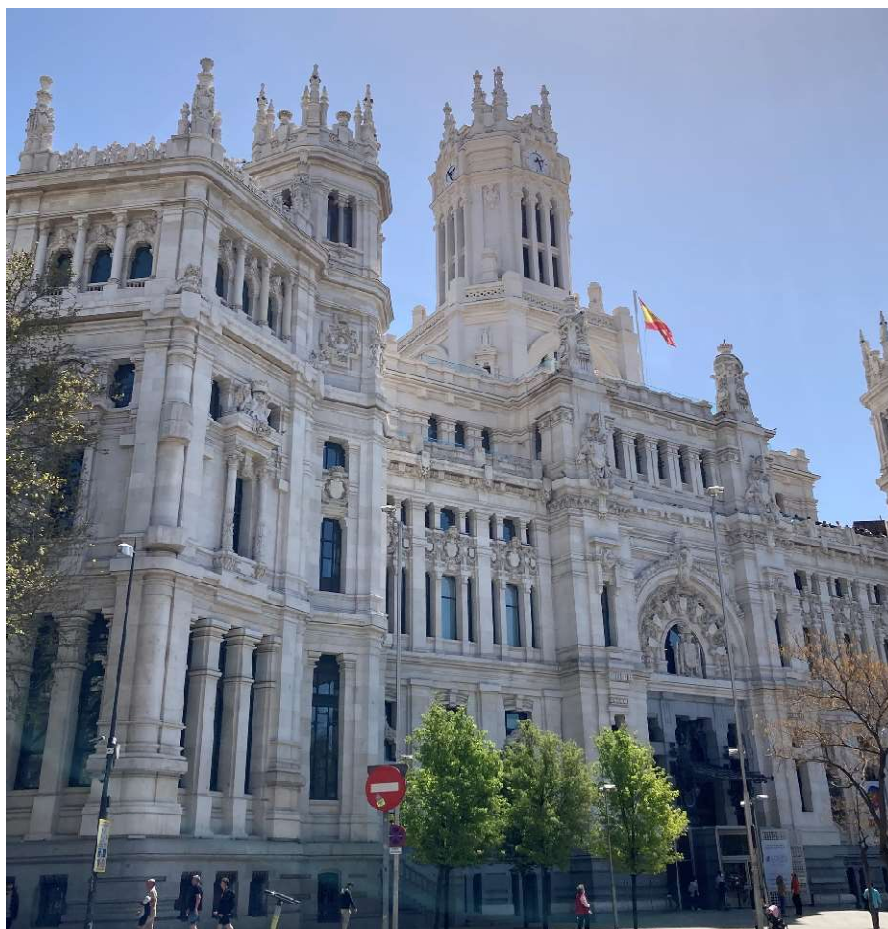


Erasmus Report – June 2022



Before leaving

I had wanted to do a year abroad since applying to university when I found out it was a possibility, and the flexibility of Warwick's study abroad programme, as well as the option to learn a language for credit alongside my maths modules, played a big role in my choice to apply here. With Brexit and then the pandemic I was worried about whether I would be able to complete this year at all, but I'm happy to say that, although it didn't go without its hitches, I have successfully completed a year at Universidad Complutense de Madrid. It has been by far the best year of my university experience so far, and I would thoroughly recommend taking the opportunity to anyone who is able.

The first thing to sort out is the most difficult – the visa. As I said, this year didn't go without its problems, and this was definitely the biggest; I didn't manage to sort it out in time and ended up having to apply from Spain, which turned out to be very expensive, and meant I couldn't go home to see my family at Christmas. I don't recommend that route, so the first piece of advice is start early. I waited until June, once I received my acceptance from Complutense, to start looking at it, but I would advise at least starting to look at what is required before then. Many of the documents you need have to be less than 3 months old, so while you can't start collecting them yet, it's a good idea to look into how to get them, as well as the costs of the documents themselves and associated translations and apostille stamps. You can find lists of the required documents on the Spanish government website. The most difficult part of the process for me, and what ended up meaning I wasn't ready in time, was getting an appointment at the consulate. Largely due to the combination

of the pandemic, and this being the first year of UK Erasmus students needing visas, the consulates were overwhelmed, taking months to reply to appointment requests, if at all. Hopefully, having done the process once now, they have a better system in place, but I would also recommend trying to get an appointment early, and being as flexible as possible with dates, although it may mean a summer close to home. While the visa process is a nightmare, don't let it put you off! Even with the stress of trying to sort it all out, and having to spend Christmas with my flatmate in Spain, I would still say this year has been completely worth it – and hopefully the process will be much easier in future years! I am very happy to help with this in any way I can; having been the first year to go through the process, I would've appreciated some guiding wisdom from someone who had done it all before.

The next thing to organise is accommodation. There will always be rooms available, so if you'd prefer to organise it once you're in Spain and can view the properties in person, you will absolutely be able to find somewhere, but I chose to get it sorted over summer for the peace of mind. I lived in a flat of 6, owned by a letting agency. I would absolutely recommend them; while my flat was on the expensive side, they resolved problems quickly and I got on well with all the people I lived with during the year. My flat was close to Cuatro Caminos, about a half an hour's walk from the maths faculty, and I was very glad to be able to walk to uni. Moncloa is the area that most students live in, also within walking distance to uni, but I also know people who lived in Malasaña, a cool neighbourhood with lots of bars and cafes, or closer to the centre, in Sol or Plaza de España, so it really depends on what your preferences are. I found where I lived was nice and quiet at night, but very well-connected, with 4 metro lines within a 10-minute walk from my flat meaning a half an hour journey to most places in the city. I found the room on the website Uniplaces and had no problems, but I know other people who found rooms through Facebook too. Complutense does also have student halls, and I know people who lived with host families, so it really is just down to personal choice. In Spain it's very common to live at home while at uni, so most of the Spanish students I met were living with parents or extended family, especially given Madrid is the capital city, and therefore more expensive than other places in Spain.

That brings me onto the last thing I sorted before I went – money. I set up a euro account with Starling, as it was free, and that way I avoided losing any of my Erasmus grant through exchange rates. Starling also have no fees on foreign transactions, so I could use my sterling account with fair exchange rates and not worry about extra charges. I believe Monzo also have free foreign transactions, so lots of my friends used that, and Santander have free cash withdrawals in Spain as far as I know. It worth noting that the final instalment of the Erasmus grant came after the end of my stay; something to take into account when deciding which currency to receive the grant in if you aren't likely to be travelling to/around Europe once your year is over.

Finally, one thing that I didn't have to worry about, but many people will post-Brexit, is a phone sim card. Until 23rd May 2022, most providers allowed free international roaming (subject to certain limitations) but after that date a lot of them have stopped. A few still do offer it (O2 for example), so the first thing to do is to check whether your plan includes international usage. A friend of mine got a sim card through the company Lobster, which is designed for UK citizens living in Spain (so has a website in English!); it wasn't expensive, and included free calls and texts to UK numbers as well as giving her everything she needed in Spain.

Upon arrival

The first important piece of advice for arrival is to pay careful attention to the term dates; the terms start much earlier than Warwick, and I know people who were caught out and missed the first few weeks of term. Before I arrived, I thought that term started on 22nd September (because that was

what one of the first emails I received said), but when I arrived on the 6th it turned out that that was the first day of term, so I was very unprepared for the start of classes. I also hadn't made any of my module choices, which I would argue was partly due to Complutense not sending out the matrícula forms to any of the Erasmus students in advance of the start of term. I found the module registration process to be quite a stressful one, as I hadn't looked at what the module options were before coming, and, as I said, wasn't expecting classes to start so early, so I would recommend having a look at the module catalogue and timetable in advance if you can, but don't worry too much if not; the first few weeks will inevitably be quite chaotic anyway, and I managed just fine sorting them out once classes had started.

For the first few weeks I was enrolled in an optional intensive Spanish course, every evening for 2 hours. I would say that I didn't find the content covered to be particularly useful; it was pretty much all grammar that I had covered before, and being online due to Covid it wasn't hugely engaging. I think had it been in person I would've found the opportunity to practise speaking and build confidence in a controlled environment much more useful. However, it was a good way to meet other Erasmus students, and I met one of the best friends I had out there in that class.

Another thing that is worth sorting out early is the transport card. The public transport system in Madrid is fantastic, and with the young person's travel card you pay €20 for 30 days' unlimited travel in all of the public transport zones. To get the card, you have to apply online and then book an appointment to collect it, which can sometimes have a wait of a couple of weeks, so it's worth looking early, because otherwise you can easily spend that much in a matter of days. A great bonus that the transport card brings is free trips to lots of the pueblos outside of central Madrid; it's valid in all of the zones of the transport network, which means you can use it to get to some of the really beautiful towns surrounding the city. My personal favourite is Toledo, but you can also get to other places, such as Aranjuez, Guadalajara and Alcalá de Henares, as well as El Escorial, the mountains in Cercedilla and the lake at Pantano de San Juan.

If you have managed to sort the immigration stuff through the 'normal' channels and have arrived in Spain in possession of a visa, the next step in the process is the empadronamiento, which is registering residency with the local council, is supposed to be started within 30 days of arrival. You book an appointment online, take your passport and completed form, and are given an official certificate of residency, which is required for the TIE (Tarjeta de Identidad de Extranjero) application, the card which ultimately grants you the right to live in Spain for the year. As with the visa, there is information on the Spanish government website, but I am very happy to help as it can be quite confusing and there is little help from uni.

The final thing you may want to organise when you arrive is an ESN card. ESN, or Erasmus Student Network, is a student-run organisation linking all the Erasmus students in a certain area (and around the world). They run a variety of events for Erasmus students throughout the year, from volleyball tournaments to club nights to weekend trips. The ESN card costs €10 and gets you access to all of this, as well as discounts with a few companies they partner with, most notably Ryanair. I didn't end up going to many of the events, but the card is worth having and the events seemed like a great way to socialise and meet people.

Throughout the year

In the final section, I will talk more about day-to-day life, both at uni and outside. The way that lectures are taught and run in Spain is very different from the UK, as we were in small classes and taught in school-style classrooms rather than lecture halls (although thankfully the majority still had

a trusty chalkboard!). The day is more or less split up into morning (9am-1pm) and afternoon (3pm-7pm) groups; you pick a group and stick with that timetable, which was nice when choosing a timetable as it meant I had either mornings or afternoons completely free. It was also useful when I was choosing my second-term modules, as the timetables for the different years would have otherwise clashed. Each group is often taught by a different lecturer, which can mean quite significant differences in teaching standards, assessment methods and even sometimes content, so this is something the native students often take into account when choosing their groups.

That brings me to module choices. UCM will let you take any modules that Warwick will sign off on, and from my experience they are fairly happy for you to take any that you like, including ones from other years and departments. As I said before, when I arrived I was very unprepared, and had no idea what was available to me, so I will give a quick overview of the modules (*asignaturas* – not *modulos!*) I took and whether I would recommend them. In first term, I took *Análisis de Funciones de Variables Complejas (AFVC)*, *Topología (TOEL)*, *Astronomía y Geodesía (AG)* and *Historia de Matemáticas (HM)*. These were all third-year modules, the first 2 compulsory for the Spanish students, and the second 2 part of a bank of options they could choose from. In second term, I took *Análisis Numérico (ANNU)*, *Matemática Elemental desde un Punto de Visto Superior (MELE)*, *Ecuaciones Diferenciales (ED)* and *Investigación Operativa (IO)*. ANNU was a compulsory third-year one, MELE optional, and ED and IO compulsory second-year.

AFVC was on complex analysis, covering some stuff I'd already done but a lot of it was new content. It was taught by Fernando Cobos Diaz, who I found to be an excellent lecturer, explaining things clearly and writing detailed notes on the blackboard; if it is available to take and still taught by him it is one I would definitely recommend, also because a lot of the content seems to overlap with the Warwick third-year module, Complex Analysis. I took TOEL because a lot of the content had already been covered in the second-year module Norms, Metrics and Topologies, so I hoped it wouldn't be too difficult. Unfortunately, the lecturer was very bad, and I found him very difficult to understand; he just mumbled from his notes from the projector and didn't write anything down. In spite of this, I would say in terms of content it is a good module to take, but definitely avoid Lupiañez if you can. AG started out hard, but once I got more used to the content it became one of my favourite modules – it was very interesting and nothing like anything the Warwick Maths department offers. We covered the geodesy part first, discussing methods of mapping the Earth's surface and different coordinate systems, and then moved onto astronomy, using a unit sphere to represent astronomical bodies. It was very calculation-based, and quite physics-y, so if you are looking for long, theoretical proofs this module is not for you. I also really enjoyed HM, it covered quite a lot of content and involved learning history as well as mathematical proofs, but I found it very interesting and well-taught.

Overall, ANNU was not a hard module, covering various types of numerical methods to solve differential equations, and how to use MatLab to implement them. I enjoyed the weekly MatLab coding sessions, but found the lectures a bit boring as the lecturer usually just presented from a powerpoint. The content wasn't particularly difficult and I did well in the exam without much work. MELE was a geometry-based module, covering the axiomatic method, as well as a lot of Euclid and various other geometries. I didn't find it hugely interesting, and it was quite tricky to follow at times. ED was definitely my favourite module of term 2, it covered content from Warwick's first-year Differential Equations module, and touched on some of the more computational things from Theory of ODEs in second year; overall was very familiar content, and even the new stuff wasn't tricky Maths to follow. I had no idea what to expect from IO, as optimisation problems was something I hadn't done at Warwick before, but I found it to be fairly interesting, and a nice change from the

'usual' maths I was doing. The theoretical aspect was quite boring and a bit confusing in my opinion, but much of the module was learning methods and performing computations, which I enjoyed.

I found it was more important to keep on top of work and going to lectures in Spain, particularly at the beginning (it is much easier to miss things when everything is in a foreign language!). In the first lecture of term, like at Warwick, the lecturer gave an overview of the content that would be covered and the assessment methods. The latter of these is important to pay attention to, as they can differ quite significantly across lecturers (potentially including things like participation, attendance, optional mid-term exams, and written homework-style assessments) and is not always written down anywhere. Once they stopped offering online classes because of Covid most of the lectures weren't recorded, and there often wasn't a set of typed lecture notes widely available, so I had to rely on getting notes from classmates.

Outside of lectures, Spain doesn't have the same culture of sports clubs and societies that most unis in the UK have, so extra-curricular activities weren't as big a part of my life as at Warwick. However, I did join the UCM choir, which I really enjoyed, and I have friends who joined orchestra, rugby, football and tennis, so there are options available if you look for them. Although it seems daunting at first, this is a great way to meet people and mingle with the Spanish students, as many of the sports teams also socialise together, particularly after matches. That said, a lot of the close friends I made at uni were other Erasmus students, either ones I had classes with or met through my Spanish lessons. I had intended to try and integrate fully with the Spanish students, but I found that once I was there this was harder (and scarier!) than expected, partly due to the culture of university in Spain – it is very common for students to go to uni close to home, so many people have friends they've been to school with, which meant that, especially by third year, the friendships are generally well-established. However, I found that while people weren't typically looking for friends, everyone was incredibly friendly and welcoming, and very happy to chat between classes or give advice if we needed it.

Finally, I will talk about activities outside of uni – Madrid has lots of art museums with famous pieces in, many of which offer free entry to students, and/or have a couple of time slots a week where entry is free for everyone. These often fill up fast, so it's worth booking a ticket early. In the hotter summer months, I spent a lot of days at the public pools, which are cheap and fairly nice (you can find them on the *Madrid Móvil* app, amongst lots of other things to do in the city). There are, of course, plenty of tapas bars and clubs and restaurants and cafes; I've got a list of my favourites which I'd be happy to share, but exploring and trying new places is all part of the fun in my opinion! Madrid is an amazing city and you can always find things to keep yourself busy – I have every intention of going back as much as I can in future!

My Warwick email address is lucy.a.taylor@warwick.ac.uk and my personal one is lucyambertaylor63@gmail.com. Feel free to email on either of those to ask questions about anything at all; moving to another country can be very daunting on your own, and I had some very patient Warwick students answering my panicked emails when I went so would be happy to do the same. (Also, in case you couldn't tell, I love talking about Madrid – you won't be able to shut me up once I've started!)