Reflective journal

Zuzana Tothová

SLOVAKIA

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It was almost a year ago when I started planning to go and study somewhere abroad. As a student of translating and interpreting I really desired to go to an English speaking country so I chose Belfast and after months of waiting, I finally found myself at the Belfast International airport. I was the only student coming from my country so I was quite worried but luckily, soon I met all the students and I started studying at the university and I knew that there was nothing to be worried about anymore.

**Academic Study**

Studying at St Mary’s was in many ways challenging and different from the studying at my home university. I have chosen six subjects mainly about Irish culture and history and now, almost at the end of semester I can say that I have definitely learnt many new things about Ireland and surprisingly my perception of this country as well as about my own country has changed.

I have studied Irish history and due to this subject I have gained a lot of information about the Ireland in 19th Century. I have learnt about the period where the first signs of division and tension between Catholics and Protestants can be seen and this helped me to understand a problem in Northern Ireland a bit better. At Divided Societies classes we have worked in the mixed groups of Irish and erasmus students and we cooperated with students from Spanish and American universities as well. The main topic of our discussions was the National Identity and its actual expressions within the different nationalities. I could compare the perception of my identity with different students and it helped me to develop my thinking about it as well as my own perception about other nationalities. I have also attended Unity in Diversity classes and lectures and seminars focused on comparison of several aspects of Irish culture expressed in literary or film works and other European cultures. The European Integration classes provided me with some new ideas about the united Europe and about great opportunities which are the results of the international cooperation. At Irish Film Studies we watched several movies about Ireland. Most of them were concerned about the Troubles in Northern Ireland and sometimes it was very depressing to see what was happening there but it helped me and all the erasmus students to again understand the problems better and see it from different perspectives.

As I mentioned before I have noticed many differences between education in Slovakia and Ireland. First of all the relationships between tutors and students are completely different. In Slovakia it is definitely more formal. There I found it great that teachers do not act superior and while teaching they also listen to the students, to their point of view and discuss many topics with them. Unfortunately it is not a case in Slovakia where teachers just give the lecture and matters are rarely discussed. Here students are encouraged to develop their own thinking and opinion about the topics which they can later express in their essays. On the other hand in some classes I sometimes missed more detailed and theoretical information about the topic.
Cultural Programme

After coming to Belfast I felt excited about getting to know the Irish culture better. My first real contact with culture, songs and students presented itself during the first week of my stay when I and some of the erasmus students went to the Cultural centre for the Cultural evening. Some Irish students from St. Mary’s University played and sang the Irish folk songs and we all liked it very much.

In October the International department and especially Paul Anthony organized the European Quiz for all erasmus students. The questions were really difficult and even though our group almost finished at the last place it was really funny and again we enjoyed this evening very much. We also went to the Pub Tour because Ireland is famous for its ‘pub life’. We saw some pubs which were really beautiful, for example The Crown or McHugh’s and learnt some facts about their history and about life in Belfast in past.

At the end of October thanks to the Student Union we made a wonderful journey to the west coast of Ireland. The weather was unexpectedly good and we took delight in everything we were doing. First day we have visited Derry and came safely to our destination – Donegal. Next day we did a hiking to the highest mountain of that area – Errigal. At the beginning of the hike we had to walk through the area with the ‘never-ending’ mud. After few minutes we were completely dirty and wet and still a whole climb was awaiting us. But from the top we had a beautiful view of the country, other mountains and Atlantic Ocean so it was certainly worth doing. We spent our last day by a sea. Some of the students tried surfing but I did not dare because of cold water and weather. But I love this part of Ireland because of the natural beauty and peace which we could feel everywhere. It is also an area where the Irish language is still spoken so we learnt a few Irish words and tried to practise them in shops or pubs.

During the semester I also attended the classes of Irish language and dance which were taught by two St Mary’s students. We have learnt the basic Irish expressions as well as few dances and this way I could learn a bit more about Irish culture as well.
Social programme

Belfast and Northern Ireland was the place where I have never been bored. My programme during the day was more or less connected with school, shopping or cooking. Almost every evening I did something with other erasmus students. Often we went to the city centre to the clubs for dancing or to the pubs and we usually looked for the pubs with the live Irish music. Even though there are many opportunities for students to entertain themselves in Slovakia I was surprised how many students here actually go out during the nights. Sometimes we went to the cinema or to the bowling club and we enjoyed going out together. We tried some different sports as well and almost every Tuesday evening we played volleyball or basketball in the University sport’s hall. Frequently we met together in some erasmus houses and just spent time together by watching TV, talking or playing games.

During the weekends I tried to discover some new places, at the beginning in Belfast and later also in the surroundings. We have visited the Giant’s Causeway which was an amazing experience because the weather was great and the nature and cliffs there were wonderful.

Student Union also organised many social events as Fresher Ball or Halloween party and we could not miss them. Halloween there was something special for me because in Slovakia we do not celebrate it. Again together we searched for the best fancy dresses and planned how to spend that night. We made our own parties too for example Pyjama’s Party or some Birthday parties.

Guidelines for future students

The studying experience abroad is in many ways special time which probably will not repeat. That is why all the students should take advantage of every opportunity they have and try as many new things as possible.

Three months is quite a long time and to spend them alone or only with people from the same country is not a very good idea. Students should stay open and get to know other erasmus students. Soon you will realize that really everybody tries to be friendly and as nice as possible because all students are in the same ship – far from their families and from everything they know well. Also try to visit some new places. In Belfast you can find many beautiful and interesting spots and local teachers or
students will certainly advice you the places worth seeing. You should not miss the University trips which are organized either by International department or Student Union.

As Belfast is still a city which is partly politically and religiously divided you should avoid discussions about certain political issues in the public places as pubs or clubs. Even though I did not find Belfast as a dangerous city people are still sensitive to the certain issues and you never know how the political discussion will end up. Also always make sure that after the night out you get home by taxi or with somebody.

**Overall reflection on the experience**

I came to Belfast as the only student from my country and even though at the beginning it was probably more difficult and stressful, eventually I could not do anything better. Before coming here I really did not know what to expect. I was worried but I knew that I wanted to try something completely different and as a student of English to improve the language. And I found Belfast and St Mary’s University College a great place where I spent three wonderful and unforgettable months with people with whom I felt very well and I hope that after leaving Belfast I will stay in touch with most of them. At first the University seemed to me as a labyrinth and I survived only because of signs in the corridors. But later I have taken a fancy to walking and looking for the best way how to get to my class and I like it very much.

During my studying at the university I could feel how I was ‘getting into’ English. At the beginning of the semester I could hardly understand the students at the university because of the different accent which I was not used to. And during the classes it was quite difficult to concentrate on the speech of my lecturers for a whole hour. But later on I have started to understand the students and everybody much better and now it is much easier to focus on the English speech. And as this was one of the reasons to come here I am happy that I managed to do so.

Almost each day spent here has been filled with a great experience or new thing which I have tried and I have never been bored. To be in a group of people consisting of so many nationalities was enriching as well as challenging because we were so different, from many countries and backgrounds and we needed to find ways how to understand and tolerate each other. But our differences have very soon become a great advantage for us as we had an opportunity to get to know different ways of life or perspectives. And everything we did together we enjoyed as much as possible even if it was only cooking or talking.

I value this opportunity to study abroad very high because it helped me in my academic studies and subsequently in my future profession as well as in my personal development and in broadening of my mind. I know that now I am more open to new things and people from different background. Thanks to all people from school and international department and also
to all the students, either erasmus or Irish. I will never forget this great time and place I could live in for one semester. Thanks.