

## **IS IT POSSIBLE TO BE A “DILL” AND STILL GET AN INTERNATIONAL MASTERS DEGREE IN LIS?**

K. HOWARD<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Digital Library Services, Royal Society for the Blind, Adelaide, South Australia*  
[KHoward@rsb.org.au](mailto:KHoward@rsb.org.au)

### **ABSTRACT**

Not only is it possible, but the two go hand in hand! In this paper I will discuss my experience as an Erasmus Mundus scholarship holder which enabled me to undertake the International Masters in Digital Library Learning (<http://dill.hio.no>) – or DILL for short. This very rich and rewarding experience – both professionally and personally – took place from August 2007 to July 2009. It has not only provided a greater understanding of what is perhaps the newest facet of Library and Information Science (the Digital Library) on a theoretical level, but has opened my eyes to the formal research process that is required to write a thesis.

I will discuss both the DILL programme and the Erasmus Mundus scholarship initiative; what it was like to be the only Australian in a group of 18 international students; the experience of living in three very different cities (you will be surprised which one supplied the biggest culture shock!); the relationship to my current employment; and the opportunities it continues to provide me with – apart from free accommodation on every continent with my new-found international friends and colleagues!

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

At the conclusion of my Graduate Diploma in Information Studies in 2006, I received an email from one of my lecturers. In it were details of a brand new Masters programme being offered in digital library studies in Europe. This captured my interest on a few of levels. Firstly, the fact that there was a specialist, dedicated programme in digital libraries – from what had been discussed throughout the Graduate Diploma I was under the impression that digital libraries were the way of the future, and yet there was comparatively little time spent on it. Secondly, a chance to live in three different European cities for the two-year duration of the programme – living in Europe or the UK had been a long held dream of mine; and finally, the existence a very generous scholarship which meant this could actually be a possibility. I was completely amazed that such an opportunity existed. My next step was to delete the email.

“Wonderful opportunity” I thought, “but nothing like that ever happens to me”. At the end of the email, my lecturer had written “For those of you who are able, I urge you to put your hat in the ring”. Even after deleting the email, those words haunted me. A few days later, I retrieved the email from the trash and applied. I put my best effort into the application, but at no time did I consider that I might actually be successful. My intention at the time was to see how far along the selection process I would get. It was a personal benchmarking exercise to see how I rated in an international selection process and I would have been happy to make the reserve list. Consequently, I promptly forgot that I had applied. In March of 2007 I received an email to say my application was successful. I was chuffed to say the least! My application was deemed to be as good as 20 other people from around the world – the benchmarking was complete and I was happy. However, I needed to respond to the offer - I could accept a position in the course outright; accept it subject to receiving the scholarship; or decline the offer. As there was no way I would be able to fund the two years in Europe myself, I ticked the “Accept subject to scholarship” box, and again promptly forgot about it because “nothing like that ever happens to me”!! In May of 2007 I was advised I had received the scholarship; by July, I was living in Oslo.

## **2. WHAT’S IN A NAME? THE INTERNATIONAL MASTERS IN DIGITAL LIBRARY LEARNING**

At this point, I should explain the title of this paper. In his welcome speech in Oslo, the Coordinator of the programme, Dr. Ragnar Audunson, told us that the consortium members were looking for a suitable name and acronym for the programme. They had the “DL” from “Digital Library” and as they were experimenting with different options, someone suggested “DIL”. Then they thought that if they added another “L” they had “DILL” – the same word as the herb. So the word “Learning” was added to the name of the programme. Dr. Audunson explained to us that the acronym being the same word as the herb was quite appropriate – the herb adds flavour to our food and that we, as students coming as we did from all parts of the world, would also add a unique ‘flavour’ to the teaching and learning experience. I didn’t dare tell him that in Australian slang a “dill” is an idiot! We became known as “DILL 1 students” because we were the first intake of the course and each subsequent intake continue to be known by their intake number. At the time of writing, DILL 2 are putting the finishing touches to their theses; DILL 3 will be starting their third semester in Parma in Italy and DILL 4 will be making arrangements to make their way to Oslo for their first semester. So, in order to obtain an International Masters degree in LIS, you must be a DILL, as opposed to a dill!

DILL is a Master programme under the European Union’s Erasmus Mundus programme. It is a joint degree offered by a consortium of three European universities: Oslo University College in Norway; Tallinn University in Estonia; and Parma University in Italy. One semester is spent at each institution and the final thesis-writing semester is spent at the institution of the students’ choice. Students graduate with a Masters degree that is recognised by all three partner institutions. As an International Master, my student colleagues came from all corners of the globe, including South Africa, Kenya, Tanzania, Ghana, Ethiopia, Laos, Thailand, Canada, Colombia, Kyrgyzstan and Kosova.

## 2.1. Programme overview

The Oslo semester started with a Summer School – an intense “crash course” in XML. Out of everything that I had read that I would be studying over the course of the two year programme, the prospect of *me* learning XML was the most frightening. I needn't have worried – by the end of the week I was writing well-formed documents, linking them to DTDs (Document Type Definitions) and validating them by using the W3C's Markup Validation Service.<sup>1</sup> The two modules for this semester were Research Methods and Theory of Science – vitally important for the thesis writing semester – and Digital Documents, covering a wide range of topics such as metadata in digital environments, ontologies, semantic web standards and information architecture.

The modules offered in the second semester at Tallinn University included Information and Knowledge Management, covering the “identification of information/knowledge needs, and the acquisition, discovery, storage, organisation, sharing, use and application of information/knowledge in the organisational context” (from <http://dill.hio.no>). This module saw a stream of international professors – Dr. Christian Schlögl from the University of Graz in Austria, Dr. Judith Broady-Preston from the University of Aberystwyth, Wales and Dr. Abdus Sattar Chaudhry from Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. But what would a module on Knowledge Management be without the author of the controversial “The nonsense of Knowledge Management”,<sup>2</sup> Professor Tom Wilson? We had a Skype hook up with him – which incidentally was developed by those technology-loving Estonians!

Similarly in Parma we had many international experts. The highlight for me was in the module “Access to Digital Libraries” which included a series of lectures and hands-on sessions with Dr. Ian Witten, one of the developers of Greenstone Digital Library software, where we built our own digital library. This consolidated so much of what we had already learnt in previous semesters. An intense week of Evaluation of Digital Libraries was conducted by Toni Olshen and Danuta Nitecki from York and Yale Universities respectively. The final weeks in Parma saw our class scattered over Europe in order to undertake internship programmes as part of the Users and Uses of Digital Libraries module. I completed mine at Casa della Musica in Parma, a music library, archive and museum co-located in the former Palazzo Cusani. It was here that I developed a keen interest in the Libraries, Archives and Museum (LAM) and digital cultural heritage sectors.

The final thesis-writing semester is undertaken at one of the three partner institutions. When discussing with a professor in Adelaide what topic I would write my thesis on, I was given an invaluable piece of advice: “whatever you do, make sure you have a good supervisor.” While each institution had highly qualified and able supervisors, I chose to return to Tallinn University as I felt a great affinity with the academic staff there. It was one of the best decisions I have ever made.

As intensive as the study was, there were many opportunities to learn about the culture of the country you were in; that of your colleagues and other international students studying at the same institution. In Oslo, the International Office staff arranged visits around the city and surrounds. One week you might be having a picnic on one of the many islands in the Oslo fjord, the next week you are staring at Edvard Munch's “The Scream” or a Stave Church from the 13th century housed at the Norsk Folkemuseum. There were opportunities to learn the language (difficult!) or to do what Norwegians do best – mountain climb (even more difficult!). I even got the chance to walk on a glacier – and yes, the ice really is blue!

Similar opportunities were offered in Tallinn. I took a class on Estonian History and Culture in addition to my Masters programme. After my disastrous attempt at learning Norwegian and knowing that Estonian nouns and adjectives have 14 cases, I thought I would cut my losses early and just learn some useful phrases! In Parma, the coordinator arranged for a cultural history graduate to show us the gems of that city. Parma has many claims to fame, aside from the famous ham and cheese. The University of Parma is one of the oldest in the world, and Parma is the birthplace of many a famous painter (Correggio, a.k.a. Allegri), composer (Verdi) and typographer Bodoni, whose family of typefaces bearing his name are still used today.

## **2.2. Three countries, three cities, three different experiences**

“First impressions last.” It is amazing how true that maxim can be, and how true it was for each country I lived in. Prior leaving Australia, I had to arrange a residence permit for Norway in a very short period of time as I would be there for longer than my Australian passport would allow. In fact, the time frame was so short that I had to have all the paperwork ready **before** I knew if I would be fortunate enough to receive the scholarship. I had contacted the Norwegian Embassy to explain my situation, and they bent over backwards to ensure my permit was processed in time. At the same time, I was dealing with Oslo University College’s International Office staff in regards to booking accommodation, paying deposits and taking up their offer of a ‘meet and greet’ service on arrival. Norway became rich with the discovery of oil, and the country runs – for the most part – like a well-oiled machine!

At the risk of generalising an entire nation, I found the Norwegian people to be somewhat introverted but nonetheless very sincere. There are no airs and graces - what you see is what you get. The introversion is often blamed on the long dark winters when there is not much else to do but sit inside and read a book – indeed, studies have shown that the value Norwegians place on their public libraries far outweighs their costs.<sup>3</sup>

The prospect of moving from a country which values freedom and equality as Norway does, to a former Soviet republic that is Estonia, was somewhat daunting. I knew a little about Soviet Russia through my undergraduate degree in music where I developed a fascination for the composer Shostakovich and the “honest communist / secret dissident” debate that continues to rage.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps because of this, I have to admit that I was expecting quite a lot of “post-Soviet” red tape. Nothing could have been further from the truth. Estonia is an incredibly progressive country which embraced its “re-independence”<sup>5</sup> from the Soviet Union by embracing technology and using it to their advantage. Estonia had one of the very first e-governments in the world; they were the first to utilise a legally binding electronic voting system using the internet; and it was three Estonians who developed Skype. The country is completely wired – everywhere you go there is a free wireless internet connection available. Granted, it is a small country at just over 45,000 square kilometres (Australia is over 7.7 million square kilometres) which makes this comparatively easy to achieve, but it means that approximately 900,000 people out of a total population of 1.2 million – or 75% - are internet users.

In my experience, the Estonian people are similar in many ways to the Norwegians – very quiet and reserved. Because much of the population remember what it was like to be ruled by a power other than what they believed to be their own, I found them to have a different approach to national pride – it is fiercely guarded. They are very proud of the fact that they gained their re-independence without a

drop of blood being spilt (they are very quick to point out that this was not the case with either Latvia or Lithuania). If you want to make an Estonian smile, just say “terre” (hello) – they are humbled that you have made an attempt to speak a language spoken by just 1.2 million people in the world. If you want to annoy them, turn up late to a meeting....which is a perfect segue to a discussion about living in Italy!

Think of everything you may have heard about the level of organisation (or lack thereof) in Italy: trains running late or on strike – check. Shops closing for lunch (including cafes and restaurants) – check. Shops closing at 12 o'clock on Thursdays and not re-opening again until Friday morning (I'm not sure what the reason was!) – check. And the list goes on! The Italian bureaucracy was also true to rumoured form. As with each country I lived in, I required a residence permit – in Italy this is called the “permesso di soggiorno”. Additionally, unlike Norway and Estonia, I had to have a visa to actually get into Italy because my intended stay was longer than the three months allowed with an Australian passport (and of course pay the visa fee). On arrival in September 2008, I duly applied for my permesso di soggiorno (including another two fees: a special “tax stamp” and the application fee!). In due course, my application would be processed and I would receive a letter with an appointment time to attend the Questura (police). Approximately 6 weeks later I did in fact receive the letter. Despite all my colleagues receiving appointments to attend the Questura in Parma (where we were living), I was given an appointment in Rome - about 5 hours away by train – for no apparent reason. But the clincher for me was the date of my appointment – 26<sup>th</sup> May, 2009. Add six weeks onto that date and I would be home in Australia for good, having just finished my final thesis writing semester!! Needless to say I never received my permesso di soggiorno, as I was not in the country to attend the appointment. Compare that to my second application for a residence permit in Estonia where I turned up to the Immigration Office at 9 o'clock and was back in the elevator, residence permit in hand at 9:06am – on the same day! As someone who is punctual and acts in a timely manner, the Italian idea of “laid-back” made living in Italy very much a challenge for me. Nevertheless, there were some little gems, such as spending a weekend in Florence for my birthday.

### **3. THE ERASMUS MUNDUS SCHOLARSHIP INITIATIVE**

The Erasmus Mundus programme was introduced in July 2001 by the European Commission. Its creation was inspired by the successful Erasmus programme for internal EU students which seeks to support “co-operation and mobility between European higher education institutions”.<sup>6</sup> The Erasmus programme is named after the 15<sup>th</sup> century Dutch scholar Desiderius Erasmus Rotterdamus. The addition of the word “Mundus” which is Latin for “world” represents the international scope of the programme.<sup>7</sup> It was modelled in part on the United States Fulbright Scholarship programme and is now said to be in direct competition with this programme for attracting foreign students.<sup>8</sup>

Erasmus Mundus is a mobility programme and such students are required to study in at least two European cities. Its aim is to prepare “its participants for life in a global, knowledge-based society” by promoting open dialogue between cultures.<sup>9</sup> By also offering scholarships of up to three months to academics, the programme seeks “to enhance quality in higher education through scholarships and academic cooperation between Europe and the rest of the world.”<sup>10</sup> Australian LIS academics have been very active in receiving these scholarships. To date, we have had three academics that I am aware of involved in the DILL Programme: Dr. Anne Maree Lloyd from Charles Sturt University (CSU);

Dr. Helen Partridge from Queensland University of Technology (QUT); and Dr. Sue Myburgh from the University of South Australia (UniSA). However, the same cannot be said for Australian students. In the year that I was accepted, there was one other Australian who made the 'reserve list' - a colleague of mine from UniSA. Since then, no Australians have applied. By writing this paper, I hope it will encourage a few more people to apply.

#### **4. APPLICATION HINTS AND TIPS**

Hopefully by now I have kindled your interest enough for you to consider applying for this amazing opportunity. If so, you are guaranteed only one more intake - DILL 5 - for the year 2011. The consortium plans to apply to the European Commission for a 5 year extension, but there are no guarantees that it will be accepted.

The application needs to include your academic transcript; a short CV (3 pages); up to three letters of reference; and a Statement of Purpose, detailing your motivation for applying, your subject interests and what you would like to do after completion. I would advise you to put a great deal of thought and research into this part of your application. Research the European Commission's Erasmus Mundus website ([http://ec.europa.eu/education/erasmus-mundus/doc514\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/education/erasmus-mundus/doc514_en.htm)) to understand the philosophy behind the initiative and use this to tailor your Statement of Purpose – fit what you want to get out of the programme into the stated aims and objectives of the programme. Additionally, I believe that if you can find a niche to your Statement of Purpose, your application will stand out from all the others. My application for example indicated my interest in the music information retrieval field and how digital technology could be used to assist music scholars. I also stated that I would like to use this experience to gain an understanding of what is actually taught in the DILL programme (at the time, the only dedicated Digital Library Masters degree that I was aware of) and bring that knowledge back to Australia to possibly inform our own LIS programmes. As it turned out, I have not pursued the music information retrieval, but I certainly did pursue the LIS education track – my thesis was based on what academic librarians and LIS academics saw as the requirements for digital library education in Australia.

Applications from non-European Union countries (so-called 'third-countries') close on 15 November 2010 a pdf version can be found here: [http://dill.hio.no/files/dill\\_application\\_form\\_stud-2010.pdf](http://dill.hio.no/files/dill_application_form_stud-2010.pdf) or a Word version can be found here: [http://dill.hio.no/files/dill\\_application\\_form\\_stud-2010.doc](http://dill.hio.no/files/dill_application_form_stud-2010.doc). Further information on all aspects of DILL can be found on the website: <http://dill.hio.no/>.

#### **5. CONCLUSION**

The programme on the whole is incredibly well organised and delivered. It is supported by excellent administration and international office staff who were only too happy to help you adjust to life in your new, albeit temporary, homes. The quality of the teaching staff is second to none. They are all well known in their field and as such have amazing contacts to other academics equally well known in their field – and as students we were on the receiving end of many of them agreeing to be guest lecturers, some for just one session, and others for several sessions.

Completing this programme has given me the skills and confidence to submit and present papers at national and international conferences. At the risk of “blowing my own trumpet”, by the end of this year, I will have presented at three national conferences (including one in Italy for the Italian Librarian’s Association) and two international conferences (including IFLA in Gothenburg, Sweden). Without this programme, I do not believe I could have achieved this.

As for employment opportunities, I am currently managing the digital library of audio books for the Royal Society for the Blind in South Australia. This position has enabled me to learn a great deal about print disabilities and alternative formats and how access to information – and therefore people’s quality of life - is greatly enhanced by the use of digital technology. Perhaps I would have been able to fulfil this position without the master’s degree in Digital Library Learning, but I believe it has given me an increased level of understanding from which to start.

It is difficult to explain exactly how this programme has changed me personally, except to say that I have grown from the experience. Living in different countries, experiencing their culture, their way of living life, dealing with language barriers (although English is widely spoken, especially in Oslo and Tallinn, surprisingly not as much in Parma) has a way of building not only one’s resilience but also understanding. Additionally, the bonds that we as a student group formed were incredibly strong. Despite being from completely different backgrounds in most cases, we experienced the highs and lows of the two years together. These were common experiences that took precedence over any country of origin. I can honestly say that I started the programme in July 2007 with colleagues and I ended it in June 2009 with friends, including many of the academic staff.

One final remark: if you do consider this programme, it is only fair that I warn you now - there is a 6 hour exam in Oslo for the Digital Documents module!

## REFERENCES

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[<sup>2</sup>] Wilson, T D.: The nonsense of “knowledge management”, *Information Research*, Vol. 8(1) (2002). Available from [informationr.net/ir/8-1/paper144.html](http://informationr.net/ir/8-1/paper144.html)

[<sup>3</sup>] Svanhild Aabø.: “Are Public Libraries Worth Their Price?” *New Library World* Vol. 106 (11/12), pp.487-485 (2005).

[<sup>4</sup>] See for example Fay, L. (2000) *Shostakovich: a Life*. New York: Oxford University Press.

[<sup>5</sup>] Estonians refer to their independence from the Soviet Union in August 1991 as their “re-independence”, claiming that they gained their first independence from Soviet Russia on 24 February, 1918. See <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/en.html>

[<sup>6</sup>] European Commission: Education and Training, Overview (2009). Available from [http://ec.europa.eu/education/erasmus-mundus/doc514\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/education/erasmus-mundus/doc514_en.htm)

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