

An Irish students Erasmus experience



The Lifelong Learning Programme, Erasmus+, supports higher education students with a study period or traineeship in one of 33 participating European countries as part of their undergraduate or postgraduate degree. The European Commission set a target of 20% of graduates from Higher Education institutions in Europe to have experienced studying or training outside their home countries by 2020 (Bologna Process, 2009). As of 2017, only 6% of Irish students enrolled in Higher Education abroad (HEA Eurostudent VI Survey, 2018). The benefits of studying abroad are many and varied and include the development of cultural competencies; the learning and familiarity with foreign languages; the improvement of overall communication skills; the promotion and embedding of future mobility opportunities for work and individual personality development. We, as members of the Guidance Community, have a responsibility to promote and encourage learners to avail of all the learning and experiential opportunities available to them. Below, one student shares with us her honest insights into her Erasmus experience, as an Irish student abroad, which she hopes will encourage and increase promotion and participation.

Why I chose to go Erasmus.....my hopes

In my case, the year abroad was a compulsory component of my degree. I had, however, always been looking forward to it and it was one of the main reasons I chose to study languages! I had very clear objectives setting out. By choosing to attend Salamanca University, Spain, I knew that it would be a great opportunity to improve my language skills, to travel and to get to know Spanish people and culture. More importantly, I hoped that through this experience I would become a more confident, independent and open-minded person.

My first impression

Something I noticed about Salamanca and Spain was the insane amount of meat (especially ham) that they eat! Wherever you look, there is always meat on display in shop windows. Being from Ireland, I noticed the obviously warmer climate. I was honestly blown away by Salamanca's beauty. It was so quaint but practical. It had such a great atmosphere that I felt at home straight away. It was so rich in Spanish culture and history. The fact the

university was the heart of the city was probably its most important factor.

The highs and lows of the experience....what it taught me

Having the opportunity to meet people from all over the world whether it be through Erasmus events, classes at the University or just be chance, was fantastic. More than anything, my participation in the University Choir formed an integral part of my whole Erasmus experience. Everyone was so kind and friendly. It was all made easier through our shared love of music. The members were of all different ages, backgrounds and careers between students and adults. They were all locals and had been involved in the choir for many years. It was a privilege to sing with them, get to know them and hear their stories. We also toured a lot which was an added bonus!

I had difficulties, as everyone does. My friends and family supported me a lot while I was away and I was really grateful for it.

At the beginning there was a lot of paper work to fill out and registering for classes that fit with my timetable proved difficult. Spanish students didn't seem to be too interested in engaging in conversation. Things got easier over time as I plucked up the courage to talk to them outside of class. Once they became more familiar with me, they were very helpful and friendly. I learnt that I had nothing to lose and everything to gain from putting myself out there and not worrying about judgement from others. I became a lot more self-assured as a result. It might sound clichéd but being yourself is the most important thing! Once I established friendships I could ask people about their different attitudes towards things, learn about their sense of humour. It gave me an insight into their culture. Likewise, it was nice to be able to share my culture with them also. It was especially hard to adjust to the late rich dinners and nights out but by the time I returned to Ireland it was hard to revert to my old habits/routine!

The only negative experience I had was that of my living situation. Everyone didn't always get along. It was difficult at times but I learnt to persevere and not let the little things get in on me. Sometimes people, regardless of culture or life experience, don't warm to you and the important thing is to accept it and move on. Be tolerant but stand up for yourself at the same time. Living at home, I never thought about this and it was an important life lesson to learn. Nevertheless I learnt to be very self-sufficient and organised.

Looking back now..what did I learn?

Looking back, now that my Erasmus has come to an end, I am happy to say that I learned a lot. I made life-long friendships with not only Spanish-speaking people but also people from all around the globe. My language abilities in all aspects improved immensely due to the fact that I totally immersed myself in the language both inside and outside the classroom. I especially learned to improve my presentations skills and mostly overcame my fear of public-speaking which was a big challenge for me!!

Although it didn't give me any definite insights into a career path, it did however change my perspective on teaching. I gave private English lessons to two students while I was abroad and thoroughly enjoyed it! As I was developing my own skills, I became more confident in imparting them to others. I found the experience very gratifying and was proud of my students' progress.

Also, Spain is a beautiful country, there is always more to discover!

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My advice to anyone considering Erasmus?

Firstly I would advise, if you have the opportunity, just to do it !

When you do go, I advise anyone going on Erasmus, especially those living abroad for the first time, to have patience with yourself, with others and with the learning system. It won't be easy at first but you will soon become accustomed to life over there. I would advise living with native speakers, if at all possible, because it will improve your language skills so much just listening to the language even if you aren't close with your flatmates. Make as many native-speaking friends as possible. Get involved in as much as you can and travel (if you have the money)! Watch Netflix or listen to podcasts, read a book or newspaper in the language as often as you can in your free time. Don't be shy! Be positive! Most importantly, it will be the year / semester of your life so just enjoy it!!

For more information on Study Periods abroad check out the HEA's 'EURIreland' portal <http://eurireland.ie/>

If you are a Guidance Counsellor in a school in Ireland you can also check out 'Euro-Quest', the FREE Resource for schools from NCGE/Euroguidance Ireland promoting educational mobility. <https://euroguidance.ie/euro-quest>

You can find out more about Euro-Quest in the separate article in this issue.



About the Author:

Caoileann Ní Cheallaigh is a 3rd year student in UCD studying a BA International Modern Languages, majoring in both German and Spanish. As part of her degree, as she mentioned, she has just completed a year-long Erasmus placement in Salamanca University, Spain. Although this experience was slightly cut short due to Covid -19 restrictions, she continues to attend classes online with Salamanca University and will complete her studies remotely. She will be back in UCD to complete her 4th and final year in September 2020.