

Student article

## Erasmus students' experience at Leicester

Mario Glera Hernando, Marta Cipres Garcia and Diego Vera Repollés

University of Leicester

In this article, three undergraduate Spanish students attending the Erasmus\* programme at the University of Leicester in the UK. The authors talk about their perceptions of their host city and the people they have met there, analyse how coming to an UK higher education institution has impacted on their study, and reflect on their learning experience as a whole.

*\*Erasmus is the European Union's flagship educational exchange programme for Higher Education students, teachers and institutions.*

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### On place and people

**Mario:** Going on Erasmus seemed to be the best way to finish my degree in English, so when the opportunity arose I did not have a moment of doubt about it. In Leicester, everything was new to me: the people, the place, the language. In those first months I met so many new people that I could not even remember their names. However, as time passed by I ended up forming my own group of friends. Usually, you begin by selecting your circles and then you naturally get more attached to some of your fellow companions. Since I haven't been to university in my home town in Spain, I am quite used to living on my own, either on student accommodation or sharing a flat, so cooking by myself wasn't really a big deal, but I have enjoyed and *suffered* those who have never cooked in their entire lives. Culture struggle is also part of the experience. For example, the fact that shops close at 5 o'clock in the UK makes you realize that you are in a different country. You can see differences not only in the timetables though, but also in the food, clothing, partying...everywhere. Eventually you get used to it and it broadens your horizons because you are able to perceive, accept, and interact with different people who have different opinions and lifestyles.

**Marta:** When I arrived in Leicester I found myself in a foreign country, surrounded by people from as many different cultures as there are countries in the world. And I am not exaggerating. Apart from other international students, the city itself is more cosmopolitan than I could ever imagine. A great part of the population is second or third generation of immigrants and racial discrimination here is not as common as I was used to see elsewhere. When I first heard people speaking English in Leicester I thought, 'That is not the English I am used to hear in the listening practice in class!' But little by little and without being totally aware of it, I became able to communicate with everybody quite well and I have made friends who I am sure will be my friends for my entire life.

**Diego:** I soon realized how cosmopolitan the citizens of Leicester were: peoples from every corner of the world have settled there and seem to genuinely make efforts to understand each other, as if none of the thousands of kilometers and years of separation between them had strength enough to impede the bloom of their relationships. Suddenly, I became part of

this multicultural network as my closest friends were people who one year ago I could barely have imagined meeting. Besides this social and cultural adaptation, an important aspect of this new life was the fact that it was the first time I lived on my own. This means that I spent the first months in Leicester cooking for myself. Mind you, cooking has never been one of my strengths! Months went by so fast that when I realized, I had spent three months attending lessons, playing volleyball with the University team, and partying, of course. I even became an assistant in the Spanish conversation classes at the University.

### **On the University**

**Mario:** The educational system in the UK is quite different from the one I am used to in Spain so I struggled to adapt to it. In my opinion, it is one of the biggest issues international/Erasmus students need to deal with. There are lots of seminars and lessons and attendance is compulsory. In terms of essay writing, lots of references are needed. Moreover, you need to go to tutorials because sometimes you do not fully understand the topic of the essays. On the other hand, getting used to a more strict educational system makes you more aware of the different parts of the assessment and you end up evolving as student and developing greater capacity of reflection and independence.

**Marta:** At the University of Leicester I have learnt a different way of studying in which independent effort is the key to academic success. I have also realized how important it is to share knowledge with my classmates. I have learnt in practice that in literary studies there is no right or wrong arguments if they are well supported.

**Diego:** The teaching approach at the University of Leicester is quite different from my home University. The methodology demanded much more work from me as I had to look for sources and read texts at home. In Zaragoza, we also had to do this kind of work, but the lectures were more didactic. I mean, there was a kind of combination between lecture and seminar instead of being two distinct sessions as at Leicester. This is probably because in Spain we weren't so many people in class and the tutor could lead sessions with the whole group. Besides, in my country tutors first explain the text we are going to work on, present the historical background, characteristics, and so on, and only in the last stage of the lessons students interpret and analyze the texts. I was a bit surprised by the few lecture hours there were in each module here and how much more independent work was required from me.

By the time the first term finished, I had already developed my English language skills. It wasn't as bad as it was before coming here. Maybe I haven't developed my speaking skills as much as I want to, but I am quite happy with it, not only because I have improved my fluency but also because I have learnt some expressions and words that are not taught at the University. You acquire quite a lot of language while going out with friends and being in a non-academic environment. So I am happy I have learnt something that I already knew in theory but I hadn't experienced yet: that not all the wisdom is in the books or at the University, but that you can learn a lot from other people, just by talking to others, no matter their economic, social, or academic background.

## Lasting impressions

**Mario:** To sum up, if you want to grow as person, if you want to broaden your horizons, visit places, make new bonds, learn, enjoy, and party, the Erasmus programme is something you must do. I have great memories of it and if you go for it too, you will never forget or regret it!

**Marta:** I really appreciate the opportunity that was given to me by the Erasmus programme. I can assure everybody that these months in Leicester have changed me as a person and I know that people who have experienced something similar – being immersed in an academic environment, being on your own far from their native countries, and meeting so many different people - can understand it. So yes, I clearly invite every single student to try the benefits of it.

**Diego:** one of the most important things I take from my Erasmus experience is the way I have grown both as a person and as a student. I truly believe that travelling is a good, if not the best way, to learn things in life because we can compare and contrast the positive and negative things we have in our home country and also the positive and negative things we see in other places. It helps you become a more understanding individual, more open-minded and a better person. To sum up, I would just like to say that I am going to spend the rest of my Erasmus time in England seizing the days, trying to learn more to improve my English skills and, above all, enjoying it day by day.

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## CONTACT THE AUTHORS

[mgh15@student.le.ac.uk](mailto:mgh15@student.le.ac.uk)

[martacip7@gmail.com](mailto:martacip7@gmail.com)

[dvera\\_92@hotmail.com](mailto:dvera_92@hotmail.com)