

ERASMUS REPORT : Sorbonne Université (Paris VI) – 2019/20

Taking a year abroad is by no means the easy option. I can't promise that it will always be simple or fun, but I guarantee you that if you make the leap out of your Warwick comfort zone you *will* have an adventure (especially if like me half of your second semester is abandoned because of a global pandemic).

Looking into Erasmus you hear a lot of buzzwords like “self-discovery”, “lifelong friends” and “independence”; it's basically all true. Going it alone in a foreign country teaches you to have faith in yourself to handle whatever bizarre, unexpected problem that comes your way. Almost by necessity it makes you more confident and outgoing. Hopefully hearing about my experiences will help you decide if a year abroad is right for you. If you're able to and you have even a vague feeling that Erasmus might be something you're interested in, I highly recommend that you go for it. The overall experience is superb so don't be put off if my report comes across as a little negative; I'm just trying to give some helpful advice!

Paris & Money

Paris never failed to surprise and amaze me. I came away from it with so many unforgettable experiences and having met so many interesting people. The city is, of course, beautiful (if sometimes a little austere) and has everything you could possibly want in terms of culture, food and nightlife. Some of my favourite student hangouts included jazz bars, subterranean nightclubs, an Irish pub, an all you can sushi restaurants, and probably the best falafel house on the continent. My only criticism of Paris is that there is very little green space even compared with a city like London. There is a reasonable amount of opportunities to do sport in the city, but if outdoor sports and nature are a priority for you then you may want to consider another university like Grenoble.

Paris is notoriously expensive but outside the most touristy areas there are plenty of great deals to be had, particularly for young people. Entry to most museums is free for Europeans under 25 (but this was of course pre-Brexit), and there are some great cheap bars in central Paris particularly in the neighbourhoods of *St Michel*, *Bastille* and *Châtelet* which are all a short trip from the university campus. When the weather's good enough a wine and cheese picnic on the Champs de Mars is highly recommended.

Paris is not a very large city, but very dense and full of character. It may not be for everyone, but I had the chance to get to know it very well and I loved the atmosphere. Getting around is surprisingly painless and extremely cheap. The fastest way to travel is usually bike or electric scooter which are available almost everywhere to rent through apps or the public *Vélib* bike stations (honestly, it's not as dangerous as you would expect). That said you can travel the whole city on a combined metro/bus pass for the entire year for as little as 300 euros. Subsidised meals for students are available on any university campus through an organisation called CROUS. The quality varies, and it is hilariously similar to children's school dinners, but it's essentially a three-course meal for three euros so it's well worth it.

If you find yourself with time on your hands and need some extra cash a part-time job is easy to find, particularly for native English speakers. Registering with a company like

Speaking Agency who put you in touch with French families who are looking for English speaking babysitters is a relatively easy way to fund your social life.

Making Friends & Speaking French

The *number one regret* you hear time and time again from returning Erasmus students is something like: “I wish I’d made more local friends and spent more time socialising in French”. It is very easy to see why this is the case: the Erasmus community is exceedingly welcoming, and they do a great job of reaching out to international students. A quick search on Facebook will show a huge variety of public events from picnics to club nights run by several groups in Paris which are specifically dedicated to socialising international students. You should absolutely take advantage of these opportunities to make friends, especially early in the year. Erasmus students make for strong friendship groups as you are all in the same situation, and you will meet people with some very interesting backgrounds. The only downside is that almost all these people are more comfortable speaking to each other in English than French, and it is very tempting to join them.

Finding French friends and living an “authentic” Parisian lifestyle is possible but challenging. Making friends in your classes at university can be difficult. During the classes themselves everyone is usually very quiet and it’s not a natural place to start conversations. Considering it is 3rd year people have generally settled into their respective cliques and, while polite, they often don’t take much interest in new people. Finding a part-time job, joining a language buddy system or a university sports club are all good ways to meet French people.

My number one tip for making French friends and socialising in French is: *try Warwick first!* As any Warwick student who’s seen the 5th floor of the library knows: Warwick is home to a substantial number of sociable (noisy) Parisians. With a bit of luck, you will meet Erasmus students who will be returning to their own universities in Paris just as you are arriving yourself. Warwick Language Society (AKA World@Warwick), run language exchanges and free student taught language lessons through which I met a couple native French people who would be in Paris at the same time as me. They were able to introduce me to even more people once I arrived. There are also dedicated societies on campus for French speakers. Ironically some of the best friends I made during my year abroad were people I met in T bar!

Even if you don’t make any close French friends you will pick up a huge amount of French from your lectures, free language lessons at Sorbonne, and just being constantly surrounded the language. When I arrived, I was only at around a B1 level but there were plenty of other international students with even worse French than me who seemed to get along just fine. Sorbonne runs language classes starting from absolute beginners so brush up on your French before you arrive but don’t let anxiety about your language skills hold you back!

Finally, don’t worry too much about spending time alone. For me my year abroad was my first experience of living properly alone, and it took a while to get used to my own company. You’ll make some good friends, but you’re also bound to feel a bit lonely sometimes, for me I think this was all part of the experience. Even alone there is always something to do in Paris and you might learn some interesting things about yourself!

Accommodation & Administration

The admin in France is no joke. There is often a mountain of paperwork associated with seemingly simple things in France. Unfortunately, inflexible and artificially complicated processes seem to be the norm and as a year abroad student even the administrative staff who want to help can struggle to know what to do with you. I went to the bank on my street on my first day and it took me **a month** and multiple visits to open a usable account. Often to get something done you will have to harass many times whoever's job it is to help you. Don't let anybody dismiss you or walk over you just because you are having trouble expressing yourself in French. Before you arrive: get several passport sized photos, photocopy all the documentation you could possibly need and upload digital copies to the cloud. Bewilderingly there is still a lot of stuff that can't be done online so be prepared to visit the post office.

The first challenge you will face on your Erasmus journey is finding somewhere to live, which is not very easy in Paris. I recommend you start early and be proactive in your search because you will not receive much support from the university, who do not themselves offer any halls. Before you go, if you can get out to Paris for a few days to view apartments either in the Easter break I highly recommend this. In terms of location I recommend living within the central city and not the suburbs; this will open more options for participating in the student nightlife. I lived in a studio apartment in a district called Le Marais which has plenty of ambiance and was essentially perfect for my needs. Each of the *arrondissements* of Paris has its own advantages, which should be investigated when searching for somewhere. The housing market moves fast and is very competitive. While you need to watch out for red flags, follow up on leads quickly and don't be too picky.

Many of my international student friends lived at *Cité Internationale Universitaire De Paris*, which is a campus of residential halls in the south of Paris specifically for housing international students. I visited several times and it seems like a beautiful and sociable place to live but expect to speak a lot of English! If you would like to make an application I would advise you to first reach out to Sorbonne and ask them if they can sponsor your application, since this is how most of the people I know managed to secure a place there.

Finally, you should know that alongside your Erasmus grant the French government offers grants (AKA: *free money*) to help with accommodation. The only catch is that the paperwork required to receive this money is hellish and many an Erasmus student has given up on their CAF application deciding that it wasn't worth the time.

Here is a handy blog summarising your options for Paris accommodation: [Link](#)

Lectures & TDs

After you've been inducted into the university by the student mobility team the first thing that you'll need to do is visit the *Licence de Mathématiques* to register for your modules. Don't panic if you can't find where you need to be or you're struggling to understand what

you have to do. You have at least a week or two to figure this out before term properly starts. The first few weeks after arriving in France will be the most difficult and once you have gotten through the adjustment period you will start to enjoy yourself a lot more.

The material covered in the courses is interesting enough and probably at a similar level of difficulty to Warwick, but you are likely to see some stuff you've already covered in second year. You should probably just choose whatever you think will interest you the most or will help you when you get back to Warwick. I strongly advise you to intercalate your year abroad. Otherwise you will be in for quite a stressful year, and you will miss out on many of the most important benefits of your year abroad which are, ultimately, the linguistic and cultural experiences.

Teaching at Sorbonne is structured very differently to at Warwick and to be honest I never quite got the hang of it. Your contact hours are split into three categories: *Cours* (lectures), *TDs* (problem classes) and sometimes for computer-based modules *TPs* (controlled assessment). There is no equivalent to supervisions or tutorials. Whereas at Warwick most of the contact hours are arranged in manageable 50-minute chunks with a break in the middle, most of my lectures and TDs at Sorbonne ran for upwards of **two hours**. Given that the average attention span is under 20 minutes, I think this is a very unrealistic approach to teaching maths which leaves students too drained to do their own more productive study. These lectures can't really be avoided though since lecture capture is non-existent and the availability of quality printed lecture notes is inconsistent. Problem classes are actually very helpful in terms of helping you recap and apply the content of the lectures, but they feel strangely like being back in school and lack the collaborative atmosphere of a supervision. The teachers of these classes are very capable and knowledgeable on the material, but I found them occasionally a little impatient.

All the courses I took were taught in French but in general this isn't a huge obstacle. Within the few weeks you will pick up the essential maths vocabulary. Much of the English terminology is taken from the French in the first place, and in the worst case you can work out a lot of what is going on from the context.

The year abroad (especially if intercalated) provides a fantastic opportunity to explore areas of maths that you may have missed first time around at Warwick and even the material that you have already seen is likely to be covered from a different point of view which will complement your understanding. You will also have the chance to get a head start in modules you plan to take later. Do not, however, make the mistake of neglecting your social life. In truth, the most valuable experiences and opportunities that the Erasmus scheme has to offer are not found in the classroom.