



study in
estonia



Alumni Stories

INTERNATIONAL GRADUATES OF
ESTONIAN UNIVERSITIES

TEXTS

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Every year, Estonian universities welcome an increasing number of international students of over 120 nationalities. Over 5,500 foreigners are currently pursuing a degree in Estonia, and the percentage of international students among the entire student body has risen from 5% in 2014 to more than 12% in 2019. According to the 2019 results of global student survey International Student Barometer, 91% of international students said they are happy with their life in Estonian universities. More tellingly, 95% of them cited 'future career impact' as an important factor in choosing their study destination.

It is therefore heartening that about half of all international students decide to settle in Estonia for employment after graduation, notably in the fields of Information and Communication Technologies; Law and Business Administration; Arts and Humanities. Postgraduation employment represents a crucial indicator in the strategy of promoting Estonian higher education abroad. With this in mind, Study in Estonia's Alumni Stories project, created in collaboration with Geenius Meedia from September 2019 to January 2020, recounts 14 fascinating stories of foreign students who came to pursue their higher education in Estonia and settled in the country for employment.

Study in Estonia is a cooperation platform of universities to increase visibility of Estonia as an attractive study destination and promote the possibilities for studying for international students. The activities are coordinated by the Education and Youth Authority in the framework of Dora Pluss activity and financed by the European Regional Development Fund.

We hope you enjoy their stories!

Rahul Puniani: "I Am Rahul and I Am Happy to Be Here!"



INDIA

UNIVERSITY OF TARTU, MSC IN INNOVATION
AND TECHNOLOGY MANAGEMENT

BUSINESS ANALYST AT FINNAIR

So, you were a mechanical engineering student in India. Of all places, you decided to come to Estonia. How exactly did you come by University of Tartu?

Well, while doing my Bachelor's degree in Mechanical Engineering, I went on a year-long exchange to Germany and got a chance to travel around Europe. At that point, I already knew what Estonia was: the technological and startup hub of Europe. Back then, still into design, 3D printing and scanning, I landed a job offer in Germany, which didn't go through due to bureaucratic complications. So, a little disappointed, I took a gap year to reinvent myself, and the field of my interest. While searching for high-profile universities, I came across a perfect course at University of Tartu: Innovation and Technology Management. I like to discover all sorts of things and, at a certain point, considered studying analytics. At University of Tartu, it was a mix of computing and management courses that start with basics, so anyone could apply even without having a relevant background. We all came from different fields and eventually reached the same level.

How did you find the course? Did you just randomly visit Estonia, while in Germany?

I did visit Estonia, but I started searching for a master's degree later. I got accepted in Austria and Hungary, but ended up placing Estonia at the top of my list. The university was the best of them all, and the oldest here. Tartu is a student town; I wanted to be in a small place, such as this one. When I was accepted in Estonia, I didn't think I would stay here forever. But eventually, the university's course and the student life in Tartu won me over completely.

So, how much did you know about Estonia before moving here to study, before you were accepted?

Well, I knew that the whole country was one big forest (laughs). The Estonian language, the same family as Finnish, is entirely different from any other known language. I checked Estonian websites; everything was online, all the information about the university and the country itself. In this sense, coming and living here was quite easy. Even in Germany I

didn't have as much freedom to do things online as I do here.

Was there a culture shock at first?

India was quite loud, so I discovered silence and peace when I came here. So, that was a bit of a shock. Then again, in India, everyone has different facial expressions; you read people. Although it's harder to do the same in Estonia, I had no communication issues here. I had lived in Europe before; my one year in Germany has helped. People here are generally nice.

So, what exactly did you study?

My programme, Innovation and Technology Management, had an interdisciplinary focus, not exclusively data science. It had courses from both Innovation Management and Business Analytics. So, there were five courses dedicated to business analysis, and then the other part was management courses. There's so much to learn in this area.



When you think of Innovation Technology, what's the big thing in your field?

Data science. I enjoyed taking courses from different faculties, such as Data Science, which makes me both a business analyst and a data analyst at the same time.

In your opinion, what was different in your student life compared to India?

In India, I was studying in my hometown, so at the end of the day I was with my family. Here, it's a different feeling because I got to be much more independent. It's a blessing and a curse! You have to manage your own affairs. On the positive side, there are fewer students in Estonian classes, which allows you to have direct contact with the professors. Also, the power gap tends to be quite low. I mean, in cultures like Indian, you cannot have a conversation with a senior without proper appointments, whether I am talking about a professor or a teacher. Here, I could always approach anyone easily. Also, I did some projects for the university staff, such as the

Head of the Academic Office and the International Marketing department. It was quite nice!

I've heard there's a lot of competition at the academic level in India. Is it less stressful here in that sense?

It's less stressful here. In India, everyone tends to go for the one thing, and ten people end up doing the same. In Estonia, people seem to be more independent in their minds and the field they want to do, their interests in life. Even at the university, I studied with students of all academic backgrounds, such as marketing or international relations. Being an engineer myself, I like this openness, the diversity of ideas.

And there's far fewer people for the same spots in Estonia. Okay, so it's calm, there's good weather. What do you like about Tartu?

It's an amazing city! Everything is within walking distance; you feel the student vibe everywhere, every

week something's happening, like a city festival, for example. Volunteering for such events always makes me feel included.

Estonians are said to be very closed and cold people. Do you think that's true?

It's a complicated question and answer. Not everyone's the same. People might seem cold, because they're not used to us, foreigners. While Asian cultures are quite close-knitted, it's much more individualistic here; one needs more space. In India, for example, there's no such thing as space. But once you get to know somebody, you never sense any coldness. Estonian friends of mine are always amazing to talk to, to hang out with. You can never know if you don't talk to people. Estonians are sometimes afraid to be open. They have to take the first step by themselves, and it turns out to be fine.

This is a bit of a personal question. I know that Indians have very, as you have said, close-knitted families. Your family, how accepting were they of you traveling for several years?

They're still not used to it because in India we live for our family, and the family lives for us. In terms of priorities, it's your family that comes first. However, I found a good self-development opportunity while here, which was okay with them. They want me to grow, academically as well; they are happy that I am here. I will invite them to visit me sometime.

Is there anything you miss a lot from home? What do you miss the most?

My family! Food... I like to cook at home, and that's something I still can't really perfect. But even in Tartu,

a city so small, there are good Indian restaurants. So mostly, I miss my family; everything else I have here. Estonia has everything.

How do you like Estonian national food?

I am a vegetarian! But I haven't had any problems buying or ordering vegetarian options here.

What do you think about Estonia and e-Estonia, as in our technological advancement, compared to other countries you have been to?

Well, from my travel experience, it's not breaking news that there's a lot of bureaucracy in Germany. Here, I was amazed at the speed at which the Estonian government works. My Estonian ID card is connected to all social and administrative services, with privacy being well-protected at the same time. Just an example: in Germany, it took me at least two or three weeks to get an appointment to register my residency. Here, I uploaded my residence and contact information online, and after 15 minutes, I was already able to use public transport in Tallinn, when I was there. Estonia might be a small state, but it's a pioneer in e-governance and online solutions.

Speaking of transport. Germany still uses paper tickets, from what I recall, while in Berlin.

Yes, they do. Here, I am not used to it. I haven't had cash for two years; ever since I've been here, only cards. Even one card is sufficient, because your ID number is connected to everything: your debit card works as a money card, a transport card, etc. It makes everything easier for the city dwellers.

RAHUL PUNIANI: "I AM RAHUL AND I AM HAPPY TO BE HERE!"

ALUMNI STORIES

You work at Finnair. How did you find your way there?

Well, my journey had started back at Swedbank, at the Business Intelligence Academy, in the course of a three-month internship in Tallinn. I was quite happy with the experience of working in Estonia, and Swedbank offered me a job. Yet, since I wanted to study for one more semester before my thesis, I went back to the university. So, that was it, until I discovered the Finnair office in Tartu; we did a collaboration project with them during the course. That's how I became a business analyst for them and I am happy to be back.

Was there a question of language skills or did they not require you to speak Estonian?

No, nor did Swedbank. At Swedbank, I was astonished to be working in an English-speaking environment, although my colleagues were mostly Estonian. Here, at Finnair, more than 90% are Estonians as well, but English remains our working language. I have never faced any communication problems here.

It's crazy though that most people in Estonia speak English.

It's a pleasant surprise to be able to speak English in Estonia practically anywhere, with anyone. Back in some other European countries, people appear less open if you don't speak their language. In Germany, it's hard to live without the German language. Of course, I learned German as well, but at the same time, if you want to volunteer somewhere they would expect you to speak at least B1 German. Here, I have never had such problems.

Okay, that's quite surprising. How well do you speak Estonian? You have learned it for two semesters!

Hästi natuke! About A1-A2... It's not the easiest language to learn, but it gets much better with practice; I like to learn languages. Sometimes I listen to Estonian music; often I understand some of the lyrics! I am quite slow in Estonian, but it takes processing.

What exactly do you do day-to-day, if it can be explained simply?

Although some of it is confidential, as a business analyst, I analyse data and use business intelligence tools to assist my stakeholders with the process of decision making. I have the responsibility of a quite specific area, ticket distribution.

So do you intend to stay here and work?

For now, yes. Usually, I don't plan too much; that has been my life for the past few years. I just go with what I like. But for now, I am really happy in Estonia, Tartu, and the company, Finnair. I'll stay here for several years; let's see what happens then!

Have you already recommended Estonia to any of your acquaintances?

Yes! I share everything, at least on my Facebook feed. People don't know much about Estonia and they're happy to find out about e-Estonia and how it's number one in digital solutions. My friends have already visited me here; they're always quite impressed.

Do you read Estonian news?

Yes! I like that ERR (Eesti Rahvusringhääling), Estonia's national news agency, has an English site as well; I do follow them. For me as an expat, it's not simply about living here, but also being part of society, knowing what's going on here. Not only do I pay taxes, but I am interested in giving back to Estonia, volunteering, organising events, helping in any way. I am very happy to be here and I would promote it to other people as well.

What would you say was the best thing that has happened to you in Estonia? Have you had any particularly fond memories?

I am part of the ESN (Erasmus Student Network); before, I was an International Student Ambassador at the university. Also, it's always a nice thing when I start speaking in Estonian, which Estonian people are not used to... But they're happy when I try! I have taken two semesters of Estonian and I am happy to give back to the Estonian culture by learning your language, so... That's a good thing. By the way,

once, I found a dictionary at the back of my Estonian textbook with my name in it, Rahul.

Wait, what?! Turns out, it means "satisfied"!

Exactly!

So, by introducing myself, olen Rahul, I am saying: I am Rahul and I am happy here!

Milad Vnejad: "Almost Estonian"



IRAN

ESTONIAN UNIVERSITY OF LIFE SCIENCES,
MSC IN LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE

ARCHITECT DESIGNER AT
ARCHITECTURAL FIRM SPORT OÜ
(ARHITEKTUURIBÜROO SPORT OÜ)

You came to Estonia to study Landscaping at Eesti Maaülikool (Estonian University of Life Sciences). How did you find out about this opportunity in Estonia?

I left my country when I was about 22 years old. I am a traveller, and I love to meet different people from different countries. Having finished my bachelor's, I went back to my country, Iran, and worked there for two years, until I felt the urge to travel again. One of my friends, whom I met in Malaysia, had been studying here for about a year, so he told me about this opportunity. Studying and working at the same time, meeting new people, I felt this excitement and was ready to change my life again. So, I applied and got an acceptance offer! My only concern was about finding a job here, since the job search in foreign countries does not always go easily.

Why?

While in Malaysia, I still had no bachelor's degree. It tends to be quite complicated to land a job with no degree in your hand, mainly in the field of my interest. It's different for customer service, for instance.

How much did you know about Estonia before coming here?

A couple of months before coming here, I did some research. I knew it's cold here; harder than in other countries to connect with people. Sometimes people don't know how to express their emotions; they hide them not to show any weakness, perhaps. Estonians share it easily, if you know each other well, if they trust you. Otherwise, they don't share much. I found it interesting.

What field did you come here to study? What's the current big thing in your field?

Landscape Architecture; more specifically, water connection and infrastructure design through landscape architecture; there's already existing research in this area. While the principal focus of architecture lies in solutions to connect the inside of the building with the outside, which I am currently specialising in, connecting the elements of nature, such as water, with the architectural planning is equally important. Today, we are moving buildings and infrastructure to the bottom of the oceans,

possibly creating a new habitat underwater. There are some projects in Dubai that I have heard of, so that's gaining momentum. Landscape architecture believes that architecture destroys nature, but we are trying to find a solution to that.

Where do you work at the moment?

Through some networking effort, I have found a position as an architect designer at an architecture firm called Arhitektuuribüroo Sport OÜ. I have already successfully designed a number of residential buildings, some watch towers, and a few visualisation projects based on the field of my interest.

Was there a language barrier with English?

It's still there. However, to be honest, it's not that big of an issue. Everyone in the younger generation speaks perfect English, so communication isn't difficult. However, if you have a long-term plan to live and work here, you eventually have to start learning Estonian, which I am doing at the moment.



I can already make an order, and understand some general topics, but it requires a regular learning effort to become more advanced.

It's hard for me to find two nations that are more different than Iranians and Estonians. Was there a cultural shock at first?

To be honest, I have been living outside of Iran for more than 13 years, so I was already well adapted. I have some Iranian friends living here, and they have not experienced any major cultural shock either, just a few of them.

What were they shocked about?

Too much freedom for them.

What do you think would be the biggest difference compared to living at home?

In Iran, people tend to be extremely extroverted and emotional, although not as positive as Estonians. Iran is a huge country, populated by more than 100 million people, so imagine: from the moment you step into the street at eight in the morning, you become part of a crowd. People are moving, fighting, yelling, honking and so on. Here, if you don't set an alarm, you might sleep until one in the afternoon. It's so quiet in Tartu! I live in Karlova, sort of a hipster area in Tartu, and every night I see how the lights shut down everywhere, and I am the only one awake. It makes a big difference — too much silence versus too much crowd.

How much do you travel around Estonia?

Each week, a group of us goes camping outside of Tartu, mostly in the summer. Outside of Estonia, I get to travel once every three-four months.

What do you think of Estonia in terms of e-governance and technological advancements?

Oh, this is something really, really advanced compared with other countries I have been to. Normally, you go to an office where you would be sent from room to room; paperwork takes too much time; in the end, you spend two or three days just to get one paper signed. In terms of e-services, Estonia makes everything easier. If there's a problem, I send an email and receive a prompt reply. It's the best place for e-services; I love it so much!

Do you have a particularly special memory about your life here?

I remember the times we were studying here: I was in my first year, without a job, partying all the time, exploring different cultures, meeting different people... I had an Italian and a French friend; we had so much fun! Once you find a job, your life changes, in a positive way. Every day you create something new, design great things.

Your future plan is to stay living and working here, indefinitely?

No one knows what the future will bring; sometimes you cannot even predict your tomorrow. Yet so far, that has been my plan.

How much do you feel you belong to the community? Do you read Estonian news?

That's the funny part! I was asking some of my friends, a couple of days ago, am I Estonian enough right now? Not in terms of nationality, just what they

think about it. Most of them said: you are Estonian; you just can't speak the language! So that's the only point of difference. I don't feel like a foreigner within this community.

Do you feel like you are accepted here?

That's a rather direct question. On most occasions, 80% of the time, yes.

What about the other 20%?

The other 20%... Every country in the world has about 80% of open-minded people and 20% of those with different values. Up until now, I feel like I have been accepted. Some people might become emotional, even rude sometimes, but I respect that. If I were from a country that has experienced so much historical conflict, it would be hard for me to trust foreigners. I understand that a small share of people might be somewhat wary of foreigners, yet my overall personal experience in Estonia has been totally positive.

Olga Vovk:
“Living here easily makes
you think that’s the way
things work everywhere”



UKRAINE

TALLINN UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY,
MSC IN HEALTHCARE TECHNOLOGY

CO-FOUNDER AND CTO OF RECOVERY COMPANION

You came here two years ago. How did you discover Estonia?

Before coming here to study in a master’s programme, I did some research on different destinations and basically arrived at two options: Germany or Estonia. Shortly after, I met the representatives of Estonian universities at a study fair, which was taking place in Ukraine. Although at that point I was already leaning towards Estonia, thanks to the great number of English language programmes, meeting the locals brought more clarity to my decision.

How much did you know about Estonia before you came to study here?

I knew that Estonia was a digital country... and that was it! For me, however, it was important to learn by which means Estonia had managed to transform into a digital powerhouse of Europe. We started at more or less the same level, yet in terms of development, Estonia has left Ukraine behind.

So, you studied Healthcare Technology at TalTech School of Information Technologies. What’s the current big thing in your professional field?

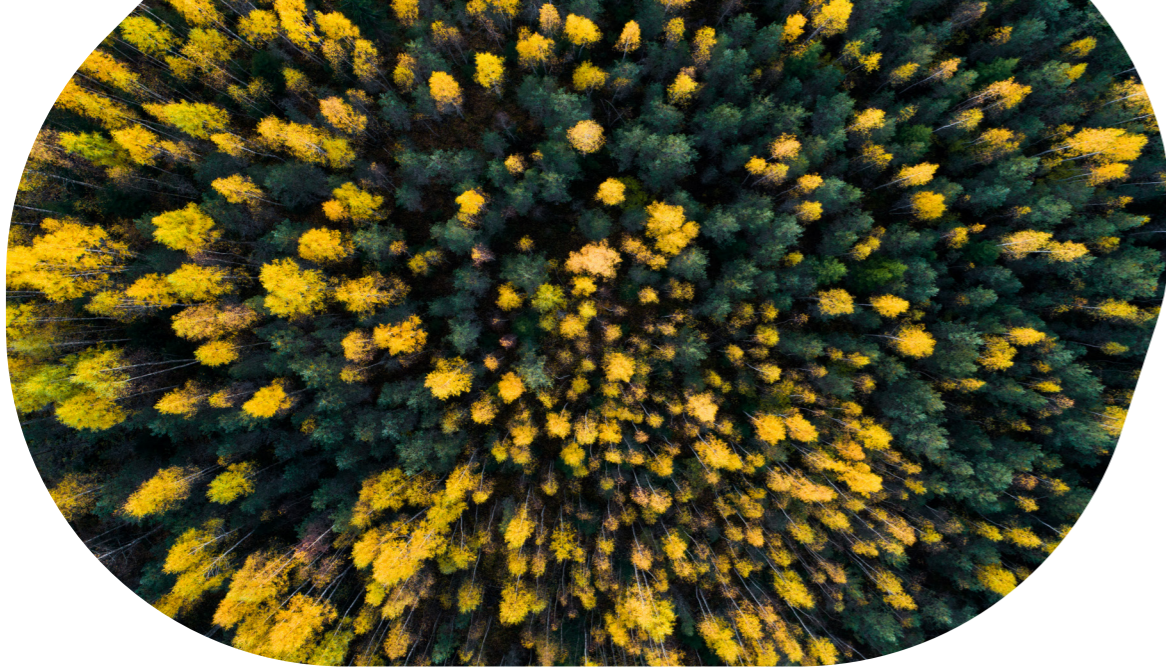
The concept of digital health solutions. Estonia’s e-health system has been advanced for quite some time, from e-Health records to innovations in recovery technologies. Our team, for example, works on the Recovery Companion project (ReCov OÜ). Essentially an application for cancer patients, Recovery Companion functions as a platform for connecting and supporting each other during the recovery process through peer-to-peer communication and a chatbot technology.

If cancer patients receive help and support from those who have gone through the same journey, it makes a big difference in their recovery. So, we established our own company, four people with different backgrounds: Ukraine, Estonia, Australia and the US. We have already received a lot of support (including finance, mentoring, networking, office space, etc.) from different organisations, such as TalTech, MEKTORY and Tehnopol. We won the LAPHack hackathon, where our journey began;

STARTERTallinn; EIT Digital Accelerator, where we received the final award; finally, our application has been selected for Prototron40, an ongoing project.

You mentioned that even before coming here, you knew that Estonia was a digital country. Now that you are here, what do you think of our “digitalness”?

Living here makes you think that’s the way things work everywhere in the world, until they don’t. Once you travel to another country, like Ukraine or Germany in my case, you remember that Estonia’s digital transformation is the exception rather than the rule. For example, the ID card: an awesome tool that helps you register your company in 15 minutes or get a doctor’s appointment and receive a medical prescription in even less time. It soon becomes your daily reality.



Was there a bit of a culture shock when you first came to Estonia?

Not really, it's quite similar to Ukraine. However, it's much darker here during the cold season; you start feeling the lack of light already in November until mid-spring. On the other hand, I enjoy summer in Estonia, which is not as hot as in Ukraine.

What would you say are the biggest differences in student life, if you compare it with your bachelor's degree in Ukraine?

Data science. I enjoyed taking courses from different faculties, such as Data Science, which makes me both a business analyst and a data analyst at the same time.

In your opinion, what was different in your student life compared to Ukraine?

I really enjoyed student life in Estonia and all the opportunities to connect with other people, the internationals. Not only did we study here, but also

had the chance to get to know each other and participate in many awesome activities, such as pub crawls, for example (laughs). Academically speaking, it is great that the Estonian education system allows you to choose the courses you are specifically interested in. In other words, you have a mandatory programme, which you can supplement with some optional courses according to the field of your interest. In Ukraine, there's only a compulsory programme that leaves no choice for optional topics, although it might have already changed by now. Here, it has been more flexible; I appreciate this teaching approach. We had a chance to meet different lecturers from all over the world, not to mention how diverse my class has been. Estonian higher education has increasingly become very international; it welcomes and supports foreign students, such as myself.

How much have you travelled in Estonia? Do you have any favourite places in Tallinn?

I have been to the South of Estonia, Tartu, Pärnu, beautiful Rõmme. In Tallinn, I would say, I have two

favourite spots. First, it is the area near TalTech, which I am really fond of; second, it is Telliskivi. Of course I like the Old Town, but Telliskivi is a better place to hang out and relax, to grab a dinner with your friends.

What would you say is the best thing that has happened to you in Estonia?

I think the master's programme and graduation have been the happiest moments, the biggest achievements for me so far. I graduated cum laude in 2019; it was such an awesome feeling! I am extremely happy to carry on and advance my career in healthcare technology, despite the employment difficulties I might have faced in such a narrow field.

Do you intend to stay in Estonia for the foreseeable future?

Yes, at least for the next few years, that's what I am planning to do.

How do you feel you have been received in Estonia? Estonians are known to be rather reserved on a personal level. Do you think that's true?

Well, I cannot say it's not true. Although Estonian society has become very international, Estonians tend to be somewhat cold, and it usually takes some time for them to open up. However, I can understand it; for me, it's not always easy to establish contact with a person for the first time. Give it a little time.

What about the language though? Have you learned any Estonian?

I have tried, but it's still very difficult. I am planning to take a course in the Estonian language, now that I have made a decision to stay here for longer. During my studies in Tallinn, I was not quite sure whether I would stay or move to another place; I spent an exchange semester in Germany, which was one of the possibilities I considered. In the end, however, I was genuinely happy to come back to Estonia. I know it may come as a surprise to many people (it was actually a bit surprising to me as well), but I really feel much better and safe living here. That's another selling point for Estonia. While in Munich, such a large city, I didn't feel entirely secure. In Tallinn, you can walk alone in the middle of the night and, I am quite sure, you will be fine.

I am quite sure, too! So, you have been away from Ukraine for a number of years now and you may be so for even longer. What would you say you miss the most from home?

I miss my family, my friends — the most important people in our lives. Recently, I have been able to visit Ukraine more often thanks to the launch of a cheap, direct flight from Tallinn to Kyiv, a really good deal for Ukrainian students. I also miss Ukrainian food!

So, what happens next? You have stayed here, worked for your company, and successfully developed your application. For how long do you intend to stay here in Estonia?

That's an unknown territory so far.

José Antonio Page Ramírez: “Estonia is a paradise for all things cultural and musical”



SPAIN

ESTONIAN ACADEMY OF MUSIC AND THEATRE,
MA IN MUSIC (TRUMPET)

BRASS MUSIC TEACHER

When did you come to Estonia for the first time?

I think it was about twelve years ago, when I first came to Estonia as an Erasmus student. Back then, I was studying at a conservatory in Granada and was considering going abroad on exchange. I was in search of a “non-conventional” study destination no one else would apply for, as the music world can obviously be very competitive. On top of it, I was just a student who played at parties in an attempt to make some extra money, and the Erasmus scholarship in Spain, unfortunately, wouldn’t be enough to live on. The international coordinator of the conservatory gave me a few recommendations, including the Sibelius Academy in Helsinki, Finland, as well as the Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre (EAMT) in Tallinn, Estonia: a modern establishment with great teaching quality and a capital city perfect for music lovers, such as myself. I applied, passed a concert exam and got accepted for an exchange year to study the trumpet. That was twelve years ago.

You were here for a year and left. What made you come back?

Being a professional musician can be tough, especially an emerging one. At the end of the programme, I went back to Spain and reached professional burnout in playing the trumpet. At one point, I couldn’t play a single note. As I had been studying at a Spanish university to become a school music teacher, I received a scholarship to teach in Canada and faced a dilemma. I would either go to Canada and leave the instrumental environment behind me or come back to Estonia, where the educational quality had already proven itself to be really high, and start playing again. As you might have guessed, I got a chance to come back to Estonia on a scholarship as an assistant teacher, ten years ago now. Everything went well, and I started to improve, little by little. In one year, I managed to transfer my study credits, pass the bachelor’s exam, and finally enter a master’s degree at the EAMT.

Did you experience a culture shock, coming from Spain to Estonia?

No, not really. At the very beginning of my stay, I followed an Estonian language course for about three weeks, which helped me connect with many people even before the start of my studies. Later, there were only two other Spanish people at the EAMT, so I spent a lot of time with the Estonian students. It’s true that Estonians can appear rather reserved and distant; they don’t tend to communicate much. Yet once you get to know each other, they become your close friends and will always be there for you. In Spain, when you meet someone for the first time, you feel like you have known each other for years and will always be best friends, which might not be the case. You may think you have a thousand friends, yet it wouldn’t be the same as here, in Estonia. In this sense, I really like the local communication culture: ironically, you need a little distance to get to know each other and have a special connection.



What was the student life like, compared to Spain?

In Granada, we studied in an old building with only a few rooms: in order to practice, you had to be there either before 08.00 or after 20.00, so you spend your entire life at the conservatory. At the EAMT, I have learned that your academic and music life can be much more flexible. I was finally able to practice anywhere and anytime, while still having time to be social within the academy.

Do you have your favourite spots in Estonia, places you like to visit often?

In Tallinn, you can always go to a live music concert, whether you buy opera tickets or go to a small pub with your friends; every week, there's something happening. Otherwise, I am always happy to get out of the town into the woods. In Spain, I come from a small town near the mountains; when I was young, we used to enjoy nature almost every weekend. Later, while in Granada, we would go hiking in the mountains every Saturday; walk seven-eight hours and spend the night in a shepherd's house. In this

sense, Estonia makes a perfect destination for eco-tourism: an hour of driving and you are already in nature. Now I live in Valga and each time I travel to Tallinn, I am being reminded of the daily stress of living in a city, even such as Tallinn. All in all, it's not so much about a specific place; it's more about the atmosphere and the people surrounding you. Living here, I consider myself very lucky: I love the music that I live for; I love my job, which allows me to teach and inspire others. That's all I have ever wanted in my life, in spite of the rough patches I have gone through.

Is there anything you miss about Spain?

I miss my family the most. For them, it took some time to accept the distance, the fact that I have found my place in Estonia. It's a different case with my friends, since even in Spain we would live and work in different cities without having much time to meet. Other than that, I would love to see more sunlight in the winter! Estonian winters are not a problem for me, as long as I am inside the house and don't have to dress like an onion (laughs). However, not seeing sunlight for three-four days in a row during the winter can be quite tough.

Now you work in Võru?

Yes! At the moment, I work in Võru and Valga music schools as a brass teacher, but I also conduct Valga's local band Piirilinna Bigband. When I arrived there five years ago, they contacted me saying that the band was in need of a conductor. We have been working together since then, meeting every week. I also work with the Võru symphony orchestra.

What about your future? Do you plan on studying more?

If you love what you do, you never stop studying. Here in Võru we are lucky to have various summer camps, invited professionals, etc. This summer, for example, I followed a conducting masterclass and a seminar on choir music. Then again, studying music instruments, or the trumpet in my case, requires constant practice. At the moment, I am working on my graduation thesis at the EAMT; in the near future I would like to improve my technical skills in conducting and increase the level of my Estonian. Other than that, I don't know what life holds for me.

What would you say to those thinking of coming to Estonia for their studies?

Estonia is wonderful; it is a paradise for all things cultural and musical. At this point, of course, I may complain there are too many tourists or the prices are going up. Nevertheless, whatever you are looking for in Estonia, you'll find it. It is also about great people living here. Once, I was looking for the migration office for the first time and asked a lady in the street which direction I should go. She ended up walking with me for nearly seven minutes just to show me where it was. She obviously didn't have to do it, yet she did.

Hertta Pirkkalainen: "Estonia has given me a sense of independence"



FINLAND

ESTONIAN UNIVERSITY OF LIFE SCIENCES,
MSC IN VETERINARY MEDICINE

HEAD VETERINARIAN AT THE ANIMAL CLINIC OF
THE ESTONIAN UNIVERSITY OF LIFE SCIENCE;
PHD CANDIDATE AT UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI

You didn't come from a very far away land; you came to your southern neighbour, Estonia, from Finland. What made you decide to come study in Estonia and what did you do before?

I came to Estonia straight from my high school, from a small town in Eastern Finland. I am a total country girl! I hadn't been to big cities at all, hadn't even travelled on a train by myself; I had never had any idea about studying abroad. I had been to Tallinn a few times before, with my family, however. Tartu seemed to be such a big city! Although the culture and lifestyle were quite new, it was a good start for me. How did I end up here? I have always wanted to be a vet. Unfortunately, in Finland, it's quite hard to get in, so there was a need for another plan. Quite accidentally, I'd heard of a person applying to Estonia, so I googled it, found out about Eesti Maaülikool (Estonian University of Life Sciences), and applied as well! Funny thing: perhaps a day before the application deadline, I called the school to double check whether my documents had been submitted correctly. I was shocked to hear that they hadn't received them. Only a few hours later they called me back, apologising for the error. Apparently my

papers had been placed on another pile! That's how I understood how important it was for me to get in, having received a rejection before. My mother still talks about how crazy I went when I heard the good news and announced, "I am going to be a vet!"

So, is it really so much harder to get in to such programmes in Finland?

I believe, at some point, it was about 10-14% percent of all candidates eventually getting in; I was close, but not quite there.

There's always one question with vets: why animals, not humans?

Well, why not animals? I think it's a challenge, dealing with creatures that don't talk to you; instead, you have to use all of your senses. Then again, I've always liked farm animals. My uncle had a farm, I spent a lot of time over there, and that's exactly what I am doing now, working with production animals. Nowadays, the idea of animals in veterinary science has changed. It was mainly about production

animals back in the old days; today, we also receive dogs, cats and other small pets. In addition to that, veterinary medicine has quickly developed into a high-level science, in Estonia as well.

You always hear about the latest advancements in human medicine, but what big thing has recently happened in your field?

In cattle medicine, we are facing global problems, such as the connection between meat production and global warming. It is a question of a large scale: I like the idea of improving the living conditions of cattle, being able to produce meat and dairy for human consumption, while simultaneously finding ways to slow down global warming. So, I believe that's the most important aspect of my field. In smaller animals, we perform many complicated surgeries. In this regard, a one-health thinking plays a central role in both veterinary and human medicine, which are always intertwined. Once performed on an animal, a surgical technique can be transferred to human medical science. We are actually fighting for the same cause.

So, straight out of high school and you had never been to Tartu. Was it difficult to get used to living in a completely different country, even though we are neighbours?

There are definitely some cultural differences. The way of thinking appears to be simpler here, in a positive way. On the other hand, some conservative habits often appear controversial to me. For example, opening the door for women, helping them put a coat on (laughs). It's not a bad thing necessarily, rather a question of equality. In the bigger picture, women tend to be seen as homemakers, they are supposed to have children and always stay beautiful. It is a little strange to me as a mentality.

You graduated in 2011. Do you feel like the things you described have changed?

Certainly! At the moment, however, conservatism seems to be regaining its position.

What, would you say, are the biggest differences in student life here, in Tartu, and in Finland?

Based on what I have heard from my friends, who have been studying in Finland, I can say with certainty that Tartu is an ideal student town. I would compare it to Jyväskylä, a student city in Finland. First, there are a great many opportunities for getting together, which I have always liked. Second, everything is so close! You may easily schedule a meeting on the other side of the town, not to mention the accessibility of the campus. In this sense, the university is quite integrated into the life of people, which would not be the case in a big city.

Once you start looking at the map, you realise there's quite a large percentage of buildings that are connected to the university.

Exactly, so I really like that.

How's the language?

Well, that was an interesting experience. Although I am quite good at learning foreign languages, I did not know any Estonian before. Nevertheless, following a one-week intensive course, we started studying in the Estonian language.

You had one week of Estonian language course and then you started studying in Estonian?

Yes! It was crazy, but I loved it anyway, as an adventure and a challenge. Recently, I was reading those old notes we took by hand, writing what we had heard, regardless of the grammar. In a few weeks, you get used to it and start learning anatomy by heart, most of which is usually related to Latin. In half a year, I would say, we were already able to get by quite well in everyday life; within a year, it had become even easier. To those facing a similar situation I would recommend mingling with the locals to experience a complete language immersion, which is the only way to become fluent in a foreign language. After graduation, I stayed working in Tartu and eventually began to teach students in Estonian.

You probably had to learn quite specific language related to your field. Did you have to simultaneously learn it in Estonian, English and Finnish?

Yes, a mix of English and Estonian literature. Incidentally, Estonia has more materials to offer, compared to Finland, although this number has somewhat decreased in recent years due to the wider use of English. From my experience, it may be quite problematic for local people and vets to give all you've got, despite the high level of English language proficiency among Estonians. Speaking in

one's native language makes a big difference. In this regard, I am better at explaining things in Estonian and obviously Finnish, regardless of my English fluency.

Coming back to Tartu, do you have any favourite spots you like to visit?

In general, I am not a city person at all (laughs). In this sense, I really like Tartu. As an owner of two dogs, I enjoy having many green places around. I walk my dogs near the university, by the Emajõgi River; sometimes, I drive further away from the city, into the woods. In Tartu, you are always in between the city life and the nature, minutes away from each other.

We have nature and we also have, at least that's what others say, really high-level technology. How do you think Estonia compares as an e-country to Finland?

You have reached a much higher level! That's one of the selling points for Estonia: a country so small, you are able to test and implement the innovations. For example, the ID card: I love that I don't have to have a lot of different cards, pins, etc. Instead, it is one card and one code dealing with virtually everything. So, Estonia, good job!

What do you do now?

At the moment, I am the head veterinarian at the production animal clinic of Estonian University of Life Sciences. In addition, I am teaching students coming to our clinic for practical training in their 5th and 6th years: clinical diagnostics; some areas of surgery; anaesthesiology; and hoof health, my favourite part actually. I am also doing a PhD in Finland, as well as

a Finnish specialisation programme in production animals. Quite soon, I will move back to Finland to work at a higher level, while also retaining some subjects I teach at the clinic. Fortunately, I will not lose my contact with Estonia completely.

But what made you decide to live in Estonia and not go back to Finland right after your studies?

Professionally, I wanted to learn more about bigger herds and herd management, since in Estonia you have bigger herds of animals than in Finland. I also liked the atmosphere of the clinics. After a one-year internship, the clinic asked me to work for them. It has been eight years now.

The usual story with Estonians: we go to Finland because they pay better. You, however, came here to work in a high-paid profession in general. How would you describe it in terms of the living policy and expenses in Estonia, compared to Finland?

Unfortunately, veterinarians are not highly paid in Estonia; it is about the average wage, even lower in some cases. Besides, it is a physically and mentally demanding job, which makes it rather difficult for fresh graduates. In general, however, Estonia has lower living costs compared with Finland. When I was coming to study here, I calculated the cost of studying in Estonia based on my annual tuition fee of 3000 euros. According to my calculations, I would manage with the help of summer jobs and the financial assistance that Finnish students abroad receive from the government. Although I did not know that the tuition fee would be increased by 10% each year and my financial plan did not quite add up in the end, studying in Helsinki would have been

way more expensive. Speaking of living costs in general, I don't really understand how Estonians live at all. Considering the wages, the prices of goods and services seem to me to be much higher, and many people might struggle to make ends meet, including students working to support themselves. It's very complicated.

You've lived in Estonia for a long time already; now you are going back to Finland to work and at the same time, you will continue teaching in Estonia. How do you see your future in the next five years?

Well, I hope I can get my PhD and the specialisation done! I hope I will be able to use all the skills and knowledge I have gained throughout my eight years in Estonia to work for the better health of production animals and have an input in global issues. In five years, I might end up in Estonia again. Thanks to the small size of this country, you can easily create your professional network and start making a difference in the field of your work. We will see what happens in Finland, but one thing is for sure: I will not stop teaching. I love watching students get excited about our scientific work, while also listening and supporting them emotionally; this is something very important.



If you look at the current Finnish education system, particularly in veterinary science, do you expect to see more Finnish students at Estonian University of Life Sciences?

Yes! I think things have changed: the students who are coming here today might be different from what they used to be several years ago; they are more global. They might not go back to their home country right after the end of their studies; they are open to the whole world. There are plenty of reasons why one should choose Estonia: a very international place to be, good teaching quality, exchange studies, etc. One of the best things Estonia has given me is independence: when I came here I had to do everything myself and get used to new languages. At times, my teachers could be rather strict, which may be changing to some extent nowadays. All in all, going to study abroad is a very good decision for students.

Nicholas Vandrey:
“When I go home,
nobody knows
where I live”



USA

UNIVERSITY OF TARTU,
BA IN BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION

BUSINESS INTELLIGENCE TEAM LEAD AT VERIFF

When did you come to Estonia? How did the decision to study in Estonia come about?

I moved to Estonia almost exactly eight years ago, in August 2011. Coming from the US, I had actually spent about a third of my life living in Europe because of my father’s job in the oil field. I lived in Scotland for two and a half years and in Norway for five years. So when I was graduating from high school, I was looking for something a little bit different to do. Estonia came up and it seemed like an interesting opportunity, so I applied to the Business Administration programme at University of Tartu. I’d met Estonians before and I actually knew a couple of students before I even came here.

Since you had already lived in Europe, this probably wasn’t that big of a cultural shock? You’ve been away from your home country for quite a while, but if you had to compare it to the US, what are the biggest differences in terms of culture or people?

It was definitely a bit different. Since I arrived in August, just a couple of months later the winter set in. It was starkly darker for me here than it was in Norway and Scotland, or at least that’s how it felt. But it wasn’t too difficult of an adjustment. Initially, the language is always one of the first factors you realise. Another difference, unsurprisingly, is just how open people are, emotionally and socially. When you meet Estonians at first, they can have the stereotype of being a little stoic. Americans, particularly in the southern part of the US where I’m from, are very open while talking to strangers, just in the middle of the street. So, that’s one of the biggest differences. Once you actually get to know people at an individual level, however, there’s not too much to distinguish there. In the eight years I’ve been here, I’ve had very, very few negative experiences of being a foreigner.

What field did you study?

I was in Business Administration and Economics. It was quite a broad programme that covered a lot of aspects of business, finance, banking, economics and marketing at quite a high level.

You mentioned that the language was quite an issue when you first came. How is it now?

I studied it for three semesters when I was in university and tried to use it as much as I can. I think it has really made social interactions quite a bit easier, knowing very fundamental Estonian to start with and working away from there. Of course, it’s got to be quite a simple conversation; if it gets too technical or too specific, the vocabulary starts to drop off. But I would say it took quite a bit of effort at first to understand the grammar and even make the appropriate sounds, because there are a lot of sounds that we don’t really use in English, so you need to get over those hurdles and start interacting. It’s actually been easier to do simple things, like getting directions or renewing a residence permit or any of these interactions, by knowing basic Estonian.

NICHOLAS VANDREY: “WHEN I GO HOME, NOBODY KNOWS WHERE I LIVE”

Speaking of your residence permit, many consider Estonia a digitally advanced country. Do you think that's true?

I would agree with that. There's definitely a lot of interaction with technology that you don't usually see elsewhere. Estonian children are exposed to the concepts of computer science and computer programming quite early on. The digital infrastructure of the country is very impressive; I can do everything online very easily. With the financial services being all digital, for instance, I can file my taxes in a couple of minutes, which would take me almost all day in the US. So, it's fair to say that Estonians embrace technology more than Americans, at least.

You've studied in Tartu and now live in Tallinn. Do you have any favourite places there? How much have you travelled around the country?

So, I've been working in Telliskivi, Kalamaja area, for a couple of years now, it's quite enjoyable. I really like the Old Town, particularly in the winter; it is nice to stroll through there. It is definitely more touristy than other areas, but it's nice. I also enjoy the Stroomi and Pelgurand areas next to the sea, quite nice places to visit as well. Before Tallinn, I spent five years living in Tartu and a significant amount of time in the southern part of Estonia: Põlva, Valga, Võrumaa. I spend a lot of time in the countryside as well.

You mentioned you work in Telliskivi. What do you do?

I'm currently part of the business intelligence team at Veriff. It is an internal team responsible for helping the company understand its own performance and opportunities for improvements; coming up with metrics; transforming the company into a data

driven decision making company; getting the overall perception of the company, how we are doing. Veriff itself is an identity verification and fraud prevention solution for anybody who needs to verify their clients. I've been there for about half a year now. Before Veriff was established in 2015, I was at a different startup called Funderbeam.

Do you feel like it's been easy for you to find a job in Estonia?

I think there are definitely a lot of opportunities for people coming into the country, because it is so startup savvy. Estonian startups, in turn, are quite eager for people all across the spectrum: you need technical people; you need business people; you need marketing people. So I've been primarily working within the startup scene. Whether or not it's easy, it's definitely feasible and definitely possible to find a job here.

When you compare Estonia to the US, there's a huge difference in the average wage. Do you feel like it's more expensive or cheaper to live in Estonia compared to the US?

A couple of years ago, I would have said cheaper without hesitating. Now, the cost of living in Estonia has started to go up a little bit. If you are comparing wages to cost of living, however, there's no stark difference in the difficulty of living in either place.

What would you say of healthcare?

That's really situation dependent. I guess if you're unlucky in the US, then healthcare can be one of your biggest costs, if you are not appropriately covered, unfortunately. So, on the Estonian side, the fact that healthcare is so accessible here is definitely a plus.

What about Estonian traditional foods?

I guess that depends on what you mean by national foods. Most people define it along the lines of a variation of potatoes, but you've also got the jelly meat, which I find quite fascinating. Traditional holiday dishes, like verivorst (blood sausage) and things like that, took some acclimatisation. But I've actually come to enjoy them quite a bit. The one thing that I still don't particularly have a fondness for is beets, which are served with quite a lot of things here in Estonia.

What do you miss the most about the US?

Family, of course; this is the big one. I also kind of miss the sports there, being a huge baseball fan. There's no baseball here so, understandably, it's one of the things I miss the most.

How aware of Estonia do feel like your family and peers are in the US?

My own family and peers are very aware of it; they've even come to visit a couple of times. The general awareness level, I would say, is a little bit different. You know, when I go back there and visit the doctor, they chitchat, "Where are you from?", and I mention I live in Estonia. "That's somewhere in Maine, right?" No, not quite, it's in Europe. Although occasionally you'll find references or mentions of Estonia in quite obscure places that surprise you, almost casually. They pop up in TV shows every now and then, a reference to Estonia or to Tallinn specifically, some Estonian word. There's someone behind the scenes thinking about that; it's quite nice.

You have now lived in Estonia for eight years; you are a resident. What do you think the future holds for you? Do you intend to stay here indefinitely?

I've been here for a long time, and it's a country that I've really come to feel comfortable in, but I haven't really set my plans so strictly according to that. I've currently got a really great opportunity here, doing a very interesting job at such a great company... If I were to leave Estonia, it would have to be for quite a specific opportunity or quite a specific reason. I do miss things about the US and I do enjoy going back to visit, but I don't feel this pull to move back without a specific reason to go there. In general, after having been here for eight years, I wasn't entirely sure what to expect when I moved here. My initial plan was definitely to come and study, move on and go somewhere else. But that's obviously not what ended up happening. And it's definitely not something I regret. I think making the move to Estonia has had a big impact on the direction my life is taking in quite a positive way. It's not that you hear a lot of people say they've had a lifelong aspiration to move to Estonia and there are many people that aren't even aware of it. For me, however, it's been quite a life changing experience and something that I think of quite positively.

Lucija Mrzljak: "Estonian winters help you concentrate on your work"



CROATIA

ESTONIAN ACADEMY OF ARTS,
MA IN ANIMATION

ANIMATION FILM DIRECTOR AND ILLUSTRATOR

When did you first come to Estonia?

I came to study at Estonian Academy of Arts, Eesti Kunstiakadeemia, in 2013 for my master's in Animation. I am from Croatia, so before I studied a bachelor's in Animated Film in Zagreb, which was more of a general art programme. Since I have always been very interested in animation, I wanted to learn more. In Zagreb, there's a very big festival of animated films, where I had seen many works from Estonia participating each year. They were really intriguing and original, and seemed to be coming from an interesting place. I was very curious about them and got a brief chance to meet Priit Pärn, who is quite famous in Estonia, when he had come to Zagreb. That's how I found out he was teaching at Eesti Kunstiakadeemia, an art academy in Tallinn, and decided to act upon the opportunity. Having been accepted to the Animation programme some time later, I packed my bags and came here, with very little knowledge about Estonia, only my idea about the studies. I thought I'd take a chance.

So you came to study Animation at Estonian Academy of Arts. What would you say right now is the biggest thing in your field?

In my circle, many people talk about VR, meaning the intersection between the digital, the human body and the environment. I personally haven't done any VR projects, but I've seen quite a lot of exhibitions created by other artists during international film festivals. The animation starts to go beyond cinema and video games; it is now possible to integrate new technologies, such as VR, in it.

If we talk about studying in Estonia, when you came here in 2013, were there any big differences or a culture shock?

Sure, many! Coming from the south of Europe, I've naturally gone through a climate shock in a much colder Estonia. I've also found that people think and operate in a different way, much more organised than in Southern Europe; it's quite clever the way things work, especially at the university. Locals tend to be quite practical and full of innovations,

which becomes obvious in Estonia's everyday life. Differences in student life? I really like how the university teachers treat students as equals. At least in Croatia and Poland, where I've also studied, there was more hierarchy, and the lecturers appeared to be on a different level with the students. The Estonian academic environment seems to be more relaxed and open-minded; you can share your ideas and achieve more productivity in this way. On a cultural level, there's a long way between the South and the North: it takes more time to establish friendships with the local students.

Have you noticed any other social or cultural differences between Croatians and Estonians?

Regardless of the contrasts I've observed, our societies have many similarities, too. Croatia was a communist country until the same time, the 1990s, eventually getting into a war that lasted for years, unfortunately. While Estonia was developing, Croatia went backwards: destruction; economic problems; unsettled society. On the other hand, we seem to have a similar way of thinking and a sense of



humour. Otherwise, Croatia is a southern European country, so people tend to be more communicative and relaxed, although not as efficient as Estonians.

Why did you decide to stay?

In the last year of university, I started working at the Eesti Joonisfilm studio, where I was involved in an animation-making project for the Eesti Rahva Muuseum (Estonian National Museum) in Tartu. I've completed two works that are now at the museum: I made one film by myself, while partially working on another as an animator. Having finished university, I started making my own film as a co-production between Croatia and Estonia, again with the Joonisfilm studio, where I still work. In between, I create book illustrations. At the moment, it is Täheke magazine. Recently, we published a children's poetry book, the first book with my illustrations. There's another book in progress meanwhile, so I am quite intertwined with many writers and artists at the moment... Having been part of such an amazing creative environment here, I've decided to stay. The days go by, and you suddenly realise it's been four years.

You've been in Estonia for many years now. Do you have any favourite places you like to go?

I love Ruhnu island. I am learning to play the violin with my friends, so three years ago, I went there to stay in the Ruhnu violin camp. It's a very special island: I liked it so much that I went there two more times after that and would really love to go again. I also like to go to Lahemaa, Viljandi and many other places.

Do you miss anything from Croatia?

Apart from my family, friends and the Croatian summer, I am alright. I try to go there once or twice a year, whenever I can.

You mentioned working at Joonisfilm. What's your current film project about?

I've just finished the animations for a new museum in Narva. Together with a bigger team of five animators, I've made visuals that will be projected on

the museum walls. At the moment, I am co-directing my own artistic animated film with an Estonian animator; it is around 15 minutes long.

What would you say or recommend to people who want to come to Estonia?

You should absolutely consider coming to Estonia for your studies. It's a vibrant, interesting and inspiring place regardless of your field, not only art. If you are craving for a change in your setting, Estonia will definitely be different from your home; it is a destination that will take you out of your comfort zone and make you embrace new things. In my case, Estonian winters help me stay focused on the projects: it's the time when you go "inwards" and really get into what you're doing without any distractions. Other than that, one of my favourite things in Estonia has been the architecture and landscapes: so much space to breathe and the wooden houses in the countryside are completely different from those back in the south of Europe. Lastly, I like the Estonian language. I can't say I speak Estonian, but I've been learning it and understand

quite a lot so far. The grammatical structures are more intricate compared to Croatian. I find it fascinating.

Juan José Restrepo: "Estonia has always been called a singing nation"



COLOMBIA

ESTONIAN ACADEMY OF MUSIC AND THEATRE,
MA IN MUSIC (VIOLIN)

VIOLIN PLAYER IN VANEMUINE SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA;
MA CANDIDATE IN ORCHESTRA CONDUCTING AT ESTONIAN
ACADEMY OF MUSIC AND THEATRE

When did you decide to come to Estonia?

While studying a bachelor's degree in Music in Colombia, I was looking for a master's degree in Europe. Thanks to networking, I had a chance to contact Mari Tampere, who teaches violin at Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre, a very avant-garde place. There was also a possibility to apply for a scholarship, which could help me with the living costs. Although in the end I paid for my studies, it was worth coming here. It was in 2013, and I arrived to Tallinn straight from Bogota. According to my plan, I would stay for only two years. I didn't know, however, that every foreign graduate in Estonia has the opportunity to stay and find a job: it is a fast-growing country that always needs professionals. That's how I started my career as a violin player at the Vanemuine theatre.

What did you know about Estonia before?

I knew one interesting thing about Estonia thanks to the world of music: Olav Roots, an Estonian-born composer and conductor who, in the 1950s, fled to Colombia from Sweden. He lived the last few years of his life in Colombia, conducting the National Symphony Orchestra, and became a very important figure in the evolution of the local classical music culture. We knew about Estonia because of him.

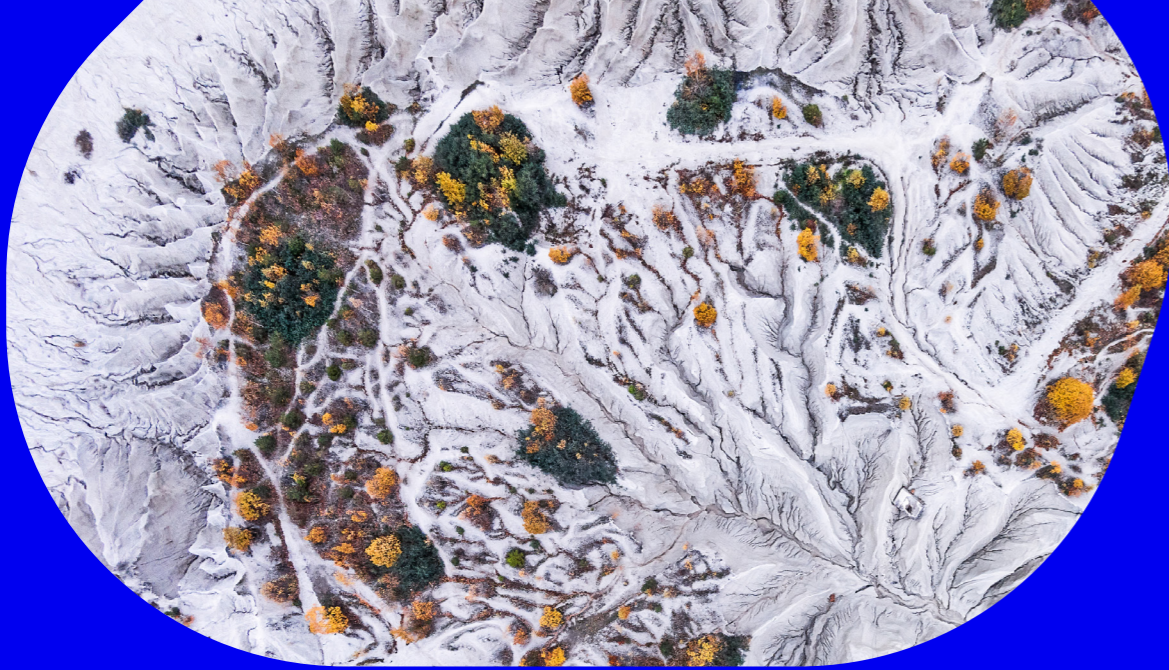
What are your impressions of student life in Estonia?

Studying music can sometimes be compared to professional sports: you dedicate hours and hours to practicing the instrument. I've studied violin, so my whole life was at the Academy, starting at an early hour every day to practice the instrument and attend lectures. Other than that, studying in Estonia compared to Colombia was like a whole new world. First, it is the system of education that works more effectively than in Latin countries: students are free to choose their own development path, and they

have access to financial support. Colombia's public education system is already collapsing because too many people are seeking higher education. Alternatively, you could go to a private university. Although more expensive, it can be viewed as an investment into your future. Unlike in Colombia, a country of 44 million people, it is easier to manage and keep things under control in such a small country like Estonia.

Many people say Estonians are closed and not very chatty, while in Latin America, from my experience, people seem to be happier and more open. Would you say that's true?

There are many factors that influence social interactions between people. South America is a huge land; there are no seasons, only one type of nice weather. Colombia is part of a Hispanic cultural community, more temperamental and emotional. Yet I wouldn't say Estonians are closed; it depends on the personality. I have met many Estonians who were open from the start, especially in the music world where we all know each other. Some locals



may be reserved until they begin to trust you, when they get to know you. Estonia is a unique culture with a unique language, which itself makes it unlike any other place in the world.

Do you have a favourite place in Estonia where you like to go?

I am always on the move: I live in Tartu, teach violin to children and teenagers in Võru music school and am studying for a master's degree in Orchestra Conducting in Tallinn, which I am very lucky to be part of. Since I study in Estonian, I already feel like an Estonian student and I am very grateful for that. Speaking of my favourite places, I like Tartu and Võru, more to the south of Estonia, for their calm and quiet atmosphere.

Did you speak any Estonian before you came?

No, I had only done some basic research on how to say tere hommikust (good morning), tere päevast (good day) and so on. However, I could never imagine I would study in a language like Estonian, such a unique yet difficult one with complex

grammar. It's still tough, but I try to speak and be understood. I guess it's a lifelong process to master a foreign language. It's true when they say you don't need words if you have music: it's all about your instrument and your voice. Once I started working in Tartu, of course, I began to really learn and speak Estonian to survive.

Do you miss anything from Colombia?

The nature is something that I miss from home, because Colombia has everything: the mountains, the seaside... I can always go back there, but my heart belongs to Estonia, as it has taught me to adapt. My first winter in Estonia, the darkness, for example, was shocking to me, but I learned how to adapt. It's also about learning how to express yourself and communicate with the local people without being intimidated by their seriousness, not simply learning the language as such. It's already been six years that I am here.

What would you say or recommend to anyone who'd like to study in Estonia?

It's an amazing idea, whether you are into music and arts or something else. Baltic Media School would be an interesting choice; IT careers tend to be quite successful here. Have you seen the new building of the Music and Theatre Academy? Now there's even more space for anyone who'd like to start their studies in there. So, if you are planning to study music, Estonia would be the right place. It has always been called a singing nation for a reason.

You've mentioned a degree in conducting. Are you planning to work in this field?

It would be great, another possibility to develop my career as a musician. At the moment, I am doing an orchestral interpretation of violin, as well as teaching everything I've ever learned in my life, sharing my knowledge with others. Orchestra is a completely new level where you have to be able to control a massive group of musicians in front of you. There's a lot of responsibility and complexity involved in doing that job. Yet, I'd love to do it, when it's the right time.

Isaac Diaz Carpio: "Coming here was the best decision of my life"



SPAIN

TALLINN UNIVERSITY,
MA IN COMMUNICATION MANAGEMENT

SEO CONTENT SPECIALIST FOR SPAIN AND LATIN
AMERICA AT TRANSFERWISE

You've now been in Estonia for almost five years. How did the decision to study here come about?

It was a mix of different things. Back in 2010, I did my bachelor's Erasmus in Finland, a place so much different from where I live in Spain. Eventually, I knew I wanted to do a master's abroad, somewhere in the north of Europe. Of all the options, Estonia was there in my mind. I checked different study websites and came across Study in Estonia, where I found a master's in Communication Management at Tallinn University. Following some research, I found out that Estonia, and Tallinn specifically, have great tech and startup potential, so the city seemed like a very special place that could give me something other countries wouldn't. Everybody goes to the UK, Germany, but who goes to Estonia, right? Before going on my Erasmus exchange in Finland, I asked the coordinator to send me as far to the north of Europe as they could. So, I spent some time on Pettersaari, a Finnish island in the middle of nowhere with a population of about 20,000 people. This time,

I decided I would also like to go to a remote place, except it would have to be a capital city.

So, how much did you know about Estonia before coming here?

I didn't know much. I kind of expected you to be somewhat similar to Finns, from a Spanish point of view, so I didn't expect to have that much of a cultural shock. There's something I would call a Nordic way of living: it is sort of the pace you follow, which translates into the way you live and work, completely different from Spain. However, each lifestyle has its benefits.

What would you say were the biggest differences in terms of student life, compared to Spain?

In terms of the EU law and the Bologna Process (the European Higher Education Area), standards and qualifications are the same. Speaking of Tallinn University, the delivery of the courses seemed to be much different from Spain. First of all, it was

a master's degree; second, it was much more interesting, intellectually stimulating and interactive. Most of my lecturers were practitioners, the fact that adds more value in terms of networking. In such a small country as Estonia, everybody knows each other. For instance, there was a top specialist of a marketing and communication agency, a journalist from ERR (Estonian Public Broadcasting) and an employee of the Estonian government's communication office. It is a hands-on experience, being taught by the professionals. Needless to say, we studied in a beautiful campus.

As a person who has lived in different countries, what do you think of Estonia as an e-country?

It works very well. It's the ID card that makes everything simple, first of all. Doing your taxes here is a beautiful experience! Two-three minutes online and that's it. By now, I believe, there's also wireless internet in most of the world, but Estonia gives it so much more importance, providing free public Wi-Fi access in every corner of the country: from my experience, there might be a small internet spot even



in a swamp. Otherwise, you have unlimited mobile data access anywhere you go. I am always happy about it. I will talk about local digital services every time I leave Estonia, as if I am an official ambassador of e-Estonia. Last year, I travelled around Canada for about a month, so each time Estonia came up in a conversation, I would try to explain as much as I could about it. I even met my Estonian friend there! We both knew we were there at the same time and just ended up bumping into each other, so random and funny.

You said you came here because you wanted to live in a bigger city. Tallinn seems to be the right place. Do you have any favourite spots here?

My office in TransferWise, I'd say, is one of the greatest. I always tell everyone: visit us, it's in the TOP 10 of places to see in Tallinn! Then as well, I like the Telliskivi district, of course, especially in the summer. Great to be there, meeting new people and hanging around. I think I have visited the Old Town about a million times and would go there a million times more. I especially enjoy the late night walks,

when the streets of the Old Town are empty. Outside of Tallinn, I've been to Tartu, Pärnu, Narva, Rakvere, Haapsalu and Saaremaa. Here, you leave the town and already feel like you're in the middle of nowhere, which makes Estonian nature and the countryside entirely different from Spain, where it takes longer for you to dive into the nature. As I am from Catalonia, our landscapes have a lot of hills and mountains, there's a village around each rocky corner. Estonia has more forests instead, peaceful and beautiful.

In Estonia, when we think of Spain, we think of hot summers. What do you think about the Estonian weather?

Believe it or not, Estonian summers are the most difficult for me. I am not used to wearing long sleeves and pants in the middle of August. Winters, on the other hand, are meant to be cold; I am ready for them. Snowy winters create a very special mood, when there's a lot of street light, reflected from the snow: it's just fantastic!

What would you say was the best thing that has happened to you in Estonia?

I must admit, coming to Estonia was the best life decision I've ever made, for many reasons: all the people I've met, the decisions I've faced, the things I've studied and learned at work, all the opportunities I've found. I consider Estonian society to be special in many ways, and one of them would be the corporate culture. For example, if you're sending an email to an Estonian colleague, you know it has to be short and to the point. You send the email, done. In Spain, you first have to talk about your weekend, try to engage with the other person emotionally, have a chit chat via email. Such communication habits have certain benefits: they make it easier to relate to the people you work with or ask them a favour in case you need anything. Here, it's the opposite: don't be a pain in the ass and be straightforward in what you need. It has changed my way of living and doing things, being more direct. In a workplace environment, it creates less bureaucracy and makes your work life more balanced.

You've mentioned you work in TransferWise. How did you end up there and what do you do?

I've been in TransferWise for three and a half years already. Ever since I've arrived in Estonia, I heard many cool things about this company, had some friends working there and always thought I'd want to work in a place like that. The right moment came when I was graduating from my master's degree and running out of money. At first, I got a position in Spanish Customer Support. Since I didn't have much professional experience back then, with the exception of a few internships, I thought I'd start from there. TransferWise, in turn, seemed like a company that would ask: "Hey, you have an idea? Give us your plan and start working on it". That's exactly how I

moved to a digital marketing position, focusing on the SEO (Search Engine Optimisation) content for Spain and Latin America.

If you work in an international company, such as TransferWise, language isn't that big of an issue, obviously, but how much Estonian have you learned so far?

I think I've failed with this, to be honest. I try to stay up-to-date with the news and Estonian politics. I have a lot of Estonian friends, so I've started learning the language as well. Unfortunately, it's been too complicated for me; at the moment, I don't really need it. Nor do I know for how long I will stay in Estonia. For now, I know some words, can understand certain conversations and react based on that.

So you are not certain for how long you will stay in Estonia? What does the future hold for you, as much as you can tell?

Well, the future is complicated. Studies and professional development were one of the main reasons I came here. I had a chance to learn more about myself and get my career started. What would be my next step, how can I continue developing myself, learn new things and see new perspectives? These are the questions I have to answer for myself in the near future.

ISAAC DIAZ CARRIO: "COMING HERE WAS THE BEST DECISION OF MY LIFE"

Dasha Karpilovich: "I must have been an Estonian in my previous life"



BELARUS

ESTONIAN BUSINESS SCHOOL,
MA IN INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION

HEAD OF MARKETING IN THE BALTIC STATES
AT HUAWEI

How many years ago did you come to Estonia?

I first came here in 2013 and started a master's programme in International Business Administration at Estonian Business School (EBS). Initially, I came to Estonia for personal reasons: while studying in China, I met my future husband, who happened to be an Estonian. Eventually, I decided to enrol with the Estonian Business School, which happened for two reasons. First, it was the strong reputation that the school has in the field of business. Second, my personal interests and professional background involve a strong international element, so the subjects offered by EBS matched my expectations better than other similar programmes in Estonia. In hindsight, it was a 100% success. Currently, I am Head of Marketing in the Baltic Countries at Huawei in Tallinn.

Although you already had a connection to Estonia before the start of your studies, what were your expectations? How much did you know about Estonia back then?

Not much at all. I only knew it would be clean and less crowded, compared to the countries I'd lived in before; a place where you can be closer to nature and yourself. The mentality, the culture — everything seemed to be extremely different from those of China or Belarus, where I am originally from. It's a common fact that Estonians tend to be quite reserved, so that wasn't that big of a cultural shock. Then again, once you break the ice and establish a closer connection, it'll last for a lifetime. In this sense, I often compare Estonian culture to Australia, where I've also lived before: it's a completely opposite experience when people are extremely open from the very beginning. They'll be nice and friendly towards you, and yet you'll never be able to open them up and let yourself into their lives; there's never a deeper connection because you're a foreigner.

That's right. In Estonia, there are so few of us that we can't afford to let people go. What would you say were the biggest differences in terms of the student culture? You've now studied in three countries?

Four, in fact: Belarus, Australia, China and Estonia. For me, studying in Estonia turned out to be the top experience. In Belarus, the system of education continues to be very much outdated, so I'd always wanted to leave the country and study abroad. Speaking of China, the international students are so isolated from the Chinese that it becomes hard to draw a comparison. We always had our own classes of Chinese Studies, which included Chinese language, culture, economics, etc. There wasn't much room for freedom, creativity or self-expression. It was a great experience, yet sometimes I compare the education model there to that of a high school. At EBS in Estonia, I got all I needed, being hungry for knowledge. We were taught by both the professors, who are strong in a theoretical background, and industry professionals, who were able to share their experience and demonstrate real-life cases. Later, the connections you set up at



the university are of great help in getting your career started and becoming integrated into society. In Australia, I did an exchange semester as a student of EBS, another great opportunity the university provided me with. However, it turned out to be too easy for me. Here, one semester means about eight subjects. At master's level, you work nine to five, go to the university for your evening classes, and do some homework later that night. It involves a lot of lectures and group projects. In Australia, meanwhile, there are only two subjects per semester, with very few lectures. The idea behind the system implies independent studying, but it doesn't really work that way — you have to be pushed to study.

You graduated in 2016 and were already working during your master's. Where did you work before?

I worked in a Chinese company dealing with trading business, mostly as an interpreter of Chinese, English and Russian. Later, my responsibilities were extended into other areas. When I graduated from EBS, it was time to move on and find something else. Obviously, I knew the Huawei brand very well from

back when I was in China, and it had started growing in Estonia when I joined them. It allowed me to use my skills and keep my Chinese language alive, my unique selling point in Estonia. It's beneficial to know Estonian for the job I am doing, but English is the company's official language here.

You've now lived in Tallinn for six years. Do you have any favourite places here?

Many! I love Kalamaja, Rottermanni... In fact, I am an urban person who loves nature, so I am in a perfect place that has both. I am a fan of all the newly developed areas of Tallinn and an area in North-Tallinn, where you drive for only ten minutes and find yourself in an absolutely wild nature park. I haven't seen it in any other city in the world. Outside of Tallinn, I've been to all major cities and islands you would think of.

What do you think of Estonia as a digital state? How does it measure up against other countries?

I'll give you an example. While in Australia, there was still no such thing as unlimited internet; besides, it was too expensive and slow. I used an entire mobile data package on the first day in my rented apartment, just streaming music and YouTube. It was in Melbourne. I couldn't comprehend how it could be over after getting used to having free, unlimited internet here, and taking it for granted. Having an opportunity to do everything online, from opening a bank account to booking a doctor's appointment, this is something I haven't experienced in any other country in the world. After living here for so long, I start considering it a human right. Native Estonians, especially if they haven't travelled around much, may not understand the privilege of living in a digital society.

You've been very active and mobile throughout your life, but what do you miss most about Belarus?

It's hard to say, as I haven't lived in my home country since 2009; it's been ten years now. Many things in Belarus have greatly changed, and I've changed as well. Of course, I miss family. It's so important to have a family connection, but I am lucky to have amazing people surrounding me in Estonia, including my second family now. I've also managed to keep the connection with my Belarusian friends, especially since it's getting easier and easier to travel between countries. Other than that, I'd say I must have been an Estonian in my previous life, because of how comfortable I feel here.

What do you think the future holds for you? Do you feel like Estonia has accepted you?

Legally, yes. Currently, I hope there will be no big changes in the internal policy towards foreigners. At the same time, I've lived here for a long time already and contributed to the country quite a lot, so I don't feel at risk in this sense. Speaking of the language, I set myself a goal to learn Estonian as fast as possible, so in my free time, I attended courses at a language school. It wasn't that difficult, since I speak quite a few foreign languages by now: Belarusian, Russian, English and finally Chinese, which has been the most difficult to learn. Once I understood the logic of Estonian, however, it was only about getting as much vocabulary as possible through communicating, reading and listening. I'd need at least one more year studying at the language school to learn grammar and writing, but it's been rather hard to find free time lately.

Hafiz Abdul Manan: “Living in Estonia has made me more extroverted and confident”



PAKISTAN

TALLINN UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY/
ESTONIAN ACADEMY OF ARTS,
MSC IN DESIGN TECHNOLOGY

DEVELOPMENT ENGINEER AT STONERIDGE, INC.,
ELECTRONICS & CONTROL DEVICES

Had you heard anything about Estonia before moving here?

To be honest, not really. I used to play a lot of online computer games and from time to time I happened to play with people from Estonia. Sometimes we even chatted a little, but there wasn't enough information to really get me interested in the country.

How would you describe your studies here? Were they challenging?

The programme at TalTech is still relatively young. There is much room for improvement and I know that they are actively working on making the programme better. I can give an example: in one subject, we had to do a group task. The lecturer divided us into groups and assigned projects to work on. Unfortunately, my groupmates weren't really interested in doing the work, and the project was failing. So I contacted the lecturer and wrote a long feedback letter, and changes were made pretty much immediately. The next group assignment was much more constructive, and the project ended up being actually useful in real life. The lecturers are

very devoted and really want you to learn. I am now teaching industrial design myself at TalTech.

What did you study before coming to Estonia and what brought you here?

Before coming to Estonia, I studied Mechanical Engineering, until I realised that my passion lies more in creative processes. That also sparked the idea to come study in Estonia, which I did in 2014.

Were you intimidated at all by the new environment?

Estonia was very strange for me in the beginning; it took me three years before I was comfortable enough to call Estonia home. It's hard living this far from Pakistan, because family and friends are far away and can't support you. The different climate, food and people were quite challenging in the beginning.

Was student life exciting?

Student life was indeed colourful. I met many new friends and we're still close. I can also say that it was a challenge at first, because Estonians are quite introverted. But I managed!

What do you think of Estonian people and the culture? How are they different from your homeland?

My first impressions were that you are very different compared to my people. Estonians are more introverted and very self-conscious. In Pakistan, however, people share a collective identity, which revolves around friends and family. In Estonia, it's the opposite. At first, that was a surprise, which took me some time to get used to. I think I still have some difficulty finding Estonian friends, but I take it as a positive challenge. For example, I was very

introverted before moving to Estonia, but living here has made me more extroverted and confident. There aren't many Pakistani people here, but we do have a Pakistan-Estonia association that meets from time to time. It's a small but tight-knit group.

What do you like most about Estonia? Do you have any memories that especially stand out?

The thing I love most about Estonia is the nature and geography. My parents came to visit last summer and they were really, really happy and surprised. It was very quiet and peaceful here, lonely in a good way. We went hiking in the bog and spent the day swimming and discovering the woods. It's definitely one of the highlights. Also very admirable is the fact that, despite a rough history, Estonians have a positive attitude. You can feel that people have moved on and want to keep improving things. It feels like being part of a wave!

What do you think of e-Estonia?

E-governance is a wonderful thing because everything is so unbureaucratic. Nothing gets tied down in paperwork, and everything works fluently.

Do you miss anything specific in Pakistan?

Of course, mainly my family and friends, but also the food. For me, Estonian cuisine is not yet as distinctive or tasty as Central European or Western European, for example. I recently visited Berlin and the dishes there were very impressive. That hasn't happened for me in Estonia yet.

Where are you currently working and where did you work before?

In addition to teaching in the university, I work in a company called Stoneridge Electronics. I didn't work during my studies, because the scholarship I received from the university covered all my needs.

What about the Estonian language? Is it difficult?

I began studying easier phrases, but once I reached B1 level I quit, because I started teaching at the university. Since everyone here speaks really good English, that is the most comfortable way of communicating.



HAFIZ ABDUL MANAN: "LIVING IN ESTONIA HAS MADE ME MORE EXTROVERTED AND CONFIDENT"

Tove Eriksson: "Estonia and Sweden turned out to be quite similar"



SWEDEN

TALLINN UNIVERSITY,
INTERNATIONAL MA IN ADULT EDUCATION
FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

TRAINING COORDINATOR AT REDR UK

So, where did you study?

I studied an international master's in Adult Education for Social Change, coordinated by the University of Glasgow and involving three more institutions across Europe. It's different from traditional exchange studies or studying abroad in general: the courses are delivered in three different locations — Glasgow, Malta and Tallinn — excluding the place where you will write your dissertation from. Estonia is one of the programme's co-creators, so I already knew I would be spending one semester in Tallinn when I applied.

How much did you know about Estonia before coming to study here?

Nothing at all, although Sweden and Stockholm are very close to Estonia. I grew up with an awareness of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, but I knew very little about it and didn't have many expectations, which strikes me in hindsight. In the end, I was pleasantly surprised about Estonia and especially Tallinn, such a cool city! On a practical level, there are so many great places to eat and have a drink, which makes it much more alive and dynamic than I expected it to

be. Setting the university aside, I had a really good time living in Tallinn. If you go outside of it, you get to see Estonia's beautiful countryside. I was happy to discover the Baltic countries and to see them doing so well in spite of the grim pages of history.

Since you are from Sweden, it probably wasn't that much of a cultural shock coming here. Would that be true to say?

No, I wouldn't say that was a big thing. Estonia and Sweden turned out to be very similar, both positively and negatively: you know, two Northern European cultures influenced by a cold climate. What's interesting is I didn't get as full of an experience as I could because of the way our master's was set up: we were studying separately from Estonian students, and following our own curriculum. Most of the contact I had with the locals was during my placement, where I was communicating with the older Estonians in the context of my profession.

Were there any differences in terms of student life?

We were studying hard, I must say. It was a tough semester, but a really great one. One of the things that contributed to that... I don't know if it's common practice for Estonian universities, but I've learned a lot about digital tools and working with online solutions. While studying, I learned how to apply my knowledge of adult education through the use of digital tools. It was a common theme for all the courses that we had and proved to be practically useful for me. Academically, it was a valuable and exciting experience, being entirely different from a lot of other places that I've been to. Since it was the last semester before the dissertation, the workload was intense. We were also coming into winter, so there was not much time left for having fun. Yet I loved the campus of Tallinn University, always full of people to hang out with, whether you are in the library, cafeteria or any other shared space where you can meet up with each other. It was a very nice environment. There was this one place with the stairs where you could sit outside, and people would

always be there. It was a relaxed and sociable way of studying, so you can still have a great time while dealing with an intense workload.

So, what was it exactly that you were studying and what are you doing right now?

I studied Adult Education for Social Change, which basically deals with the practice of adult education in a way that creates active, engaged citizens aware of societal and political issues. While writing my dissertation, I started working as a training coordinator at an NGO that focuses on the training and capacity-building of humanitarian workers, dealing with natural disasters or emergencies. My job includes designing and adapting the courses and delivering the training. It's been a year and a half now.

Considering how close Tallinn and Stockholm are, was there anything you missed from Sweden?

By that time, we'd been on the move for about a year together as a programme cohort and got pretty close, and that became my home for those two years of my master's. Wherever we were was kind of where home was. My partner was also traveling with us, so I had a really great setup in that way. I didn't even go back home while in Tallinn, because I really enjoyed the city. Maybe because of how similar and close Stockholm and Tallinn are, I didn't feel the need to miss home. Then again, to be fair, I've been living in the UK for the past ten years, so I am used to being away. There's only one silly thing I always miss: I am always in search of Swedish sweets. In Estonia, salty liquorice is easy to find, which made me really happy. It's that thing you can never find anywhere else, except in Northern Europe.

Estonians are very proud of being a digital country. How does it compare to other countries you've been to?

As I said, digital solutions were one of the main focuses of my master's programme. At the university, we were always encouraged to make use of digital tools in our assignments and day-to-day work. In addition to that, I did my placement in a local organisation that works with the digitalisation of teaching methods, where I got to see classrooms of the future, featuring desk-size tablets, robots, etc. I hadn't come across that in my master's before or my general interaction with the education system. Estonians do take interest and pride in e-services.

Do you have any favourite places you liked to visit in Tallinn?

I've always liked Telliskivi and a few local restaurants: Must Puudel and a small Russian restaurant, the name of which I cannot remember now. In terms of arts, I recommend visiting Kumu Art Museum. Apart from that, the one thing that I really enjoyed were Estonian saunas, which we often visited outside of Tallinn. It was also a way to get through the winter.

Do you intend to return to Estonia sometime in the future?

I'd love to visit Estonia again. I've been traveling my whole life and now I intend to be based in Northern Europe for a bit longer, so I'd definitely love to go back. Professionally, I'd like to continue working on my own projects and collaborations in adult education, so it would be fantastic to establish some links with Estonia.



TOVE ERIKSSON: "ESTONIA AND SWEDEN TURNED OUT TO BE QUITE SIMILAR"

Eric Kwayisi: "Our nations have a lot in common"



GHANA

ESTONIAN ENTREPRENEURSHIP UNIVERSITY
OF APPLIED SCIENCES,
MA IN INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION

COMPLIANCE SPECIALIST AT TRANSFERWISE

What exactly did you study at the university?

I studied International Business Administration at Estonian Entrepreneurship University of Applied Sciences (Mainor) and received my master's degree in November 2019. I would describe my studies as very practical and thorough. The school constantly encourages students to take the initiative, participate in different projects and be proactive in their professional field. My course was designed in a way that it immediately allowed me to apply my study skills to real-life work. I previously studied Civil Engineering and Business Administration in Ghana. Combining this knowledge helps me see the world from a much better and more intelligent perspective.

Where do you currently work?

I currently work for TransferWise as a Compliance Specialist. I constantly monitor and control the risks associated with user authentication, such as fraud, money laundering, etc. I love my job very much; it's

a fun and pleasant environment. I feel very happy to have started my career as a Customer Support Specialist several years ago and reach such a position in an Estonian company.

When did you come to Estonia and how did you hear about our country?

I arrived in Estonia in 2018 from Kursk, Russia. I was born and raised in Ghana, but after my university studies there, I went to Europe to pursue a master's degree. While in Russia, I started picking up the language and was planning on going to Moscow to study in the same field. Unfortunately, it was a heavy-workload course taught entirely in Russian, so I could not learn the language and follow the speciality at the same time. It was at this moment that a friend living in Kursk told me about the opportunities in Estonia. I did online research on the country for a long time and, honestly, I was overwhelmed — the possibilities and technological development of the Estonian e-government seemed perfect for continuing my studies. After that, I learned more about my school and its modules. Since the language of instruction was English, and the

programme seemed exciting, Estonia was confirmed as the first choice!

Did you have any fears about coming to Estonia? How did you adapt?

In the beginning, what scared me the most was learning about the size of the population. I mean, there are 30 million people living in Ghana, and we are not even the largest country in Africa. Seeing that only 1.3 million people live in Estonia, I was a little bit afraid, because I didn't know what to expect. On the other hand, I can adapt to all kinds of changes quite quickly and easily. Currently, I work for a multicultural company around people from different countries, which has also helped me to adapt. Now, I am enjoying many hobbies here. I play football in a team, play music and go to church.

How would you compare your academic and social life in Ghana and Estonia?

In Estonia, students have the opportunity and a greater privilege to define themselves, decide for

themselves and follow their journey. I have studied most of my life in Ghana and I have to say that the difference is enormous. In my country, students have to gain a lot of experience before they are even allowed to move on. The education I have received in Estonia has enriched my professional self-confidence and the wealth of opportunities ahead. When it comes to Estonian and Ghanaian people, we actually have a lot in common as nations. Both are young countries that only emerged from an occupying power in the last century. Of course, the main difference lies in diversity, because there are more than 400 ethnic groups living in Ghana. Ghanaians also resemble Americans in the sense of being open and friendly. Estonians, however, always seem to have a colder and more reserved attitude; they do not always want to start a conversation until you get to know each other better.

What do you like and dislike about Estonia?

This may surprise you! I really like the weather here. It's chilly, cloudy, and rainy — as cosy as it can get. But most of all, I admire the hard-working

and determined character of Estonians, the fact that has shaped the history of your nation. In terms of inconveniences, I would emphasise that I did not choose my skin colour or the place where I was born. While I understand that people tend to protect themselves and their property, I also face an unpleasant and discriminatory attitude from time to time. If Estonia wants to be on the world map in the future, it must learn to be more open-minded.

Have you learned any Estonian?

At the moment, I don't speak Estonian very much. I know some simple expressions and I can speak them if necessary. Unfortunately, my work schedule has been so busy that there is little time left to study. Hopefully this will change in the future, but I am glad that it is very easy to get along with English and Russian.

What do you think of the e-government?

As I mentioned before, e-government has been one of the main attractions for me to move here. I will



not stay in Estonia forever, and if I ever return home, I would definitely like to bring my e-government knowledge there, contributing to a better Ghana. I have visited Estonia's neighbouring countries, such as Finland and Sweden, but all things digital are not as well developed there. Instead, it's a lot of paperwork and access to services can be quite painful. For Estonia, there is definitely a reason to be proud of e-government!

Are you happy with your experience in Estonia so far?

'Happy' is not the right word — 'fulfilled' would describe it better. Estonia has contributed enormously to who I am, and I want to help this country become renowned on the world map. I have found friends, new hobbies, a wonderful job and a new life here. In addition, there are 15 other Ghanaians here with me, who also add positivity to my life.

Bhavesh Kumar:
"One can hardly
find any disadvantages
to living in Estonia"



INDIA

ESTONIAN ENTREPRENEURSHIP UNIVERSITY
OF APPLIED SCIENCES,
MA IN INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS
ADMINISTRATION

SOFTWARE DEVELOPER AT HANSAB
IT SOLUTIONS

What are you studying in Estonia? What's your background in India?

At the moment, I am studying a master's programme in business at Estonian Entrepreneurship University of Applied Sciences (EUAS) and working as a software engineer at Hansab IT solutions. Originally, I came from a technical field: back in India, I completed a master's degree in Engineering in Electronics and Communication. Following that, I began looking for a good place to start my business studies abroad, and then I came across Estonia. That's how I made the best decision of my life, so far. Here in Estonia, an IT and entrepreneurial hub of Europe, I can work as a developer and think of starting my own business at any time, having learned the tactics on the spot. That's why I chose Estonia.

Did you have any fears or prejudices about Estonia?

Not at all. I got such a good impression on the internet that I came here with a very positive attitude. Nor have I been able to find any particular negative aspects to living, studying or working here. I'm happy with everything.

How would you compare Indian and Estonian student life?

If I compare Estonian student life to the one in India, it is much better here. I would definitely recommend EUAS to anyone seriously considering higher education. In India, there's no such way of learning as you have here: we are mostly focused on acquiring theoretical knowledge and passing exams, rather than practicing technical skills used in a real life workplace. The lectures here are very meaningful and relevant. In addition to providing scholarships and assisting with the integration, higher education institutions are also strongly motivated by employers' attitudes. Getting a job as an international student isn't easy, but everything depends on your skills.

Are there significant cultural differences between India and Estonia? Do you miss India?

Do I miss my home country? Of course, I lived there for so many years. I miss my family, in particular. Yet in spite of this, I love Estonia a lot. It's been two years now. It's a very safe country: you can come back home at 2am without being worried for your safety. The way of living here, generally, seems to be "smarter" and very practical, with the "gears" working the right way in every aspect. On top of that, there are so many events going on, especially in Tallinn! There's always an opportunity to meet

new people. The main difference, however, is that people in India are much more open and sociable. Estonians don't like to talk much, so it takes a bit of time to break the ice and become friends. There are some Indian people living here, but I don't interact with them much. My goal is to get connected with the local people and become part of the Estonian community. The climate is also very different: in India, we would normally have 35-40 degrees Celsius, which is really hot compared to the Estonian reality! In the beginning, it was a little difficult to become adjusted, but I am used to it by now.

What do you think of Estonia as an e-country?

Estonian e-services save you a huge amount of time, money and patience in terms of bureaucracy and paperwork. You may, for example, file your taxes or apply for a residence permit within minutes.

Do you have some special memories from your time here?

I remember vividly the first time I visited the Seaplane Harbour Museum in Tallinn and the feeling of curiosity and excitement my family and I had when we saw an old submarine on display. It was a very precious and memorable moment for me.





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