Why I chose ESSEC?

I chose this university, because during my research for Erasmus universities this was one of the highest ranked universities. I also wanted to study in France, since French is my second language. I recommend you, if you do the Erasmus program for language skill purposes, to take up all your courses in that specific language. In my case, the majority of my courses were in English and I regret it a bit now as I would have improved much more even if I had struggled at the beginning. ESSEC Business School is the second-best business school in France, everyone there will reassure you about this.

My experiences regarding the university

The system and the grading are completely different. They grade you from 1-20, 20 being the best, but it’s nearly impossible to get the maximum grade. Even if the professor compliments you and tells you that you did a brilliant job they still give you a 16-18, which is considered to be a really really good mark there. Naturally, in Hungary this would not be an amazing grade nor would a professor of Corvinus, generally speaking, withhold grades.

Another surprising difference is the way you’re expected to show your knowledge. In Hungary, practice or seminar sessions are very important but in mid-term or final exams you have to know the theory, too. At ESSEC, I was really confused at the beginning as I was used to the Hungarian system and did not know if I had to study the theory at home, or I just could believe the professors when they said that no definitions were going to be asked. So, it turned out that you really don’t need to memorize the definitions word by word, you “only” have to understand them and be able to use them in real life situations.

Needless to say, you will have many group works, and joint assignments, with super mixed, international people. Beware, that group works go on in mid-term and final exam periods, unlike in Hungary where there are usually two presentations/assignments between exams and after the start of the semester. You will learn how to work in a culturally diverse group. For me this was a priceless knowledge that I gained. French, Brazilian, Canadian, Portuguese, Spanish, Italian, German, Chinese students work completely differently and at first, it’s always a bit if a struggle to get the group to work in sync.

Courses are 3 hours long with a 30 (sometimes rather 15)-minute break included. There is no differentiation between seminars or lectures, attendance is mandatory and it’s completely up to the professor if the course is more like a lecture or seminar. Furthermore, you can only miss two classes (2x3 hours), if you exceed this limit, you automatically fail the course.
My experiences with regards to living abroad

Food & beverages
As you might insinuate, everything is more expensive. Especially the basic nutritional elements, such as: fruit, vegetables, meat and fish. At ESSEC, there is a cafeteria where at lunch break you can get a decent salad with a quarter of a baguette for €5, there are also daily hot dishes available which, to be honest, I have never tried. The Auchan is very close to the university thus in the one-hour lunch break it’s also convenient to grab something from it, or from a close Pomme de Pain (bakery).

Cooking wise, there aren’t too many options as residents don’t have ovens and microwaved ready-made pizza is disgusting, trust me. You either cook something on the stove or "prepare" something in the microwave.

Regarding French food, the patisserie goods are usually delicious, my favorite was les tartelettes au citron meringuées (lemon tarts with meringue), it’s worth trying. But as expected, Paris (and even Cergy) has many different restaurants serving from Italian dishes to Japanese ones. The only thing that I could not get a hold on was coffee. Beware that at the ESSEC cafeteria, in case you order cappuccino you will get something more like a hot chocolate, and even in Paris you should only trust Italians coffee shops. Wine wise, you can get wines for €4 in Auchan, but if you plan on bringing it home as a souvenir I would advise you to visit Le Grand Épicerie in Paris.

The residence- Cergy – Paris

Residences provided by ESSEC
The residence where I was staying was 20-minutes’ walk from the university as I was staying in Les Linandes residence. This residence is the cheapest and you live with another student sharing a bathroom and a kitchen which costs €489/ month, WI-FI not included. Another residence is situated right at the back of ESSEC (Le port) and another an RER station away (Le haut). As I was spending my fall semester abroad, there was a week or so in September when the heating wasn’t working yet, and the room was terribly cold. Later on, they turned on the heating and I had no more problems with my room.

You can get a subsidy, the CAF based on where you come from, what flat you are renting and your previous incomes. Europeans, mostly, get the CAF after providing the list of documents they ask for. Therefore, make enough copies of your documents and be very patient as administration is rather slow. Even though the required French bank account’s opening can take an hour and getting the CAF can be at the end of December (for all full months), it’s worth it as you can get €100-200/ full month subsidy.

As mentioned before, WI-FI is not included in the monthly housing fee. You can either buy a monthly subscription for €20 from Wififirst, which allows two of your devices to be connected to the internet simultaneously or subscribe to Free, a French telephone service company and get a deal there.

Cergy
To be honest, the security wasn’t the best in Cergy. I would not advise you to leave the residence after dusk, not even if you are in a group.
There is a mall, Les trois fontaines, in which Auchan is situated, where you will also find shops like: Mango, H&M, NAF NAF and many others. Otherwise, there is not much to do so I spent most of my free-time discovering Paris.

Paris

A magnificent city, but you already know that. So here are some facts that you may like to know: a Navigo (a monthly pass for public transport) is around €70-80. Cergy is in zone 5, meaning that at weekend you can buy a daily student ticket for €9 (this offer doesn’t apply to weekdays). I didn’t end up buying the Navigo as I always walked to university and mostly went to Paris at the weekends.

Walking distances are much larger than in Budapest, for example it takes hours to walk from la Cathédrale Notre Dame to la Tour Eiffel. Sometimes walking is even faster or takes the same amount of time as taking the metro. Otherwise, the underground system is well-developed, and Paris is easy to get around.

If you want to save money when getting from the airport (Charles de Gaulle) to your residence, or vice versa, I suggest you taking the 9518 bus until Cergy Préfecture which will only cost you €2. You can also get an Uber, but the price will be much higher.

Culture

Although being on the same continent, France and the French culture has its differentiated aspects. French people are usually friendly and social, although don’t expect them to start working on any group projects just before the deadline. You may also notice while queuing to pay in a supermarket, that the French like to take their time placing their items into the bags and paying, moreover, they may even start a casual conversation while doing so. It can be strange at first as we are used to vanishing our items as quickly as possible into our bags and giving the amount of money to the shop assistant that we previously calculated in the queue.

If you walk the roads of Paris, you will realize that art is a must! Even if you mind your own business, not being a tourist, you just bump into fascinating art pieces and architecture, or even a Dior exhibition. Thus, art is a huge part of the culture, such as: the art of eating cheese, the art of drinking wine…. All in all, …

I am really glad to have experienced the Erasmus program at ESSEC, and also for it being so close to Paris. I think, my most precious and valuable experiences were working with diverse people in terms of both culture and personality, getting to know so many people from so many countries and getting a glimpse of their mindsets and since it was my first time, also, living on my own.

I most definitely will visit Paris again, because it has endless wonders to discover.

Laissez-moi vous émerveiller… (Le festin- Camille)