TABLE OF CONTENT

I. Academic Study
II. Cultural Programme
III. Social Programme
IV. Guidelines for future students
V. Overall reflection on the experience
I can still recall the day (or night if you prefer). I tried to sleep, but I couldn’t. In 4 hours I would be in the car, driving to the airport and on my way to Belfast where I would spend the next three months of the year on something that is called ‘Erasmus’. Today, I consider it to be a magical word. Every time I’ll hear it in the future, I will be one of those few who will know what it means. Not what it’s all about, but what it really means. To me it means enhancing your knowledge of people, living together with total strangers who become the best of friends, encountering your own boundaries and trying to push them to another limit, taking care of yourself and of others and so on. Erasmus, an experience that will leave you flabbergasted!

I. Academic Study

Due to the fact that Joline and I could only arrive on the 26th of January (exams back home we torturing our brains at that time), we only had one week of classes to go before we would be placed into local secondary schools to do our thing!

On Monday, we decided to take as many courses as possible because we hadn’t got our timetable yet. One of the classes we followed was ‘Irish Literature’ during which we studied Irish short stories.

Another class we took was ‘Divided Societies’, which was about (you’ll never guess) divided societies… Joline and I could relate to this class quite well because at the moment we left Belgium, we still didn’t have a government and our country was more divided than it had ever been. It would have been very interesting to find out more about the divided society we got thrown into (the Too bad we only arrived a week before the classes ended. In the lesson we followed, students and teacher sat down and evaluated a mural tour they had done through the city. I wished I could’ve been there because that would have been an ideal opportunity to get to know the city and its hidden places.

A class that is followed by almost all of the Erasmus students is Irish Film Studies. Nothing cozier than watching a film together with everyone in a room that provides comfortable cupboards to sit on and cups of coffee to devour.

Eventually, lessons at St. Mary’s aren’t that very different from the lessons we take in our institution. But still, there are some differences. Lessons here only take about an hour whilst in Belgium we are sometimes trapped in a room for 3 hours in a row with someone who is desperately trying to make us see of what use ICT can be in the classroom. Without a break in between, yes, it can drive you insane, believe me!

Another difference that I have noticed is that the relation student – lecturer is much more informal here than in Belgium. Our coordinator was very helpful as the staff of St. Mary’s in general.

Next to being a student, we also became teachers in a secondary school. Mine was literally down the road, as I taught in Corpus Christi College. An enriching experience it was! I soon noticed that it was one of the tougher schools in the area. When I came home and told stories about my day to my roommate, her stories were almost every time about nice things pupils did. Mine were a bit more adventurous. I absolutely had no problem with the “tougher” reputation of my school. Some people told me ’if you can
survive there, you can survive in every school’ and that made me wonder. I slightly
recalled an event in the past where we went on a trip to Norwich last year. We spent
one week there and we also visited a school. The things that I saw there, made me
decide NEVER to go overseas to be a teacher there. Some examples: At a certain
moment, the door of the classroom opens and a boy walks in, kisses his girlfriend and
walks back out. When we arrived there, the bus we were on became “the enemy” and
was attacked with snowballs. The teachers have a really hard time making lessons
interesting for pupils and although they have everything at hand (interactive
whiteboards, overhead projectors and all the didactical equipment wanted), they still
can’t seem to capture the attention of the pupils. Logically, the following questions pops
into your head: “Why have you decided to come to Belfast – of all places – to complete
your teaching practice”? Well, I can’t really answer that question. I don’t really know
what drove me here, but I feel like I’ve made a good decision. I think my experience in
teaching here will help me more with my teaching back home.
Eventually, teaching practice wise everything turned out to be ok!

One of my classes: 8L. With Head of Department, Geraldine Assembly Hall

The head of the English department was a lovely and kind-hearted woman who wanted
to talk to me and my American colleague-Erasmus-student-friend Deena for an entire
day if we would’ve let her and if she could’ve. She observed some of my lessons, just
like my younger mentor (Miss Eileen Cassidy) who was very helpful as well. I felt
accepted by them and almost felt like a proper teacher there. I tried to help them every
way I could and they tried to help me giving all possible note, OHT’s and explanations
about anything I wanted to know. All the teachers were really kind and thanked me a
thousand times for assisting them with their classes or teaching their classes for a while.
The pupils were real monkeys at times but I do miss them together with the nice
atmosphere they created during the lessons.
II. Cultural programme

- **Belle of Belfast City**

**City Center, Queen’s and Botanic Gardens**

Before I came to Belfast, I have to admit that my insight in the city and the history weren’t that profound. Ok, you know that it got really rough, but seriously, that’s about it! So I was surprised to discover that it’s actually a fairly “new” city. Everywhere you look, you see things being build or rebuild: streets are renewed, buildings are restored, new shopping centers were opened and so on. On our first quest through the city, we first bounced upon a huge building, known as City Hall, which is nowadays accompanied by a giant wheel (where you can ask your girl/boyfriend to marry you in the VIP-box for £50 – get real, will you!).

Continuing our search through the city, we discovered some other nice places like the Grand Opera House, the Waterfront and a mysterious blue fish that is washed ashore. At a fifteen to twenty minutes’ walk of the center, you can find a place where tranquility and nature give you a little break form the hectic city center: Queen’s University and the Botanic Gardens. When we first walked past the old building that represents Queen’s University, we felt like we were starring in the latest Harry Potter movie. Totally astounded by the beauty of it, we walked around it to find a nice inner square. Just next to the university, you can enjoy a stroll in the park of the Botanic Gardens. When the weather was good (was it ever these past three months...) we took a blanket and a picnic and we would spent the afternoon there reading a book, throwing an occasional Frisbee or kicking a ball at each other. It’s the perfect place to relax!

**Irish Dancing Championships**

While we were here (from 23rd until 30th of March) the Waterfront was the place to be for everyone who likes Irish dancing. Some of us got the chance to practice their dancing skills during their School Based Work and thought it was difficult but funny. When we arrived at the Waterfront, we saw a group of girls with a lot of blonde curly hair – why do they have to wear those wigs anyway – in short trousers jumping in a funny way from one side of the square to the other side or in circles. We informed to get some tickets but because we had to pay £10 for 2 hours of dancing, we just stayed outside and watched the girls practicing their dance.
**Ulster Fry**
One cannot dwell in Ireland without having tasted the famous Ulster Fry. One morning, we got up early and went to the ‘Bridge House’ and devoured a lovely Ulster Fry of only £2! We heard the stories other students told us of the terrible view of the plate coming your way filled with dirty sausages, beans in a red sauce and some things that apparently are unidentifiable... Nevertheless, we decided to try it and found it to be surprisingly good and you will not be able to eat another thing for the rest of the day – the plate is FULL of sausages, beans, soda bread, eggs and so on! We say YES to Ulster Fry! Try it, you’ll love it!

**Black Taxi Mural Tour**
Every city has his history but it has to be said that this city has an especially turbulent one. Being an Erasmus student we were told before we came here not to do certain things if we didn’t want to offend people. Because we only took this mural tour during the last month we were here, my image of the city changed a bit. I hadn’t seen the peace wall yet and still I couldn’t believe how close it is situated to where we live and walk every day. Our taxi driver was a nice man who answered our many inquiries and gave us more explanation as our jaws sometimes fell open with astonishment.

We took a black taxi in the City Center and during the ride, the driver gave us all kinds of information about buildings we drove past or things that happened at certain places. I couldn’t believe my ears. Things were/are too crazy for words! We studied the Troubles back home during English history, but now actually being (and living) in the neighbourhood and seeing everything for real, made me see the whole picture more clearly. I was very impressed with it. The fact that you know that there are gates that still close every single night, is quite spooky. Because this is a very important part of the life people here in Belfast, I took all of my visitors on a black cab mural tour. My parents were very much impressed by it and they feel now that they know the city more and they understand it better. The city center is nice and modern, but it what’s going on behind the scenes that makes this place what it is today.
Stormont
During one of our YouTube-adventures, we discovered a song called ‘Belfast Child’ by The Simple Minds. While we looked, our attention was suddenly drawn by a big white building that floated by very briefly. We started to search our travel guide and came upon Stormont, the building of the Northern Irish parliament. We decided to visit it the next day. And a good decision that was! After the fifteen minutes’ drive on the bus, we stood in front of the gates of a huge park. In the distance we saw something that looked like a castle but before you could reach that, you had to walk the 1,6 km long driveway. We thought that if we stayed there long enough, we might bump in to a politician or someone else who might be of any great importance. We were reading on a bench, enjoying the sun for about an hour when one of us suddenly realised that it was a Saturday and that nobody important would turn up... Damn it!

- Irish lessons

After living in our house for over a month, we still couldn’t figure out what the big green building was just around the corner of our street. Until one night, some of us came back from the opera and found that the door was open. We first thought it was a community center until we started to chat with a local in the bar. This was a place where Irish lessons were organised for free (well, at the end of the lesson, a wee bag was given round and you could give the teacher whatever you wanted to give him). We got a friendly invitation to come around again next week and follow the classes. And so we did. Eight of us entered the building without knowing any Irish at all and we left with a couple of Irish sentences and expressions in our pockets and an invitation to a holiday home in Donegall. Try and be impulsive once in a while and you’ll find that it’s worth it!

- Saint Paddy’s Day

The next big event in our diary was St. Patrick’s Day on 17th of March. Because some of us had teaching practice that morning, we decided to stay put in Belfast and just enjoy the scenery here. We must admit that we expected more of it. There were some wagons that were decorated but the nicest attractions (I thought) were the people in the streets. Most of them were dressed up in green and wore funny hats, crowns or were completely transfigured into something greenish (including us by the way…). After the parade, we follow the crowd to the Custom House Square, where some entertainment was scheduled. After some performances (highlight being an ex-Sugarbabe-babe), the DJ wished us a happy St. Patrick’s Day and it was over and done with. We all looked at each other in astonishment – “Are they serious? It’s only 3 o’clock”! And yes, it seemed that we had to continue the party on our own but together with all the people on the streets. But no worries fore there was plenty to go to in the city. But everywhere we went, all you could see was a sea of people trying to get into (or out of) a pub. We gave up the search for a drink in the centre and tried to
satisfy ourselves closer to home. ‘The Hawthorn bar’ on the corner of or street (Hawthorn Street or how hard it is to come up with a name for your pub) was everyone’s first choice. When we got there the owner of the pub kindly offered us some Irish stew which looked really terrible but was delicious! Not much later, some locals took out their guitars and violins and started to play some tunes, which set the mood for a whole night of music, stew and Guinness!

- **International Week**

If international isn’t cultural, then I’m a stranger to this world. During our stay here as an Erasmus student you get to meet a lot of different cultures and people from all around the world. All these things were bundled in one week of ‘International Week’ where lecturers from all around came to enlighten us with their ideas on educational topics. This was a good way of getting in contact again with all the other students after the ‘solitude’ your teaching practice forced you upon.

Some lectures were more interesting than others (we couldn’t really grasp why we had to know about Gdansk or what the lady was actually talking about…) Fortunately for us, not every lecture went like this. Especially during the classes of the Belgian lecturers we were aloud to use our creativity, which I like more that just sitting and watching pictures of the Polish woman who went to India – here again we were left a bit baffled. During the lecture of ‘Fairy Tales in a European Perspective’ we had to sit in groups and write our own fairy tale. In the lecture of our Walloon colleague, which was about EFL-methods, we had to stick a paper on our back and we had to write at least 1 nice thing on the paper of five people, only using adjectives and adverbs. I remember more from those lectures than of any other lecture. During the International Week, things got a bit chaotic sometimes. Lectures were running late so classes couldn’t start at the hour they were supposed to start. We always were in the lecture theater as scheduled, though lessons never began at the scheduled times. This didn’t bother me at all. Flexibility is an important quality a teacher should have and so we all waited patiently (and it gave us more time to get the necessary coffee to get rid of the hangover from the day before…).

Next to the lectures, the college also organized a Euroquiz (which we didn’t win), a historical pub tour (during which we got to know Belfast even better and discovered the hidden pubs), a trip to the Giant’s Causeway and to the Bushmills distillery and last but not least the Eurovision contest (which we didn’t win either, but we had a lot of fun defending our national tricolour). It was fun to have this kind of variation in the program and so these activities were very much appreciated by everyone!
To give the week the proper ending it deserved, we all had a “graduation dinner” on Friday afternoon. During this meal, the major of Belfast was present and she all gave us our diplomas. A fine ending to a fine week!
III. Social programme

How we kept ourselves entertained, you ask? Being in Belfast, it’s not the most difficult thing to do. Read the following...

- Trip to the West coast

I could keep on writing about this trip for hours, but sadly, space and time are limited so I’ll try and give you a summary of our trip to the West.

Travellers as we are, we all felt the urge to discover more about (Northern) Ireland than Belfast alone. So we decided to rent a car and drive around for a couple of days, highlighting certain places on the map we definitely wanted to see.

And so it was that on a gloomy Sunday morning 10 people embarked on a noble quest: to search and find the true soul of this country. And did we find it, you ask? I believe we did.

We set off in our 2 Renault Clio’s, not knowing how different but especially difficult it would be driving on the left (=other) side of the road. Not only the driving was difficult, but some Irish lads had scattered roundabouts all over the land (and we believe this thoroughly) just to make it extra difficult for us!

The first day we had to drive to Letterfrack, a small village in the Connemara district, where we had booked a hostel. We got lost a couple of times (damn you leprechauns who took away the traffic signs!) and stopped in Westport for a little “stretching of the legs”.

Whilst driving, we passed the most beautiful sights which appeared to be a mixture of lakes, mountains and magnificent pieces of forest. Too bad the weather wasn’t that great (my mother kept sending me messages that there was a bad storm heading for Ireland and that we should be very careful on the road), but the company we were with definitely made it worth while!

Arriving in our hostel, we found it to be very cozy: an old cottage which seemed a lot bigger than thought at first sight and was a home to a collection of things my grandmother has in the basement belonging to my great-grandmother. A burning fire welcomed us in the warm red painted living area; we were shown around and installed for the night. Some of us made the preparations for dinner and others kept dwelling about and discovered the little corners and rooms that made the hostel even more special than before.

The next morning we got up, full of energy and after a big breakfast of homemade bread, eggs and REAL coffee (no instant things for the first time in months, oh, how we craved for that!), we set off for the second day of our adventure in Ireland. After driving through a beautiful landscape that evoked many “oooohh’s” and “aaaaahhh’s” in both cars, we arrived in Galway. One of us had already been here so we got the full guided tour of the city, which is very nice and quite romantic I would say. We wondered the streets in search of some peace of mind, soon finding it at The Belgian Beerhouse. We passed the evening enjoying each others company, listening to relaxing music and giving our body the necessary nourishment to be able to continue the journey back home the next day – for we could only rent the cars for three days. But before pointing our noses north again, we were treated to a last visit – the cliffs of Moher... I felt like we had saved the best for last. I was absolutely overwhelmed!
With a smile on our faces and feeling completely in balance with Mother Nature (after she had tested us by blowing wind in our face at God-knows-what-speed; we barely kept ourselves upon our feet) we felt ready to undertake the journey back home. Arriving back in Belfast, we all felt like coming home again. The home is where the heart is!

- Performances of all kind

We soon discovered that the city of Belfast had loads of cultural activities going on. So one night, we decided to go to the opera and see ‘Madame Butterfly’. I had never seen an opera before and was therefore quite curious what it would be like. The Dutch people had already been to a ballet in the Grand Opera House so they gave me loads of details about the decoration of the room, the way the show went and so on. We got in at a reasonable price (£12) but were seated at the right upper side of the room so we could only see the stage if we stood up or is we put our heads through the railings. I didn’t really matter to me. I enjoyed a wonderful opera and I really intend to go to the opera when I am back home again. Sometimes during the performance when two or three actors sang together, it gave me goosebumps. I felt the tears filling my eyes, but I could withdraw myself from crying. I didn’t expect it to be this emotional, because you can actually compare it to theatre, but with opera you have people who can sing in an excellent way.
Speaking of theatre... One day, we received a small newspaper with news from West Belfast. We read through it and found out that the play 'The White Wedding' was on that night in the Culturlann – you know, the church on Falls Road that’s not really a church, but some kind of cultural center, as the name does suspect. As impulsive as we were, we all went to see it and it turned out to be a fantastic evening! Never in my life had I seen so many amateurs on one stage. It was hilarious!

A bit tired of watching films at home and craving for more space, we decided to go to the cinema as well. On Tuesdays you could find us at the Movie House, where we often attended the Crazy Tuesdays (a film of your choice for only £2.50) devouring popcorn and enjoying the wonderful seats!

- Going out... or staying in?

Belfast has a rich pub and club culture and we know it! All you need is a bunch of crazy Erasmus students and some taxis to drive us to our favourite destinations: Robinsons bar and Fibber Magee’s, Kelly’s Cellars, Limelight and Madden’s in the city centre or closer to Queen’s University we lost some calories on the dancefloors of the Bot (= Botanique), the Box or the Eg (=Eglantine). Somewhat closer to home (actually at the end of our street) we sometimes visited the Hawthorn Bar, where one man was playing music or all of a sudden a band came out of nowhere. We spent several hours there talking to the locals and listening carefully to their views on modern society, religion and so on. We wisely withheld from any comment what so ever.

Whenever we decided not to go out, the phone was ringing 10 minutes later and we were invited to one of the parties at the homes of other Erasmus students. At the end, those are the parties I remember the most: just enjoying each others company, singing songs or faking karaoke, telling jokes and playing silly games. The funny thing about these home parties is that you get to know each other really well and after some time, you just walk in to each others houses like it’s your own. In the beginning it’s very weird to get flung into a group of people who have all different kinds of nationalities and who already know each other for a bit longer. But it’s very easy to find your way. Everyone is very friendly and takes you along! It’s a great way to make friends for life!
IV. Guidelines for future students

DO:

- Rent a car and travel around the country. There is so much more to (Northern) Ireland than the city of Belfast!

- Try to plan as many trips as you can and try to do something else every day! Time flies and before you know it, you’re on the plane back home.

- Take your time to explore the city. It has loads of things to offer and to visit (Cave Hill, Belfast Zoo, Queen’s University, Waterfront, Grand Opera House, shoppingstreet...).

- Check your oil level and the amount of electricity on your metre regularly. It’s not fun waking up in a freezing house (yes, it happened to practically everyone once) and finding out that you’ve ran out of oil or electricity.

- Speak to the locals whenever you get the chance. They are always up to give you more information about anything you need to know and you will improve your English. In the beginning it will be a bit difficult to understand them, but you’ll adopt the accent soon enough!

- Get in contact with as many other students (both Erasmus and Irish). You’ll always have something to do or somewhere to go!

- Shop at ASDA, Iceland or Lidl if you don’t want to spend a fortune on groceries every time you go shopping. Another advantage: some shops actually drop you groceries at home for free!

- Bring adaptors. They have different sockets here then on the continent.

- Mind where you’re walking. Dogs tend to leave an occasional present for you in front of your doorstep.

- Email me if you have any questions: sophie_vyncke@hotmail.com

DON’T:

- Stay at home and think that it’s not that special to go on Erasmus. Go chaise the waterfall and tumble deeper down into this big adventure!

- Be afraid to talk to the Irish people. You’ll find them to be very friendly people, willing to help with any problem you have.

- Being a girl - walk the streets alone on your own after the pubs have closed at 1am. It’s not very clever and not safe!
- Forget to exchange your money, for they pay with Pounds here!

- Stand on the corner of the street and state that you know everything about the problems here and what you think about it. It’s better not to touch the subject unless it’s brought up in a conversation by a local. Still, be careful with what you’re saying. Your opinion can come across as rude and impolite.

- Expect too much of your housing facility. You won’t have everything you THINK you need, but you’ll find out that what you have is enough to live with. Erasmus is definitely a lesson in modesty.
V. Overall reflection on the experience.

Weeks in advance I’d prepared myself to come here. I told my friends and family that I would go to Belfast for three months and I got the same reaction from almost everyone: “Oh, Belfast! You’re going to a city that is practically still like a war area”! I didn’t know Ireland then and I don’t know Ireland now (well, maybe a bit, but at least better than before!), but to say that I’ve lived in the heart of a changing city that is recovering from some hard kicks up the ass, that counts for something right!? I’m the last one to claim that I know how people think or how they feel, but I have to say that I can see the picture more clearly now. And living here has made me hungry for more.

I wasn’t really sure why I came here, but one thing was sure: I felt that it was time for something else. I wanted to push my limits and see how far I could go on my own. Before I left on this journey, I only left home a couple of times on my one, but no longer than 10 days max. This time I would have to cope on my own for three months. I loved the ‘not knowing’ in the beginning of these three months, appreciated the ‘getting to know’ to eventually ‘loving and not wanting to leave’. Now that I know that I can do these (and other things), I think, is the start of a new part of my life.

Living here has actually opened my eyes to quite a lot of things. As I stated before, accepting our house was a real lesson in modesty. Joline, who came here with me from the same institution, and I are both from the country and so we are used to some space. Here, we found that our space was limited – not being able to pass
from one side of the kitchen to the other side without being stuck. But we grew attached to it: our house might be small, but it was very cozy and soon became are ‘home’. The longer we were here, the more we felt as one with the city and the neighbourhood we live in.

Another thing: people here are really friendly. When you’re at a bar in Belgium ordering a drink, nobody will talk to you. You would just stand at the bar minding your own business. Here, no way! People almost immediately start to talk to you and are always really interested when you say you’re from a foreign country. This fact sometimes got me treated to several drinks on one evening. Happy days!

The third thing that struck me was the fact that the Troubles are still very much alive here. Of course I had heard of everything that happened here, but I hadn’t the faintest idea of how it all still would be part of people’s lives. We already saw this when Peter Collins showed us to our house on day one. On the corner of the streets, there were murals painted on the walls and that is unknown in Belgium. I had no clue that there would be this many and all around town! Funny as it may be, it took us about a month and a half to take one of those black taxi mural tours and to find out how close we actually were to everything! We had walked up and down Falls Road several times, but never did we see the peace wall (which was all and all not that far away)!

And now, we are at the brink of leaving. Needless to say, I will miss this place a lot. I will miss the people I’ve met here and the friends I’ve made here, our house, my roommates, the atmosphere in the pubs and clubs, the walks from the city center to our house and visa versa and so many other little things! I’m not looking forward to getting on that bus/plane and heading back home. It will be weird leaving Belfast and knowing that you will not be returning shortly. But someday we’ll return here – oh, how I hope so!

Last but not least, I would like to thank all of you from St. Mary’s for making my time here something I will never forget!

It’s something unpredictable, but in the end it’s right – these were the days of our lives!!