From 5 February 2018 until 31 May 2018, I participated in the Erasmus+ program during an internship at the UK and Ireland Desk in the United Nations Regional Information Centre in Brussels, Belgium. This was part of the fourth semester of my Joint European Master in Comparative Local Development.

I would thoroughly recommend the experience: the internship, the city, the culture, and the people. I found accommodation through Facebook groups – with no assistance from the receiving or sending institutions. I lived with 6 other young professionals, in a neighbourhood called Saint Gilles, very close to Gare du Midi (where the Eurostar comes into) – a 20 minute metro ride from work (8.20 euro return trip) or a 45 minute walk.

When I initially arrived in Brussels, my soon-to-be housemate picked me up from Gare du Midi where the Eurostar came in, and I met him at Sam’s Café in the station. He helped me get back to our house, and cooked me lunch as we chatted and got to know each other. He was an English teacher working part-time at a local university, and has now moved to Prague to take a fulltime position in procurement. After about an hour, we begun to smell what we thought was either a gas leak, or burning plastic. As we had no response from our landlady, we called the fire brigade – who arrived promptly and checked the property. It turned out to be burning plastic from haphazardly placed electric wires in the kitchen – which had blown the lights and were now an open flame. This issue was never resolved throughout my tenancy.

I would strongly NOT recommend any future Erasmus+ participants in Brussels to rent a property from Annabelle Assemat – who was my landlady of 52 Rue de Merode, 1060 Saint Gilles. She never fixed any necessary repairs, constantly sent strangers round with no warning – and with keys so they could let themselves in – and sent frequent aggressive emails – despite never responding to ours.

I loved my housemates, though, who were from all over the world. Throughout my tenancy, I lived with a total of 9 people: two Romanian architects; one Australian architect; one British English teacher, three Germans: two working for a German foundation NGO as part of the EU
Green Party, and one working for an economics and finance organisation in the EU; and one Spaniard, working for a human rights NGO. My rent was 400 euro a month, plus around 6 euro for internet, and despite my landlady, the location was perfect, and I thoroughly enjoyed my time there. We ate many communal dinners together, went for drinks in our regular bar in Parvis de Saint Gilles, and on my first weekend, I went to Antwerp and Ghent with them – for the Ghent Light Festival.

My internship comprised of: (1) monitoring the UK and Ireland media on a daily basis to send to United Nations headquarters in New York for the Secretary General; (2) participating in the updating and production of articles for the English language section of the website; (3) maintaining social media sites; (4) assisting the UK and Ireland desk with the organisation of UNRIC’s monthly film events: Cine-ONU (see pic below); (5) research for speech writing, enquiries, UN projects and initiatives in Belgium and the UK and Ireland; (6) assisting with regional and national projects as required, for instance with UNRIC campaigns/ competitions.

Throughout the internship, I improved my public relations and communications skills; gained a better understanding of outreach within the UN system; gained a deeper understanding of the work of the UN, and how to promote it in the UK and Ireland and throughout Europe; and improved my website and social media skills. I also gained a more thorough understanding of policy and guidelines for UN communications and outreach.

My progress was monitored by daily meetings with opportunities for feedback and to monitor progress – these comprised of two daily meetings in the morning and afternoon; and a full induction programme with one week training on all aspects of communications and event organisation within the UN system in general, and at the UN Regional Information Centre in particular.
At the end of my internship period, I was well versed in the work, and workings, of the UN, and trained up the two next interns who would be replacing me with confidence and enthusiasm – creating an entirely new booklet of updated intern guidelines with my colleague.

I would thoroughly recommend my internship from the perspective of my boss, Karen Davies, and my colleagues. My boss is probably the best boss I will ever have, and I am still in close contact with her via email – and will be attending one of our work events in London at the end of June. She was welcoming from start, approachable throughout the internship, and keen to assist in my job hunt in whatever way she could with her extensive contacts, and with a glowing reference. She is the epitome of professionalism, and transparency – and was an unexpectedly lovely introduction to working in the UN.

In terms of my colleagues – the other interns - I worked closest with the other UK and Ireland intern – of which there are always two of us. I was trained up by the two previous UK and Ireland interns – as I then trained my successors. The two previous UK and Ireland interns stayed in Brussels for jobs, and so I also stayed in close contact with them – having dinner with them on a fairly regular basis. Beyond the UK and Ireland Desk, there were also approximately 20 other interns working at UNRIC at the same time as me. We were represented around 10 countries and came from even more. We were all in our 20s, all passionate about the SDGs and the work of the UN, and all living in Brussels short-term so we were all equally proactive, and keen to explore Brussels, attend conferences, and spend time with each other.

Overall I would thoroughly recommend the experience of doing an internship with UNRIC in Brussels. It was an incredible 4 months, both personally and professionally; and I am infinitely grateful to the Erasmus+ programme for making it financially possible.