

My name is Elena and I am a 24 years old master student. I am originally from Spain, where I did my BSc in Biotechnology, and I am currently in the 4. semester of the Msc. in Human Biology at the LMU Munich. I would like to talk about my Erasmus+ internship and to convince you that it is one of the best experiences I have taken part in so far.

I did an Erasmus+ traineeship program for two months at the Institut de recherche en santé, environnement et travail (IRSET), a public research institution in Rennes, France. I am currently pursuing a master's degree, and I decided to broaden my experience in lab research during the third semester of the program. The research carried out in the group I worked with was closely related to the project for my master thesis, that I recently started at the Institut Curie in Paris. Moreover, and most importantly, I already had a previous experience with the same group in Rennes. After I finished my bachelor's degree in Spain and before starting the master's, I decided to look for internship opportunities abroad.

My home university in Spain has an agreement with the Université de Rennes I, a partner institution from the IRSET. Even though France was not my first choice because of the language, the dates and the duration suited my plans, so I applied for the position. The selection procedure was done by the department of international affairs at my university, which takes into account primarily the average grade during the bachelor and any foreign language spoken gives extra points. In some cases, the receiving institution requires a certificated minimum level of English or the country language, which was not my case. After having been selected for the program and I was entitled to receive the scholarship, I contacted the coordinator at the receiving institution and he got me in touch with the head of the team I eventually worked with, Dr. F.S. . She was absolutely keen on receiving international students and supportive even though it required extra efforts from her side as a lot of paperwork needed to be done. The experience in her group in terms of team colleagues, project, support with paperwork and integration was so incredible that I decided to apply again during the master's program. In this case, the application and selection procedure were a bit different. I first contacted the group, and once I had their approval and a letter of invitation to complete a twomonths internship with them, I applied for the Erasmus+ program. To this end, we filled the "Traineeship agreement", which specifies duration and dates of internship, main goals, responsible people in sending and receiving institution, information about insurance coverage and possible payments, inclusion of the internship in the curriculum and ECTS, etc. The document needed to be signed by the student applying, by the coordinator at the corresponding faculty of the LMU and by the responsible at the receiving institution. Lastly, the student must write a letter of motivation

stating the reasons why he/she wants to take part in a mobility program. The traineeship agreement, letter of acceptance of the receiving group and the letter of motivation need to be submitted for the application procedure to start. Once the application was accepted, I received all the information necessary about documents to be sent and signed before, during and after the mobility. The most important things to consider before starting the mobility is booking a proper health care, private liability and accident insurance which covers both during free time and at work, and accommodation. Regarding insurance, I personally recommend the one offered by the DAAD, as it is specific for students going on mobility programs abroad and it covers all the requirements. Then, the process of looking for accommodation is not easy. In general, receiving institutions, in this case the university, provide accommodation in the public residences for exchange students. However, for short periods it is very difficult to get one. In France, the CROUS is the organism responsible for multiple student affairs, such as housing, financial support or management of student cafeterias (the equivalent to the Studentenwerk in Germany). It is possible to apply for accommodation, but it is advisable to do it with time, as spots are limited for the number of students in Rennes. Thanks to a friend living in Rennes that I knew in forehand, I found a room in a shared flat 5 minutes away walking to the lab and it turned out to be great. I shared the flat with a French girl, so I got the chance to speak French. Looking for accommodation can be overwhelming, so it is very useful to ask for recommendations to previous students or to the receiving teams itself. It is very common that advertisements are posted on the internal website of the institutes. The last thing to be done is signing the grant agreement between the sending institution and yourself, who establishes the amount and payment dates of the financial support.

On the day of arrival, everything must be set up for the student to start working. It depends on the receiving institution and in my case, I needed to sign to confirm the date of start and to get my personal access card. Once I signed, I was officially an intern student from the IRSET and I could go to work anytime within the official working times and always when my supervisor was in the lab as well. After getting ready with the paperwork, I spent some time with my boss discussing the details of the project I would work in and my specific tasks. In this case, it did not take long because I had to continue the project I already worked in during my previous internship in the same lab. The goal of the internship was to unveil the effects of a drug used for the treatment of specific cancers, such as multiple myeloma, in the reproductive system and fertility of female mice. To complete the project, we designed two experiments which were my responsibility: 1) Analyzing gene expression profiles of mice treated with the drug and compare

it with untreated mice, as controls; and 2) Analyzing the number of germ cells (oocytes) found in the ovaries, the reproductive organs, in untreated and drug-treated female mice. By the end of the internship, we managed to get very interesting results that we submitted to publish in an important journal in the field of reproduction. This internship gave me the opportunity to put hands on practice on experimental and analysis techniques, as well as concepts that I learned during my bachelor's and master's studies. Such studies, especially the bachelor, gives us a broad theoretical background which is essential for the later laboratory work. I am strongly convinced that one is not fully capable of understanding and mastering a technique until one has to perform it on his/her own. It is in such moments when one faces difficulties and problems, but also when one realizes that one is capable of doing such tasks. Therefore, I did not only have the chance to implement techniques and concepts that I learned before, but I gained unvaluable self-confidence, problem-solving attitudes and teamwork, among many other soft skills. Among the specific hard skills I gained great expertise in, are immunofluorescence or immunohistochemistry analysis, gene expression analysis by quantitative real time PCR, image analysis softwares and statistical analysis using various softwares. Moreover, I could get to know new techniques such as chromatin immunoprecipitation or ChIP, which enables the analysis of DNA sequences bound to proteins of interest by antibody-mediated precipitation. A typical working day would start at 9:30 and finish around 17:30 – 18:00, depending on the working load each day. We had our lunch break around 12:30 – 13:00 for an hour and we always had lunch all together with the whole team. As we were a small team, we got the chance to spend a lot of time together, getting to know each other and getting really close. I would say by now we are a family and I keep close contact to all of them. In fact, I got very close with other master and PhD students, who introduced me to most of their local friends. These friends are now close friends of mine. I would like to point out that this is one of the things I enjoyed the most about the whole internship. Getting the chance to know local people from the country who introduces you to his/her friends builds a social network that makes you feel 100% integrated in the new country and community, making you feel as one of them and enjoying the experience to its maximum. Even though it is not always easy, I strongly recommend any student going abroad to make the effort to know locals, as it is an experience one would not regret.

As I previously mentioned, I did not choose France because of the language, as I was not fluent in French before arriving. The group I worked with was very international and the daily work was done in English, so I did not take part in any language course. However, it is very advisable

to speak French not only to communicate outside the working context, but with locals in your free time. Paperwork is easier as well. Even though working in English was not a new thing for me, the more you do, the more comfortable you get with it and you feel less tired of not working in your mother tongue. However, I did experience an improvement in my level of French, not especially at work, but during my free time. This second internship I have done in Rennes has been very different from the first one regarding free time, as we are in the middle of a pandemic. Therefore, I could not practice any outside sport past the curfew time, which is at 19:00 currently in France, nor go to cafés, bars, the cinema or theater. However, I did not have much free time during the week, so I spent most of the time outside from work at home with my French flat mate cooking, talking, doing some work outs together and watching series. Most of the weekends, I took a train to go to Le Mans, a city very close to Rennes, were one of the best friends, which was a colleague during my first internship, currently lives. It has been such a pity, as Rennes offers a great variety of cultural activities, fairs and festivals in the park when the weather allows and plenty of bars and life in the streets.

Rennes is a small city and well-suited to walk, so it was my main way of transport. However, it counts with an efficient and high-frequency metro line with crosses the city. Moreover, it has a big bus network inside the city, which also connects the city center with the suburbs.

In terms of living costs, Rennes is a quite affordable city, especially compared to Munich, where I am pursuing my master's degree. Accommodation ranges from 200€ if one is lucky enough to get a room in a dorm from the CROUS, the French equivalent to the Studentenwerk, to around 400 to 500€ for a room in a shared flat or "colocation" in French. The prices of the supermarkets are very similar to Germany, though I noticed more expensive prices compared to the cheapest supermarkets in Germany such as Aldi, which is where I used to shop. Hence, it is easier to find cheaper options in Germany than in France. If I had to choose one thing where I did see a big difference in prices is beers in the bars. The minimum price of a pint in France is 5-6€, whereas in Germany you can find many bars offerings beers for 3-4€. Unfortunately, I did not have the chance to get financial support from the receiving institution, so I counted on the Erasmus+ scholarship, financial support of my family and own savings from part-time jobs in Munich.

As I mentioned, this internship was the second one I did in this institution and in France. Moreover, during my bachelor's studies in Spain, I spent one year abroad in Würzburg as part of the Erasmus+ studies program. Therefore, and considering I'm doing my master's far from my home country, I already had experience with foreign cultures in the cultural, social and

academic environment and I considered it would not be especially useful for me to take part in the SINIK at the LMU. However, I would recommend it to students who are not familiar and will experience an exchange program abroad for the first time.

To sum up all the points covered, I would say that the Erasmus+ program offers an enormous and fantastic opportunity to explore new cultures in a social and academic or professional context. Thanks to my first Erasmus+ experience, I decided to do my master's degree abroad. Later, during my first internship in Rennes, I discovered a field of research in biology that I found extremely fascinating and gave me the motivation to consider it as my future field of research and to consider France as a country to live long term. It is for this reason that I decided to carry out a second internship in the same institution, and to that I applied and am currently doing my master thesis in Paris in the same field of research. Hence, I can say that it was a very future life-defining experience.

This internship was easy for me in terms of both expectations and challenges. As it was the second time I worked together with the group and in a project I was already familiar with, I knew exactly what to expect and what was expected from me. However, it was not the case the first time I arrived in Rennes. By that time, I had not much previous experience independently in a lab abroad, so I did not know if I would be capable of it. Moreover, France was a completely new culture for me and not my initial choice abroad, so my fears were more linked to the country itself than to the work. Would it be easy to get to know people? Would I manage without speaking French? Would I feel integrated? Would I get along with the team? And the answer to all of the questions is a big yes. Luckily, I did not face any difficulty during neither during the first nor during the second internship, apart from the exceptional situation in which the covid pandemic put all of all us.

To conclude, I would strongly recommend this institute and specially the group led by Dr. F. S. to other students. The field of research in mammalian reproduction is fascinating, the IRSET, which is part of the French public research institution INSERM, together with the Université de Rennes I, is a well-recognized scientific institution in the whole country, which automatically boosts the CV and future working opportunities. More importantly, the human quality of the team members provides an excellent and welcoming atmosphere for coming students which are not familiar with the culture and the field of work. Teamwork is crucial in this group and one would never feel alone or unattended, neither in the academic nor personal side. They are always happy and count with all the resources to welcoming new students. In fact, I know by personal experience and from the experience of friends that students come back

for additional internships after the first one, which says a lot about the team members and the projects.