



The Finnish Experience

2011 Group Study Exchange. District 9820 to Finland, District 1410



In April 2011, The Rotary GSE Team headed for Finland.
Five unique insights from the team members.



*Walking in the woods with members of the Rotray Club of Alastaro.
Drinking cold beer is easy when the outside temperature is zero.*

Can Finland Remain Top Dog of the Western Liberal Tradition?

Finland is often credited as one of the most successful nations of the western liberal tradition. Its success is attributed to its quality education system, consistently outperforming all OECD Nations, high liveability, low crime rate and high standard of living.

Its confidence as a nation can be seen in its current expansion of nuclear power and its audacious solution to the permanent disposal of nuclear waste by burying it in its own backyard. However, to understand its success it is necessary to understand its history.

Finland has only been an independent nation since 1917 and like many countries; its independence came through war. Prior to 1917 Finland was an autonomous region of the Russian Empire and with the collapse of the Tsarist regime, Marshall Mannerheim led the country to independence in a civil war with Finnish communists.

The Finns do not think of Russians fondly and antagonism over Karelia saw Finland go to war with the Soviet Union in 1939. Known locally as the Winter War the Finns kept the invading Soviet Union out of Finland and took back areas of Karelia. This led to an anti Soviet alliance with Nazi Germany that ended with her defeat in World War 2.

The redrawing of European boundaries after the war required Finland to cede Karelia back to the Soviet Union.

Prior to 1809 Finland was a province of Sweden and today Swedish is still an official language of the country. Much of the South West of Finland has Swedish speaking communities and institutions, including Universities and schools.

This history has had a significant impact on the psyche of the Finnish people. With only 5.6 million people and almost the entire country north of the 60th parallel, the only thing the Finnish people believe they can rely on is themselves, and that this is their only natural resource. It is no wonder that due to the history and the extremes of geography that Finns see that their very survival rests in the quality of their education system for all children.

Finns value highly the collective social dividend while being a highly competitive market economy. They have considered and rejected policies that threaten to segregate their society. For example an opportunity for the government to consider allowing private schools was widely rejected by left and right wing parties because they all believed that this would lead to greater segregation.

Its education system sees all children study exactly the same curriculum for the first nine years of their schooling and is seen as the basis for this equality of opportunity. The system provides considerable and well targeted resources to ensure that students who are performing below the expected level of their development have the opportunity to overcome these lapses in development, while at the same time little or nothing is done in the schooling system to extend brighter and more capable students. It is common for Finns to consider the social benefit of a desegregated society over improved opportunity for their own children.



*Looking good after hair do's at
"Red Head" in Somero*

One High School Principal attributed Finland's educational success to the fact that teachers were more effective because they had a narrow range of student abilities to deal with in the classroom.

When asked, many teachers and principals attribute Finland's educational success to the fact that all its teachers in primary and secondary education have a masters degree. But when pressed to explain how this improves learning in the classroom, responses vary from teachers having an improved understanding of specialist pedagogies in their subject areas to the improved selection process of teachers for teacher training.

Whatever the reason, it is clear that its educational system is at the core of Finland's success as a western liberal democracy. However, this may be under threat as a result of the recent election of April 17 2011 where a right wing, nationalist party, Basic Finns, increased its vote from 4.1% in the previous election to a phenomenal 19%. This makes Basic Finns a serious political player with the centre right National Coalition Party with 20.4% of the vote and the centre left Social Democratic Party with 19.1% of the vote.

The threat does not come from any change to education policy itself, but the Basic Finns anti immigration stance. While only supported by under one fifth of the electorate, immigration appears to strike a fear in Finns that an immigrant society will not appreciate the very history and geography that has shaped Finnish society and will weaken its self reliance.

In the most recent OECD study of the effectiveness of education systems around the world, Finland still has the most capable fifteen year olds than any other country. But unlike previous results, the evenness of school performance across the country is not as strong as it was. A recent analysis of PISA results in Finland shows school performance dropping off in some areas of the big cities of Finland where migration is strongest. As a member of Europe, Finland is bound to accept refugees from a range of countries in Africa, the Middle East and Asia.

Finns question what this means for their highly successful society and may well be one of the reasons why Basic Finns polled so strongly.

While the immigration threat and recent election results paint one conclusion, it is worth noting that Finns are a practical people and supported by their strong education system have been able to solve complex social problems in the past. Like its approach to nuclear power, it may well be that Finland solves the immigration issue in a way that does not threaten the current social fabric and continues to build a society where segregation continues to be avoided at all costs. Whatever the outcome, Finland will continue to be an interesting nation to watch for many years ahead.

Stephen Daly

Rotary D9820 Team Leader to Finland April 2011

The Differences of Gen Y between Finland and Australia.

Broadly speaking, Generation Y refers to those born from 1976 to 1991.

I have a special interest in this generation as they make up a proportion of my employees in my two salons.

Denise Markovski. *Business Owner*

In Australia, Gen Y has been labelled as lazy, unmotivated, rude and disrespectful. There is a lot of talk as to why this has happened, one popular reason for example focuses on family structure and whether both parents are working, or divorced, or both. A common thread I have found when talking to my clients about their kids is that these parents didn't have much while growing up, so both parents now work harder and longer to give their kids all that they missed out on.

Looking back I am now wondering if giving everything to our children has actually helped them or disadvantaged them?

I started to question this in my first week in Finland. After asking a lot of questions while staying with my host families I started to notice some big differences between our two countries. For starters to my surprise they had no idea what a Gen X or a Gen Y was. In Finland they have had both parents working full time since the 1930's or even earlier, which meant that kids have played a big part in family life. They would get themselves ready in the mornings for school as well as riding or walking to school by themselves, even when the temperature outside was -30 degrees.

Other differences I found in the way Australian parents think differently to Finnish Parents are:

- In Australia, parents feel guilty over divorce, in Finland it is a part of life
- Parents are made to feel guilty for having a career, while in Finland it is normal for kids to start child care from the ages of 6 weeks to 12 months
- In Australia parents are torn between career and family, in Finland a career is encouraged and supported by the community and government
- In Australia it is common for parents to take their kids to school. In Finland, children either walk or ride their bikes to school
- Mums get the kids and their lunches ready in the morning in Australia. In Finland schools provide hot lunches for children
- Mum drives children to and from friends homes in Australia, while in Finland they walk or ride to friends homes
- Mum is still driving children around at age of 16 and more so now they have a social life, whereas in Finland they are allowed to drive a moped car that has a very small motor at the age of 16



Note they still use cut throat razors in Finland

After noticing all these differences I came to the conclusion that parents in Australia are under a lot more pressure than parents in Finland, which was quite noticeable in the faces of both parents and children.

I found the children in Finland to be very respectful of their parents and their teachers. They were polite to strangers and they did what needed to be done, even if they didn't like it. These children have been given responsibility from a very young age and are given consequences for their actions and it seems to be working very well.

Upon my return to my business, I put this "TUFF LOVE" into action with my staff and the turnaround in my team has been nothing more than a miracle. The feedback from my team has been that they feel as though they have direction for their future and that they have got their passion back.

I now hold them responsible for their actions and give them consequences but with a loving heart and give them the guidance to get back on track, and they are LOVING IT!!!!

Denise Markovski
Business Owner

Sisu

Throughout my entire GSE experience, there is one theme that has remained a constant.

This theme is embodied in the single Finnish word 'sisu' to which I referred in my initial letter of intent.

Fiona Whelan. Analyst Dulux

On several occasions since then, both whilst abroad and also upon my return to Australia, I have commented on this word. The word 'sisu' is not one that readily translates into the English language, but it best expresses the collective qualities that flow through the veins of every Finn we met.

Six hundred years of Swedish rule and a hundred years of Russian domination have influenced both the language and the customs of Finland, but the character of the people remains unique.

For the outsider, the difficulty in understanding the Finns becomes apparent when descriptions vary from "honest, yet stubborn" to "slow and very quiet"; however all the Finns we met defied these stereo-typical descriptions. The Finns we met were intelligent and humble, welcoming and extremely inquisitive. Of course, like anywhere in the world, there were regional and individual differences, but certain general characteristics remained.

The Finnish people possess a quality that can only be described by using the word 'sisu', which denotes a combination of courage, stamina and a sense of stubbornness. There is a philosophy that what *must* be done, *will* be done, regardless of what it takes to succeed. There is a special strength of character and a persistent determination to continue and conquer in situations of adversity.

'Sisu' is the ability to determine a course of action and pursue it, regardless of the obstacles along the way.

The greatest testament to this concept was displayed in members of the Rotary Club of Mariehamn, and by the Consumer Behaviour Team at PAF Casinos, which I visited and which resulted in an exceptional vocational visit for me. Observing consumer behaviors' and the reactions triggered by such behaviors', provides new possibilities and opportunities for improving consumer products. The two vocational days at PAF Casinos enlightened me to the myriad of ways of measuring and analysing such information. I consider myself privileged to have been able to liaise with such intelligent and effective managers. Whilst visiting PAF Casinos, I was exposed to different data warehousing tools, Customer Relationship Management software and Customer Survey data. I valued the opportunity to personally witness surveys being emailed out and the analysis of this data as it was returned to the various data warehousing systems.

One of the things that impressed me most during this experience was the way in which PAF Casinos viewed this vocational visit. From the very beginning, my attendance was viewed as an exchange of ideas and as a mutual learning experience for all involved. This particular vocational visit, organised outside of the regular timetable by one of the hosts I had met previously, also gives credit to the flexibility under which the Finnish Rotary Organisation, and in particular the Rotary Club of Mariehamn, is able to operate.

Since visiting Finland, I have reflected on the possibility of whether living in such extreme weather conditions has played a role in developing the intrinsic nature of the Finns. Living in temperatures that drop to well below minus 20 degrees in winter must endow a person with a sense of endurance and strong will power. As visitors, we were fortunate enough to participate in activities requiring endurance and will power, as we scrambled from the sauna, through the snow and then plunged into the icy sea water below. Prior to participation, we were led to believe that the Finns considered this a normal event and so naturally we were keen to partake; however we were kindly informed afterwards that they do in-fact, usually save this 'uniquely Finnish experience' especially for foreigners.

I remain unsure as to whether the Finns were in shock or awe, when we asked them to carve us a 10 metre hole in the sea so we could practice swimming our laps. One thing I *am* assured of is that none of the Finns was as keen as the Australians, to be swimming laps in the frozen lake in sub zero temperatures!



*D1410 GSE chair
Risto Harkonen
with the team at
Naantali on their
first outing*



Experiencing Finland's National obsession. Ice Hockey with Ismo and Pekka from the Rotary Club of Rauma. Pekka was a former GSE team member

My Finnish hosts often suggested that Finns are either born with 'sisu' or they are not; however as an Australian I am choosing to believe that 'sisu' is a behaviour that can be learned. Furthermore, I am choosing to believe that as a direct result of participating in the GSE program, 'sisu' is a skill I have already started to develop.

Initially, my GSE goals were simply to gain the confidence to speak both individually and publicly to people of various backgrounds, ages and educational abilities. I had hoped to be challenged both emotionally and intellectually, to share ideas and experiences and to appreciate and learn from difference.

Participation in this exchange to Finland has allowed me to achieve these goals, but more importantly, it has taught me that participation in an exchange program is also about having the ability to accept both current and emerging situations with dignity and a silent determination. It is about learning to overcome problems as they present themselves and is as much about fostering relationships as it is about personal and professional challenges and fulfillment. This program has certainly allowed me to develop and foster many new relationships and I hope that over time, I am able to live my life with the same determination and passion as the Finns.

The most important personal lesson that I will take away from this program is to find my own sisu. To determine an appropriate course of action and pursue it, regardless of the obstacles that present themselves along the way.

I remain indebted to those members of The Rotary Club of Mt Eliza who nominated and supported me in the initial application process, to Rotary International, to the leader and members of my Exchange Team and especially to my Finnish hosts and their families, to the business contacts, and to the various Rotary Clubs of Finland.

Fiona Whelan. *Analyst Dulux*



Looking beyond the numbers – a Finnish experience

‘Talkoot’ is the Finnish custom of a group of people working together to accomplish a task to benefit the community for no reward apart from perhaps a leisurely sauna when the job is done. It is a concept of united action that is founded upon the collective nature of Finnish society and the Finn’s strong desire for self-sufficiency as a nation. It goes hand in hand with the concept of *sisu*, the Finnish strength of will and determination.

Kristy Stephens. Financial Accountant - Westernport Water

In the business world the Finn’s see themselves as a uniquely functional people, able to find creative solutions to problems and having the skills make these solutions reality. The concepts of ‘talkoot’ and ‘sisu’ are evident in the nation’s focus on providing cutting-edge technology and innovation in the field of sustainability and the large number of companies devoted to developing innovative technologies for recycling and renewable energy. Also driving this commitment to clean technology and innovation is Finland’s obligation to keep its greenhouse gas emissions at the 1990 level under the Kyoto Protocol. Finland has been meeting this target since 2008, and looks set to continue to do so.

Being a small country subject to an extreme climate and geography Finland is not wasteful with its resources and aims to be self –sufficient in essentials such as electricity, heating and

Above: Breakfast, Kristy and Denise with Elina Kiiski and children.

Elina was a past GSE member to Missouri USA

water. In 2010 12% of electricity was imported, mostly from Russia. Currently the main energy sources are nuclear power (25%), coal (16%), hydropower (15%), natural gas (13%), wood and peat. Nuclear power will provide a greater portion of electricity into the future, with a new reactor at Olkiluoto Plant which we visited, due to be commissioned in 2012, and construction of another three reactors currently being assessed. It is hoped that this will eliminate Finland's reliance on other countries for electricity.

District heating is the most common form of heating in Finland, accounting for 50% of the heating market, and is available in almost all towns and population centres. 80% of district heating is generated as part of the electricity production process. Cogeneration (combined heat and power generation) at nuclear plants is being explored, and a proposed project at a nuclear plant near Helsinki shows potential to cut greenhouse gas emissions by 6%.

We found the positive and trustful attitudes of our Finnish hosts (one of whom lived only 7km from the nuclear plant) towards nuclear power amazing and a little disconcerting considering recent events in Japan and our own country's aversion to nuclear power. I came away with my apprehensive attitude, which was formed only on media coverage surrounding events such as Chernobyl and Fukushima, challenged and have committed to educating myself more widely about nuclear power. I put this commitment, and perhaps my sanity considering the temperature, to the test when we swam in the frozen sea at our hosts' summer cottage near the nuclear plant. I haven't grown any extra limbs yet.

On my vocational days I visited a number of companies who use a combination of biowaste (food waste) and sewage sludge to produce biogas, biodiesel, and fertilisers. These visits piqued my interest given that upon superficial enquiry it seems that the infrastructure required for some of these bioenergy projects is relatively cheap. One biogas plant that I visited apparently cost €2million. I will be endeavouring to get more information from

these companies to explore the financial viability of these types of projects and gaining further insight into the Finn's view on environmental sustainability versus profitability.



Visiting Mia (D1410 GSE team) at her book shop with members of the Rotary Club of Laitilla



Farewell cocktail evening. Clare, Denise and Fiona with DGN Berndt Von Veh and Paul Whybrow, and Englishman living in Turku

It was interesting to see the very different method used for treating drinking water in Finland. The geography of Finland, made up of bedrock and glacial formations, lends itself to artificial recharge, which involves infiltrating water from rivers and lakes into groundwater to be purified. Artificial recharge is used in some parts of Australia (mostly South and Western Australia) mostly as a method of water storage rather than water treatment.

I also visited a water research institute that focuses on water quality. The institute is interested in exchanging information with Westernport Water on raw water quality data, as although Finland has an abundance of water, in some areas there are issues with the quality of raw water. The institute also has a water education website aimed at school children that is soon to be translated into English. It is hoped that in conjunction with the Communications Manager, I will be able to visit local schools to exhibit the website and teach about water conservation in the home.

The Group Study Exchange program has given me the opportunity to expand my knowledge of the water industry in areas outside my usual area of expertise. I believe that gaining a wider understanding of water research and alternative technologies will stand me in good stead for furthering my career within the water industry.

On a more personal level I would like to think that the 'sisu' of the Finnish has rubbed off on me. Like others in our team, Finland too, has gotten under my skin and has left me with an insatiable thirst for knowledge and a determination to experience everything I possibly can and challenge myself in every aspect of my life.

I am extremely grateful and appreciative of the opportunity the Rotary Group Study Exchange Program has provided me. It has opened my eyes and broadened my perspective, and I believe the program has enriched me in ways that will become more and more evident as I progress through my life. I was incredibly touched by the warmth and generosity of everyone involved in the GSE program and the amazing effort they made to ensure our experience in Finland was as enriching as possible. I believe the program is a perfect example of 'talkoot'- a group of people connecting and working together in the hope of fostering peace and understanding.

Kristy Stephens. *Financial Accountant - Westernport Water*

Finland has gotten under my skin

**Before I boarded the plane to Turku my knowledge of Finland,
Finnish culture and the Finns themselves was limited.**

**We had all poured over the Lonely Planet guide, worriedly discussed the
ins and outs of sauna etiquette and learnt how to say 'kitos' or 'thankyou'.**

Clare Challenger. *Teacher Frankston High School*

I have come home with what feels like a year's worth of experiences. On just one day we went from a mall to a glass blowing school, to an agricultural research centre, onto a light plane ride and finished up racing each other around a frozen lake, having multiple saunas, our first of many ice dips and a huge meal with our hosts all while being climbed all over by their young children. Needless to say we were frequent back seat nappers and sleeping at night was never an issue!

As an educator, for me the appeal of Finland was immediate. A country which is consistently reported as having the most academically able 15 year olds in the world intrigued me and continues to do so.

Over the course of our month away I was able to visit preschools, primary schools, high schools, vocational schools and both traditional universities and the newer universities of applied sciences.

Although not all the elements of the Finnish education system are exportable, due mainly to their taxation system and the very low levels of immigration, there were many notable differences between our systems which interested me.

Rather than bundling their children off to school soon after they are 5 as we do, the Finns do not start formal education until the age of 7 and have a strong belief in the power of learning through play.

Throughout their schooling much time is spent making sure that all children can achieve at an equal level, with the focus on bringing up those with lower abilities rather than extending the most able.

Due to their position in Europe, and their unique language (which is so different from any other, that Tolkien based his language of the Elves in Lord of the Rings on it) from a young age Finns have a heavy curriculum of foreign languages, namely the compulsory Swedish (which is considered a controversial policy by the growing extreme right 'Basic Finns' political party) and English, but frequently complement these by German, French or Russian. It wasn't unusual for us to meet someone who could converse in five or more languages and although their English



A grade 4 classroom in Pori, where we all delivered a lesson on Australia to the students.

was almost always perfect, they would apologise for their supposed inadequacies. Even the three and five year olds I stayed with were keen to introduce themselves in English and were quick to break any awkward silences in the sauna by showing off how well they could count to ten. The three year old was disappointed I couldn't reciprocate!

While Steve and I toured schools we were constantly in awe of the high quality of student work. In one school we visited the year 7 students were making very professional looking wooden toys, the year 9's sculpting their own furniture and a few of the year 12's were busy putting the finishing touches on their perfectly built hot tubs, complete with a heating system they had also built themselves.

After 9 years of compulsory education, young Finns have the option to continue their academic studies at school in an equivalent of our VCE or can choose to continue to a specific vocational school. This is a major difference I saw in comparison to our educational system as there is very little stigma attached to choosing to study a vocation rather than a traditional academic program. We met several of these students while away and in fact were ferried around by two 18 year olds who were studying logistics and took us on as a special project for extra credit. The Finnish vocational education system is one which I believe Australia should aspire to emulate.

Without a doubt one of the keys to achieving such outstanding results in education lies in the hands of Finnish teachers. Steve and I were very interested to learn about the rigorous process for being accepted into an education degree. For example of the applicants to study Education at Turku University, approximately 1,000 students sit the national teaching test which is based on general academic ability, annually. Of the 1,000 applicants the first 330

are selected for an interview, designed to screen for suitability for teaching. Of the 330, 95 are accepted. This means that the teachers in Finland are the cream of the crop, so to speak. Being a teacher in Finland is a highly desirable occupation and one that is well respected in the community. Sadly in Australia, this is not always the case.

Another stark difference was the absence of private schools or indeed fees at all, even at a tertiary level. When I explained that young Australians rack up considerable debt before even entering the work force people were surprised and queried the logic of higher education being out of the realm of so many. Much to my surprise and interest, Finland is one of the last countries in the world that continues to provide fee free Masters Degrees, taught in English, to foreign students. Coupled with wanting to know more about their outstanding educational results, studying School Leadership in Finland is a very tempting opportunity and one that I am very seriously considering in the near future.

I have no doubts that I will return to Finland soon, if not to study then to visit many of the families I stayed with, with whom I forged friendships I couldn't have imagined could be established in such short times. I never expected to be so sad saying goodbye to people I had only met five days earlier but being so far away from our own homes yet made to feel so welcome was very touching. Since I have been home I have been in contact with several of my hosts, one of whom is threatening to visit very soon.

The opportunity that Rotary Group Study Exchange provided us with was unforgettable and will have a lasting impact on me both professionally and personally.

And for those of you are still wondering, sauna etiquette, for Fins, usually involves no clothes at all. Luckily for us, they made exceptions and let us get away with wearing towels.

Clare Challenger. *Teacher Frankston High School*



Clare and Fiona catch up with Elina (D1410 GSE team) at the District Governor's Gala Ball

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Drinking Stallhagen beer with the brewer, Christian Ekstrom, who is also the finder of the world's oldest champagne, discovered in a ship wreck in the Baltic Sea off the Aland Islands.