the ministry.

Kankare admits it is 'unfortunate' that students have been sent to different contact points, and says the ministry will give further instructions to embassies.

*Applicants who want to discuss their residence permit issues can call the Foreign Ministry at +358 (0)0295 16001 or write to [visas.mfa@formin.fi](mailto:visas.mfa@formin.fi).*

Sources Yle News / Priya Ramachandran D'souza

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