
Studying Abroad with Disability

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The Erasmus programme celebrates the 30th anniversary of its existence this year. Charles University approached several of its former Erasmus students to share their experience with the programme. Diana Rálišová spent her Erasmus semester in Limerick, Ireland. This would be nothing unusual – Charles University sends about 1300 of its students abroad with the Erasmus programme yearly and Limerick is one of its good partners, belonging to the favourite destinations of Czech students. There is something extraordinary by Diana Rálišová, however – the petite, jovial brunette is one of CU students with special needs and when preparing for her study stay abroad she had to consider her disability – Diana has a visual impairment.

Diana, what do you study at Charles University and what motivated you to apply for study stay in Limerick? How satisfied were you with your selection?

I study English and American Studies at the Faculty of Arts and therefore, it was reasonable for me to travel to an English-speaking country. First, I thought about going to Oxford or Cambridge, of course, as any English-language student who likes England as much as I did would, but this seemed rather impossible to me. As I didn't want to build myself more obstacles than I already had, I decided to choose a less famous university and also an alternative to England – Ireland. Since I come from a small city I immediately knew my destination wouldn't be Dublin. I was also limited by the agreements that our department had, of course. When I arrived to Limerick, I almost couldn't believe how lucky choice I had made, Limerick offered me everything (and even more) than I could ever hope for!

As student with special needs you received a special grant of the Erasmus programme to cover your higher expenses connected to your disability. Equally, you were offered assistance from the University of Limerick. What all was necessary for you to take care of to be able to participate in the exchange? How did the University of Limerick help you?

As a disabled student, you have to think about even simple things that other people don't have to bother with in their daily lives. How will I find my gate at the airport? How do I transfer? How will I travel from the airport? Which route should I take? How do I find my new house?

People solve all these things with their good eyesight immediately, but I had to ask for help in advance.

Firstly, it was vital for me to contact the Erasmus coordinator in Limerick and to explain my problem. They are used to receiving many handicapped students there so I knew she would help me. She arranged for a guide who would pick me up at the airport and accompany me directly to my door. She would also let the Disability Department know that there would be an extra student to take care of.

I had to ask the airport for assistance which you are granted at all European airports. The airport assistant showed me to my gate and helped me to transfer and to locate my suitcase.

In Limerick, I needed to have a private campus tour and also, the Disability Office arranged for a social worker to show me and explain the basic things in the city – how to use the public transport, where are the shops, some restaurants, and the post office.

The University of Limerick had a brilliant system of providing for the blind and visually handicapped, and it was all free of charge. All I had to do was to explain clearly what I needed. I could always ask the International Office for help, be it with finding my classroom or with registering to clubs and societies.

I had to take care of my special electronic equipment as well, so I asked the airport for a dispensation in terms of allowance regarding my hand luggage, because my equipment couldn't go to the luggage store room of the plane, so they had to let me go through the security check with these. Plus I had to find an insurance company for a special insurance. I also asked the International Office how to store my equipment the best way so nobody would steal it. I also had to think carefully of the way how would I study in Limerick, how would I complete my tasks and how would I read the required literature, since I cannot manage to read the standard printed texts.

You have to do a lot of planning before you go and you have to think over every single step you take. It definitely takes you more time and effort.

As the majority of British and Irish universities also the University of Limerick is very pro-student oriented. You joined several of local student societies, which helped you to better integrate into the local student community. What all the University of Limerick offers to the students in this field and what was most interesting offer for you?

I joined the Tea Appreciation Society and the International Society. The International Society was a must for me, because they organised trips throughout the country which I certainly couldn't go for alone, so I was thankful for them. The University of Limerick offers many clubs and societies focused on sports, theatre, music, games, films, books, animals; they have everything, every hobby you might like, they have it.

What I also used and what I really appreciated were the free-of-charge workshops that the university organised. For example, there was an essay writing workshop which taught you how to write an excellent essay, or there was the Regional Writing Centre which helped you with your writing assignments, whatever that might be, so all you had to do was to come and consult for free. It was amazing. I've never seen such a care.

If you would compare the studies at Charles University and at the University of Limerick, what are their best points? How do the services for the special-needs students differ in both the institutions?

Charles University has an undeniable status of prestige and a reputation that every student can benefit from. The standard quality of education is kept high enough to bring these benefits, however, the Czech school system is making the students passive. What I mostly appreciated at the UL was the attitude of the students: *"If I want something, I would go for it; if I want to know something new, I'll attend the workshops (as described above); if I need help, I won't hesitate to ask for it."*

Regarding the services for special-needs students, the only one difference was that the help received in Limerick could be made more effective and faster (i.e. the book-scanning). However, it is important to highlight that we are comparing two school systems that cannot be compared, the university education in Ireland is paid by the students (while studying in a university in the Czech Republic is free), so I can imagine things can be easier and more efficient when you have more money.

The city of Limerick does not belong to often frequented destinations of Czech tourists. No matter that, it is certainly interesting. Would you recommend it for a visit? What did you like the best there?

I would definitely recommend the city and its surroundings for a visit, especially Bunratty Castle, which is just a 30 minute drive from Limerick. The city is perfect as it is, there's a castle as well (King John's Castle) and if one cannot travel alone beyond the city as I couldn't, visiting the city castle is nice enough too. What I enjoyed the most was its calming atmosphere and the people there who were exceptionally nice. Nothing of the rush and madness of Dublin!

Last question. Study stay in Limerick enabled you (next to deepening your English studies proficiency) to enhance your knowledge of Irish language and literature. What is the most interesting in this field for you and why? Did you attend a course of Irish language already prior to your departure to Ireland or did you start learning it after the arrival to Limerick?

I had attended the Irish Language classes before I went to Ireland at Charles University and I wished to continue with my studies in Ireland. What I enjoy the most about Irish is the fact that the language is "dying", therefore one could feel an urge to learn it and thus preserve it. By studying it one can delve more deeply into the research in the field of Irish place names or the culture and Irish traditions, which I also studied in Ireland and I loved it. It also mirrors the history of the whole country, since Irish language, Irishness and the whole Irish culture has more or less followed the same path and development as the language. From all I've learnt I can say that hardly any nation is so strong-willed and indomitable but at the same time so immensely kind as the Irish.

Thank you for the interview.

My pleasure!

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