

My year abroad at the Universidad Complutense de Madrid has been one of the most rewarding and transformative experiences of my degree. It challenged me academically, linguistically and personally, while giving me the opportunity to experience life in a different culture. In retrospect, I realise how much I have grown over the last nine months of living abroad and how the lessons I have learned have made me a more well-rounded person. The time I have spent in Madrid has made me more adaptable, proactive and resilient, both academically and personally. I have no doubt that taking a year abroad was the right decision.

Academics

Academically, the transition was much more challenging than I had expected. Although I deliberately chose to study third-year mathematics modules because I wanted to challenge myself, I quickly realised that the Spanish university system differed significantly from what I was used to at Warwick. The teaching was less standardised, with each lecturer using their own style and providing varying levels of lecture notes and resources – if at all. Moreover, the greater emphasis on note-taking differed from my usual way of learning, meaning I had to develop new strategies for engaging with lectures. This meant that I had to adapt my revision style for each module rather than relying on a familiar structure.

The biggest challenge came during the first-semester examinations. The exams placed much greater emphasis on memorisation, including recalling the exact names of theorems rather than focusing primarily on intuition and application. Furthermore, there were very few past papers or revision resources available. It was only in the second semester that I discovered an informal database of past papers, and even then they were provided without mark schemes. I underestimated these differences and was therefore unprepared for the examination period.

Despite working hard throughout the semester, I failed two modules and had to resit them. In addition, the examination timetable differed significantly from Warwick's, and I was unable to sit one exam because it clashed with an international flight that had been booked months in advance. Although this was disappointing, it highlighted the importance of understanding the practical differences between university systems as early as possible. These experiences forced me to reflect on how I approached my year abroad academically. However, I recognised that I had not yet adapted to the expectations of the Spanish system.

During the second semester I changed my approach significantly. I made much greater use of problem classes, focused my revision around the style of questions I now expected, and learned how to balance understanding with the level of detail required in examinations. As a result, I passed all of my second-semester modules and felt much more confident throughout the exam period. Although it was a shock at first, I now recognise how this experience helped me build resilience and showed me the importance of adapting to different academic environments rather than expecting them to resemble those I was already familiar with.

Studying mathematics entirely in Spanish also became one of the most valuable parts of my year abroad. At first, following the lectures required a great deal of concentration, particularly because I needed to learn mathematical terminology in the language for algebra and analysis. However, as my Spanish improved, I became increasingly comfortable participating in lectures and even answering questions in class. Revisiting familiar mathematical topics through another language also strengthened my understanding of the material, particularly in algebra and logic, as I was constantly reinforcing both the concepts and the terminology.

Additionally, the modules I chose helped me to better understand where my mathematical interests lie. Throughout the year I found myself increasingly drawn towards proof-based and highly logical areas of mathematics such as logic, set theory and algebra. Having the opportunity to explore these subjects in greater depth and without the pressure of final year influenced how I think about my future studies and the areas I would like to pursue further.

Social and Cultural

Outside of university, I gained just as much from life in Madrid. I made close friendships with students at Complutense who welcomed me into university life and patiently helped me improve my Spanish through everyday conversation. It took quite a bit for me to adapt to their Madrileño slang and be able to follow the conversations, but they were incredibly open to me from day one. By the end of the year I felt far more confident communicating in both formal academic settings and informal social situations. My daily interactions with them as well as with everyday people gave me an appreciation of the language that would not have been possible through classroom study alone.

Immersing myself in Spanish culture was another highlight of the year. I attended cultural events including Día de la Hispanidad celebrations, flamenco performances and Christmas markets, explored museums, visited Toledo, and discovered many different neighbourhoods of Madrid and the surrounding region. Through my friends I also learned about Spanish traditions, history and family life, as well as everyday aspects of culture such as card games (I absolutely fell in love with Mus), football and food. These experiences gave me a much deeper understanding of Spain than I could have gained as a tourist.

And I have not even mentioned the music yet! I fell in love with the music scene of Madrid and its Hispanic and Latino influences. Throughout the year I regularly attended jazz performances and visited one of the city's famous blues bars. I discovered a love for jazz and blues, particularly when fused with Latin American and Afro-Caribbean influences. Madrid's street musicians also introduced me to genres such as cumbia and tropical music, which I had never really listened to before.

Personally, this year abroad has helped me become far more independent and adaptable. Moving to a new country, studying in another language and overcoming unexpected academic challenges required me to develop resilience and confidence in my own ability to solve problems. Although the first semester was difficult, it ultimately made the second semester much more rewarding because I could clearly see how much I had grown and learned.

Overall, I leave Madrid with stronger mathematical knowledge, a much higher level of Spanish, lasting friendships and a far greater appreciation for Spanish culture. Most importantly, I have learned that adapting to unfamiliar situations is something to be embraced rather than avoided. The challenges I faced ultimately became the experiences from which I learned the most, and I believe this year has prepared me well for my final year at Warwick and for future opportunities beyond university.