Report

On my Erasmus term in University College London

I am studying International Relations at Corvinus University of Budapest. Thanks to the Erasmus+ Program, I won the chance to exchange to University College London and spent a wonderful semester in London. It was a lifetime experience that I will never forget.

Academics

University College London is one of the most prestigious universities in the world, which is one of the main reasons why I applied for it as a receiving institution. It belongs to University of London, a conglomerate of several universities and higher education institutions in London. This allowed me to take courses from other of its constituent institutions, e.g. Birkbeck College and study wide range of subjects. The university offered wide selection of courses. However, we could only take up four modules, each possibly worth 0.5 or 1 unit, equivalent to 7.5 or 15 ETC. All together it could not exceed 2 units or 30 ETC. To take up courses beyond the total number of units allowed to be studied, the permission of affiliate coordinator and department is needed. At first, 4 modules seemed few, but the amount of dedication it meant was not an easy task to fulfill. Each course consisted of lectures, seminars or tutorials, homework, assignments and exams. Altogether I spent 15-20 hours/week on visiting courses, which is similar to the amount of studies expected at Corvinus, but the amount of preparation for class immensely exceeded that at my home university. Most of the homework were source analyzing, reading materials and book, which consumed immense amount of time.

Each class was 1.5 hours long and there were no breaks between classes, which were difficult to manage both for lecturers and students. The students were always late for class, which meant professors had to start their lectures, seminars or tutorials approximately 10 minutes late and finish 5-10 minutes earlier, for students to be able to arrive in time for their next class. Otherwise delay was common. Moreover, the campus is huge; sometimes it takes 10-20 minutes to get to your class destinations. Hence, I believe the timetable would be more rational with shorter classes and break times in between.

Course application meant difficulty for me. I spent nearly two weeks after my arrival to set my timetable, due to several reasons. Firstly, I arrived 2 days later after the official start date of the term due to problems with my visa, as I am not a European citizen. This meant I missed the opportunity to attend the orientation week, which was the week before the official start and where the timetables of the affiliate students were mostly set. Furthermore, I lost the chance to get to know all other exchange students from the same courses; the chance to make friends, which is
especially important since I was living alone in a new place.

Moreover, I would say I did not receive every help I needed from the student office, so I was rather disappointed, frustrated and helpless then. After I arrived and visited the student office, I was given a course list and was told to get in touch with each professor on asking them whether I could attend their classes. I did so, however I had to change my course selection 4-5 times, because the student admissions officer informed me after I mailed and asked for the permission from the professors, that the course was already full. This went on multiple times, eventually in the second week of the term the student officer gave me the list of courses which still had remaining places, so I could finally apply for something which is still available. As a world famous university I did not expect something like this to happen. I was used to the Neptun system at Corvinus University, where I can clearly see the course list, the course size and remaining places to be taken all at one place. This would allow me to apply for available courses, spare the time lag of contacting the professors uselessly, visiting the student office for 4-5 times for fixing my schedule and avoid falling behind with my studies. The Portico system that they use needs certain modification and it would be nicer if the student officers would be more friendly and helping.

The facilities of the university are compact. They offer wide range of devices to enhance the study of students. The university has 3-4 libraries, which grant access to massive research and academic materials. The access to libraries was free for University College London students, who were the holders of UCL student cards. It also consists of museums, theater, laboratories and hospitals. In your free time you could just pop in for a museum tour or a theater performance organized by different student associations. The Bloomsbury Theater offered fantastic and interesting shows. If you were bored, you could also join a student association and look behind the scene of the organized events. The life in UCL was certainly not boring.

The teaching quality is satisfactory. The lecturers are highly educated and professionals in fields they teach. The faculty members were not only lecturers, but researchers and professionals in their own field; hence they could provide us with more real life experiences and incorporate that in their teachings. The requirements for the courses were demanding. Except from internal assignments, essays and portfolios were required. Most of the times, you either had to write 2-3 essays or pass the final exam for accomplishing the course. The day-to-day research for homework and small group activities and discussion on seminars, provided an inspirational environment for academic life. What was unusual for me was the grading system that differed hugely from that of Hungarian system. It was weird at first, because the work has to be really exceptional to be above 80%. They also often say professors and lecturers cannot reach 100%. Well, this system is rather stimulating since people would like to challenge themselves in getting above 80%.

**Life in London (living expenses)**

Hungarians who had been to London often say London is an expensive place. They are right: the living standards are approximately 3 times higher than in Hungary,
but you would find the way to spare your expenses. But this is not the case with locals. If you have a job in London you would live well with your basic salary. The basic living expenses e.g. food, clothes, necessities, etc. are easily covered by your earnings. There are varieties of places where you may shop, from the markets to malls, where you would always find what you need to buy on different prices. Hence, it is good to compare prices before shopping.

The accommodation fees are especially expensive in London. The accommodations are let out every week, which would be very unusual at first. I lived in a university student accommodation, called Campbell House. It was next door to my department at Bloomsbury campus of the university where I was exchanging. The weekly price of accommodation was 169 GBP, which is relatively a high price for UCL provided student halls and houses.

The reason for choosing a rather closer but more expensive accommodation than a relatively far away (more than 30 min of walk to university) but cheaper one, is because we may easily make friends from the same university and the public transportation costs are not low either. A single travel costs 2.3 GBP in Zone 1, where the university is located. The prices of tube tickets also depend on the time of travel. They distinguish between peak time and off-peak times, where peak time tickets are more expensive. Well, the cheapest solution for the underground and buses is using oyster cards which should be connected with other railway cards to enjoy the discounts. If you travel a lot with public transport, it is worth it to register for one online or at tube (underground) stations. Transportation could also be solved by renting a bike. It only cost 2 GBP/day to rent those Santander Cycles, at their self-serving bike stops. If you are travelling with big luggage or have to arrive somewhere urgently, Uber provides a convenient way to travel. It is good to download their application, so whenever in need you could just call a car through the app and moderate the route through your phone. The other benefit Uber is that it is 2 times cheaper than a normal cab.

The scholarship provided by the Erasmus+ Program only covered partially the expenses for my accommodation. The living expenses had to be supported by my own, but it was better than nothing. So, I am really grateful that I received some scholarship, as otherwise I would have chosen not to go. The financial part could also be solved by working part-time, for instance for a university department during your studies or somewhere in the society.

**London, the city itself**

London is a metropolis. It is abundant in all aspects. As an exchanging student, we had lot of opportunities to discover the beauty of this city. There are a lot of places to see, starting from those must-go unique sights in London, for instance the Buckingham Palace, Trafalgar Square, Big Ben, Shakespeare Museum, The London Eye, The British Museum, The National Gallery, etc.. Most of the sights are for fee, but most of the museums and parks are free for admissions. If you have time you could spend a splendid day in either British Museum, National Gallery, Science
Museum or Museum of Natural History, as all of them are so huge that at least one day is needed for each to visit all parts of it. London is famous for its parks and gardens, such as the Hyde Park, the Kensington Gardens, and the Regents Park, where you could gather with your friends or just having a lazy afternoon reading. To visit other famous sights which are not for gratuity, combination tickets could be brought online for discounted prices. I would advise to pre-book for an entrance ticket, because it allows you to jump the queue, spare time, cost and energy.

Except from the local places the city includes a great variety of outsider influences, places like the China town and Little Italy show how international is London itself. These places are famous its abundance in Chinese and Italian restaurants. I would say British cuisine is not the best and my favorite in the world, but in London you would never stay hungry. There are all kinds of restaurants and small eateries serving all plates from different kinds of world cuisines. From American steaks and French fries, to Hungarian Goulash, to Middle Eastern humus plates, to Far Eastern sushi, kimchi and hotpot, everything is available in London and the tastes are quite authentic. I hues for me the when I missed home, eating traditional delicacies from my hometown, cured my homesickness. Regarding the prices, a normal price for a meal of 1 plate and a drink at a restaurant ranges from 8 GBP and above, but a sandwich bought at a supermarket starts only from 1.5 GBP, whereas a meal deal with a sandwich, drink and snack costs 3GBP, hence you would for sure find something to eat.

There are also various places worth visiting outside London as well. Places like Greenwich, Windsor (for Windsor Palace and Eton College), Oxford, Cambridge and Bath etc., are must-visit places for tourists and foreigners. Infrastructure is developed in whole Britain. You could travel easily by train, coach, ferry and plane or even by tube (e.g. Greenwich) to another city. Megabus and National Express are 2 budget coach lines, which provide carriage to all major English, Scottish, Welsh cities even abroad to destinations like Paris, Madrid etc. The prices of these coach services are relatively the cheapest. Budget airlines e.g. Easyjet, Ryanair are useful in case you want to visit a city distant from London. It would be even cheaper and faster than train at times if you do not have a railway card.

**Conclusion**

All in all, I had a great semester in London at University College London. Through this Erasmus+ exchange program I got study at one of the world’s best university and the experience was worthwhile. The faculty and facilities are good. The study was challenging and tough at times but the academic environment was inspirational. I was rather inspired by the rich university life that UCL offered. I had the chance to visit interesting lectures, theater performances organized by student associations, which all opened my eyes. Moreover, I made new friends, who were UCL full-time students, exchange students and even from other higher institutions with whom my term in London became more colorful. Hopefully, we will stay in touch for long after I left.
London, the city itself is just amazing. It offers lot of opportunities. It is a place where I would like to live and work maybe in the future. The pace of life there is just ideal for me. It has the quick pace of life there with all the rush for work in the morning and the economic, high-tech region of the city, but it also allows you to slow down and enjoy life for instance sit in a pub and drink a draft of bear or watch a theater play after work. It is a place with development and culture at the same time. Unlike other big cities, especially Asian cities such as Shanghai or Beijing, where the pace is too fast and culture is not strongly embedded in the everyday life of the people. Eventually, London is just rich in sights and places, waiting there for you to discover. I would recommend it to everyone!