

Preparation

On 20.04.2016 my candidacy was confirmed by Paris 8 and I received an info-mail with the detailed step-by-step information to my Erasmus, accommodation, deadlines etc. The instructions included were rather clear. However I still faced problems while filling in the Learning Agreement because the course catalogues were outdated and lacked some information (course codes for example). Moreover, I couldn't find any information to French courses at all, thus I was sure that I will have to change my Learning Agreement on arrival.

The most useful in terms of preparation I found *Guide d'accueil des étudiants internationaux* (http://www.univ-paris8.fr/IMG/pdf_Guide_Pratique_2015-2016.pdf) where I found a lot of helpful tips.

On 21.04.2016 I sent an application form for a dorm room at the University Campus and on 12.05.2016 I received a positive reply, hence I didn't have to worry about finding an accommodation by myself. However, I had to pay the dorm room for the whole period + deposit (total 1753,00 €) before my arrival. Additionally, I had to pay some 30 € for the room insurance.

All other questions I had before my arrival were answered rather promptly by Catherine Rochemont- a person in charge of Erasmus students in Paris 8. However, in August the whole University was on vacations so I couldn't contact anybody during that time.

As I am not a citizen of the EU I also had to apply additionally for a French visa. Preparing the documents for the visa was not complicated; however, I had to go to Frankfurt to apply for it, which required additional planning and financial investments. The visa itself was free of charge and it was sent to me to Bremen by DHL once done.

I went to Paris on the 1st on September by bus. Unfortunately, my suit case with all my belongings got stolen from the luggage compartment of the bus and I had to spend a lot of time at the bus station and got rather late to the University itself (I highly recommend to avoid going by Eurolines).

Formalities

Keys from the dorm room

On arrival I went directly to the International Office to Catherine Rochemont where I gave the documents listed in the info mail and got a certificate of matriculation. After that I went to CROUS with the certificate of matriculation, insurance document, confirmation of bank transaction, formulaire de reservation and a confirmation letter. To get the Internet password I had to come back to CROUS with my student card once it was done.

Residence permit

On arrival, non EU citizens have to send a letter with a copy of their passport, bus ticket and a form from the consulate to Office Français Immigration Intégration in Bobigny (13 Rue Marguerite Yourcenar, 93000 Bobigny, France) In about a month you will get a letter with a date for medical examination which is necessary for the permit. The examination is quite fast but there are always a lot of people in a queue. The doctors at the OFII don't take any tests; they only take a chest X-ray and measure height, weight and blood pressure.

Work

French law allows international students to work at most 964 hours per year. However, I didn't manage to find a sustainable job because of several reasons:

- the academic load was very big and took a lot of time
- it's hard to find a job in Saint-Denis and Paris is quite far, thus the way to and from a working place in Paris took a lot of time
- The employers were reluctant to hire only for 5-6 months
- It's harder to find a job with poor French (which was a case for me)
- Many employers asked for *Le numéro de sécurité sociale* which I didn't have. My advice is to apply for this document as soon as you arrive because it takes a lot of time to make it.

Bank account

Most of the banks denied me a bank account, because I stayed only for 5 months, which they considered to be too short. However, I managed to open an account by CIC for 2 € a month.

CAF

You can get some of the money which you pay for your room back. Note that one should do it as soon as possible because they pay back for the period not including the month when you applied for it. Among other documents you will need a French bank account, a copy of your birth certificate and its French translation and a special form you'll have to get from CROUS.

Health insurance

French just don't accept European health insurance card (such as from AOK) and they always demand *le numéro de sécurité sociale*. So to be treated for free you will have to make this document (it's free but it takes a lot of time to make it) or get an additional health insurance. At the University Campus there is a medical center in *maison d'étudiants* where you can also get medical help for free (people are really nice there). You can also get a sick leave or a medical certificate there.

General information about the University

The University is situated quite far away from Paris itself so living on campus was cheap but it prevented me from visiting Paris as much as I wanted. The month ticket costs around 70 € but I never bought it. For transportation I bought a used bicycle for 55 € at www.leboncoin.fr. In my experience going to the city center by bike takes approximately the same time as going there by metro. Note, however, that traffic can be quite chaotic in Paris and one should be really careful, especially once it gets dark.

The University Paris 8 offers *stage linguistique* which I thought would be an intensive French course but in fact it was more like a German O-Woche with some excursions, cultural and historical information about the University and Paris. It was still nice and worth it as we connected with other Erasmus students and got to know Paris and the University a bit.

The subscription to the courses is different from department to department. In my case (Gender Studies) at the first class a professor would pass a blank where we had to write our names and contact information. Additional to that, I had to make *inscription pédagogique* with Catherine Rochemont at the International Office.

The courses at Paris 8 were really interesting and they undoubtedly gave me a deep insight in the chosen topics. At the Gender Studies department all the professors I encountered were very knowledgeable, well-qualified and helpful when needed. At the same time it was a surprise for me that one class lasts for three hours with no break at all between the classes and some 5 minutes break within one class. This meant that to get 30 CPs, I needed twice as much time as I would need in Germany.

As for academic load, it was way harder to study at Paris 8 than I imagined. Apart from language problems (in my case, my French was quite bad, B1-B2, and often insufficient to follow the classes properly), I was expected to read lots of texts to every class, prepare some 2-3 page essays as a part of continuous assessment and do some other minor but obligatory homework that took me a lot of time. During the classes the students are expected to take notes non-stop that also was a big problem for me, as I wasn't used to it. The final term papers and exams were numerous and the time to write those was very limited. At the end I had one month (half of which were Christmas holidays) to write 4 exams and hand in 4 term papers. Basically I spent last month of my stay locked in my room under terrible pressure. I would highly recommend students to go to Paris 8 for a year to spread out the academic load and have some time to enjoy the city and student life.

The life at the campus dormitory was fun; however, the students tended to stick to English that significantly slowed down my progress in French.

As for free time activities, the University offers a wide range of things to do. I paid 10 € for a member card of *EIAP* (*Échanges internationaux à Paris*) association <http://www.eiap.fr> that organized numerous parties, excursions, theatre and cinema visits, etc. Unfortunately, the academic load that I had didn't allow me to use those opportunities as much as I wanted.

There is a big choice of sports you can do at the University, all of them are free and for some you can even earn CPs! I was doing tango, boxing and going to a gym once a week. The coaches I had were great.

Courses

Though at the University of Bremen I was a Bachelor student I took all of my courses from the Master department of Gender Studies. I had no problems with that whatsoever. I heard that for some other departments some courses were not available to Erasmus students but it wasn't the case for me.

The half of the classes I took was from the department of French as a foreign language, as I needed to improve my language skills to be able to follow the classes.

At the beginning I had the following courses:

- Genre et politique 5CP
- Grammaire et expression écrite 6 CP
- Grammaire avancée 6CP
- Langue Orale 6 CP
- Anthropologie du genre 5CP
- Géographie du genre 5CP
- Sexualité, genre et religion dans la monde Anglophone 5CP

At the end I couldn't manage all these courses and I decided not to drop Anthropologie du genre but even so, it was very difficult.

As for evaluation it's really very strict. While it is possible to get 17 in a French course (they are considered to be of secondary importance), one should be happy to get 14 in a "main" subject. It was quite upsetting for me to get such low notes even though I worked hard.

As an example here is a commentary from a professor to one of the works I wrote:

I've read your paper, which I found intriguing. I had never come across framing before and found it interesting. I was very favourably impressed with the transparency of your methodology. I found the chronology of Francis's pronouncements and your comments on them useful (in particular the three tactics you draw out from them). I also find it very interesting that this self-projection of Francis's image as gay friendly leads to 38% of US Catholics believing that Francis supports same sex-marriage. Of course all this says more about the way in which Francis is mediated and how people respond to that mediation than about Francis himself. And therefore I feel that it would have been good to focus a bit more on what your data may say about US society and perhaps more particularly about US Catholics (although I'm not sure it would have been possible for you to find data to focus more specifically on this particular group). But I also liked the fact that you were clear-sighted about this piece of research being merely a starting point that calls for further study. I have decided to give this paper 14/20

On a bright side, I was allowed to write all my term papers in English but as far as I know, this was possible only at my department and only as an exception. In any case, thanks to this fact I was able to hand in all the required works on time.

Accommodation

My dorm room was ok, big enough, with a small fridge, a bed, a table, lots of shelves and a private bathroom. We shared a common kitchen with some 7 other people. The biggest problem for me was that in winter the temperature in the room was around 14 C (with a working heater), because of thin wooden walls. For this reason, all of us had to buy another heater in our rooms, without it, it would have been impossible to live there.

Saint-Denis

There is a supermarket just around the corner from the dormitory and a big market which can be reached in 15 minutes by foot. The central square with a basilica and a park is very pretty. However, in Saint-Denis there is not much to do, so for culture and parties I had to go to Paris. Moreover, Saint-Denis is known for its high criminality and those are not just words. A lot of cell-phones and other belongings were stolen in the streets of Saint-Denis (my cell-phone included). In the night time it is definitely not safe to be alone in the streets, especially for girls.

Summary

I have learnt a lot in Paris 8 and the knowledge I've got will undoubtedly help me in my future academic life. However, the academic load was way more than I expected which prevented me from enjoying Paris and student life.