

Academic Erasmus+ Exchange – Experiences

I've lived in Catania on Sicily (Italy) during the past five months, as I had the chance to combine a semester abroad with an internship together with my investigations for my master thesis.

I decided to apply for both Erasmus-programmes, the semester and the internship abroad, thanks to the great advice from the International Office at the ASH. During 5 months of studying at the University of Catania I had the possibility to learn and improve my Italian skills so I was prepared to work and start my thesis in Italy. Beside that it is a great opportunity to live abroad for a longer time receiving an Erasmus-grant. I received a 4-months-grant for my study semester, also for my internship, so in total I had the possibility to live 8 months on Sicily with a certain financial stability.

I am a student in the International Conflict Management-Master programme at ASH, although our master programme doesn't have any kind of Erasmus-collaboration with other universities, it is possible to be part of an Erasmus-programme thanks to the major cooperation contracts of the ASH. The ICM-programme is unique, that's why it seems to be very difficult to take part at an academic exchange such as Erasmus+ or any other kind of programme. I can recommend realizing the exchange during the semester in which you write your thesis and, if it is possible, extend the master for one semester. The bureaucratic process to extend the master is easy because you only have to show up at the office of the ICM administration, they probably will recommend you not to extend the master. As I have already said the ICM has a unique teaching system, so your exchange semester will probably not have any influence on your ECTS-credits system and grades.

Although extending your master would mean a longer time of studies, but on the other hand you have a lot of intercultural experience which, in my opinion, is more important than finishing my studies on time.

When I decided to realise an Erasmus semester abroad, I already knew about the lack of compatible international courses, so within my research I wanted to concentrate more on my personal wishes. The Italian language was one important factor for me, as well as the context of illegal migration and refugees, so Catania was my first and only choice. The application process was very easy and the staff from the International Office were always very helpful giving me advises and support. If you are planning a semester abroad I can fully recommend you the counselling at the International Office. Due to this help I've decided to go abroad for a study semester and an internship. Combining the study semester with an internship gave me the possibility to stay over a longer period of time in Italy and writing my thesis abroad.

The application process was really quick and only after two months I received the official confirmation that I was accepted at the partner university in Italy, so I could continue with my arrangements.

I also found an interesting course at the University of Catania called "*Global Politics and Euro-Mediterranean Relations (GLOPEM)*" which was held in English. If you look up the courses on the website you will notice that it is really easy to find your way around.

On the 1st of October I travelled to Catania with a cheap Ryanair flight and during the first week of October I participated at the introduction week for incoming students at University of Catania. They gave us all the relevant information on libraries, housing, casino, internet etc. In this week we also completed the grading test on our Italian skills.

We also presented ourselves in front of the political and social science department where we had the chance to talk with other students and getting to know the professors. The staff in this department are very kind and helpful, but you have to be aware of the different work rhythm and especially bureaucratic things take a lot much longer. One example is the Italian course, where we passed the

grading tests in October, and which started in December. The GLOPEM-course started mid of November and some other courses got cancelled. Because of this it took me a long time to change my Learning Agreement – about 60 days. Apart from that I finished my semester fine and nearly all of the exams were oral exams or I had to hand in an essay.

I wasn't really happy about the academic level of the University of Catania and the GLOPEM-course, but I got to know a different side of European education and that was a very important experience for me.

Apart from the academic and bureaucratic context, I can say that my experience in Catania and Sicily was great. The people are very relaxed and take their time. They start the day with a sweet breakfast and in general the food there is awesome. From Monday to Saturday you can visit a market where you can find a big variety of fruits and vegetables at a really low price. Food is a big thing in Sicilian culture and the people really appreciate a good lunch or dinner. Catania is full of cafés, trattorias, bistros and kiosks with a spectacular variety of products.

There are also enough bars and pubs and there is a lot of nightlife going on, so you could easily go out every night. It isn't difficult to meet new people and Sicilian people mostly are open for a small talk.

It was also quite easy to find an apartment, but I would recommend you to look for flats when you actually are in Catania, otherwise you will find a lot of expensive flats on the internet.

You can book a hostel for the first days and then start searching for a nice flat after arriving in Catania. My flatmates are my best friends and they made my experience unique. From my point of view it is good to live in the city centre as the public transport system in Catania is really bad. Living in the city centre makes it possible to get to all the important places within 30 minutes by foot and it is very safe, even at night. Going on bike is also an option, it is easy to buy one but you have to be careful with the traffic and unfortunately cyclists and pedestrians are not as respected like in Germany.

Finally I am very happy about my decision going to Sicily. The people, university, food, sea, climate and the island is incredible and it is worth it to go there and get to know more of the island. Of course everything will be much easier if you are able to speak Italian.