Erasmus+ Report – student exchange experience – University College London

My name is Bertalan Bordás, I’m an International Relations MA student of Corvinus University of Budapest who had the luck and honour to study for a term at one of Europe’s highest ranked university in London, UCL. My personal motivation was not really a question in the matter of choosing this very institute. Our teachers highly recommended all IR students to travel the world and therefore, Erasmus for me appeared as a “must” which I gladly took. It covered my field of interest and wish for expertise in UK politics and diplomacy. I had the chance to previously research in London as a historian due to my earlier studies, but going away from “home” for so long on my own was something new. Even for a twenty-something student. It may not sound surprising afterall, that a rough start means a rough start no matter how well prepared you think you are.

Travel, public transportation and accommodations

Traveling is about how much you can scout the prices of economy flights, private taxis and delivery companies. It is best to plan ahead your journey – even if you are waiting for your EU fund to be confirmed – for months. Also reserving your tickets for your flight, transfer, bag transfer, calculate the exact price of London public transportation, your planned usage of this kind of transport., bike track availability and everything other. The cruel reality which hits the exchange students hard that they rarely get any accommodations provided by UCL support (or in the least possible moment which makes planning ahead impossible), so I think the best way is to seek for a private accommodations provider right from the start, preferably in around west or south London, and do not even bother with UCL accommodations. The EU funds – as many stated before – cover only the 30-50% of the whole expenses, flight and transportation not included, but roughly 2000 GBPs should cover a term. I would recommend LHA chains hostel franchise which is a fine line between price and quality with its cheap double rooms and some edible food provided daily, included in an affordable price. Therefore, your daily journey to UCL is completely dependent where you have managed to find your new home. If you had a relatively traffic-busy journey to there and back, try to utilize your time: read a book, prepare for classes, do your homework, make your schedule!
It is really important to follow a schedule throughout your whole stay. The English might seem “fashionably late” from everywhere and a bit light-headed, but in general they are very well organized and the delays they display are just symptoms of the clockwork like lifestyle you are expected to follow. The cultural shock and the language is going to overwhelm your thoughts so just forget all the free-time you had at home. You will have lots of new friends, events to pick and attend to, and courses to prepare for, so keep that schedule tight and updated. I cannot emphasize the importance of networking enough. This is one of the best universities an IR student can possibly visit, especially the faculty of SSEES, where the partnership agreement bridges our institutions. The relationships, friendships you make here are invaluable, possibly with a greater impact on your personal life or career which you can even make at home. Make sure you give all the best of you. It is although extremely difficult as you try to adjust your social self and accent/vocabulary to the various nations and people you meet. These people do not only work with different concepts behind the words and are from different cultures but they have a different understanding of the whole world and its phenomena. For example, friends do not scale to two main categories as determined by Hungarian language near and far categories (“barátok”. “haverok”), but it is a term moving on a wide scale from a complete stranger to a family-like person. This is the reason why your vocabulary and grammar will expand greatly, even after passing the IELTS with 7+ grades.

SSEES as a destination for IR studies is a vast different discipline from a student perspective than the one you study at home. SSEES is all about ‘area studies’, which differs from IR in a sense that it is more focused on one specific country or region and trying to provide a more interdisciplinary method, in a way which fits the western education methods and system. It is hardly explainable through this paper, but when a student regularly studies for a course and prepares for the module, the outcome is different from the experience at home. Maybe better in some ways, as personal dedication for work, creativity and own research is more encouraged, or maybe not, since it is not checked in every step and less guided with much exposure to amateur mistakes. The school has a state of the art technology. But how does it apply to humanities? It provides the students full access to almost every significant database and digital libraries, and as a student who had to travel hundreds of kilometres for researching in archives, this was just like gaining a new sense to the existing five. The students do not need to search...
aimlessly, but with little caution and knowledge to search engines they can specify their criteria and topic, and get an incredible amount of scholastic information on their research.

And social

UCL does not only excel in the field of research and provides great background for scientific well-being but also it has a myriad of social events, clubs, gatherings, public initiations to contribute to student’s communities and social life. You can feel alone at home, in the library (possibly) but not on the campus. It is almost impossible to not get into one of these clubs. Are you a chocolate-enthusiastic? A football fan? An esports addict? UCL is guaranteed to be your place, since there is almost a club for everything.

Social life is also highly dependent of what friends you make out there in the brave new world you discover for yourself. Make sure you attend to the early gatherings of the given bunch of SSEES and make time for other regular meetings – alcohol included or not. Mind your words, as you will make a first impression. But most importantly make a first impression, do not bother with what they think about you. Be the guy or girl who “made that awful joke why we are all going to hell for laughing at it”, “the Brexiter/Remainer”, “French Paul” etc.. Be remembered, make a name, the reintroductions and the rest will follow. If you manage to keep contact via social media or telly, you will have the greatest time of your life filled with wonderful and interesting people who do not stop in conversation after discussing how London weather is “not as rainy as everyone said it will be this time of the year”.

And here at last I should provide a list of “musts” in London. But there is so much to see there that it is hard to list all of it. Those who chose this city for their Erasmus definitely have their own list. I would just wish to add two or three places. Camden Market is a must, which – for reasons I am not aware of – I have avoided but embraced in the last month of my stay. A long walk from Kensington to Hyde Park is a head-clearer for a weekend, and Marlborough’s Arms or Phineas is unavoidable if you are a SSEES student looking for a good pint.

In conclusion, maybe some Erasmus programmes in other institutes are better for your finances, where EU funds cover the full amount of money you need, but with some contribution, UCL gives you not only the new perspective how you have always wanted to see your progression as a student, but also gives the opportunity to know yourself and invaluable friendships you never knew you wanted.