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# An overview of the Erasmus+ exchange program and a comparison of educational systems between Hungary and Georgia

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Globalization and the increased number of relationships between countries lead every person to have international experiences. In almost every industry, it is a must to be able to deal with a globally competitive working environment. The Life-Long Learning Program which was proposed by the European Commission offered not only European but also non-European (non-EU) students the chance to gain this broad experience by crossing borders and studying in an international atmosphere. Doing an Erasmus+ is a journey around the world, but most importantly it is an opportunity for self-discovery and self-perception: for people whose life goal is to get out of their comfort zone and always move forward, studying abroad must be included in their to-do list. Receiving a foreign education opens millions of doors, and lets us travel, explore the world, learn about new cultures and new people, and try delicious traditional food. This process includes making comparisons between countries' developmental stages and people's lifestyles. In other words, by studying abroad we get to know ourselves in challenging situations, such as when facing language barriers, or experiencing co-living.

In this following essay, we, Lizi Kolbaia and Gwanza Basilashvili, English Philology students at Black Sea International University in the Republic of Georgia, would like to overview our exchange year in Hungary at Eötvös Loránd University. Our desire is to give you a close look at what it is like to be an Erasmus+ mobility student from a non-EU country. We will provide a rundown of everyday situations and challenges that we have overcome and experienced.

## The Application Process

Before embarking on this experience, there are several steps and some bureaucratic matters that must be dealt with. We think the first one, after the decision of moving to a foreign country for educational purposes, is to enroll

in the mobility program. The steps differ in various scenarios whether you are applying for the scholarship or you are planning to cover the expenses on your own. In our case, we were informed about the scholarship by our home institution, International Black Sea University (IBSU), which was announced by Erasmus+. The requested documents included a motivation letter, a CV in Europass format, a language certificate, two recommendation letters from lecturers, a transcript of grades, and a certificate approving that we are students of IBSU. This was followed by an interview, when students who want to participate in the exchange program are asked about their strengths and weaknesses, or questions like how they would represent their country or what they would do after the mobility.

A positive response is followed by many steps that non-EU citizens must take, such as applying for a visa, which is firstly connected to finances, and then to the stress that causes. To start from the beginning, we have to make an appointment via the consular official website. Part of the preparation consists of filling out forms (application for a residence permit and appendix 14) that are available online. An applicant should prepare all these documents beforehand. All that you need to represent is the letter of acceptance, and proof that you have financial support and medical insurance. The process can stretch into a lengthy period.

Still and all, we were always informed by an Erasmus coordinator about the following stages. It was a very comfortable process, as all of our questions were answered straightaway. There was no such moment, connected to bureaucratic matters when we were confused and had no information about what to do afterward. In August, when we crossed the Hungarian border, there was a pandemic situation, therefore it was necessary to file equity requests. An equity request is an online form asking for permission from the border police to enter the country. The website and application were in Hungarian, so without the help of our Erasmus coordinator, we would have been in a lot of trouble.

Non-EU resident students cross the border with a D-category visa, which should be replaced by a residence permit to insure legal stay. The newcomer has only one month before the immigration office, which is not a very positive experience. There, non-native people met a huge line of emigrants starting from the bus stop. Even though getting a number for the residence permit takes only a few minutes, waiting for your turn lasts approximately three hours. The institution offers no Wi-Fi or café where the customers can buy coffee or even water and wait in a comfortable way. Besides getting a residency permit, there is a need for registration of your accommodation, which of course means having a flat.

### **Everyday Challenges: Finding a Flat, Medical Care, Buying Groceries**

Searching for a flat was one more challenge. Even though the university sent recommendations, we could not manage to pick one from their list for a variety of reasons. Some of them were shared rooms, where five or six people were living together. As we were searching for a two-room apartment, we did not find this option acceptable. Others were asking for the two-month deposit two to three months before we had received our scholarship. Therefore, we started searching for private landlords. The process was tiresome and stressful, as all of the owners replied once in a blue moon and said that only long-term rent was possible. One week before our arrival, when we had almost lost all of our hope, we found a very trustworthy company. They helped us find an appropriate flat and gave a discount. The landlord was so attentive that he even picked us up from the airport for free. We can surely say that this was a good first impression on the country and people.

Receiving an education in a foreign country is definitely linked to positive attitudes and experiences, however, there are still aspects that might cause anxiety in some students. While studying abroad, one meets situations, where she/he is challenged. For instance: sicknesses, difficulties connected to finances, language, or cultural barriers. Throughout these two semesters, we visited the laboratory for yearly blood check-ups in a lab located in the sixth district. All the staff members were friendly and ready to help, however, their English language skills were not enough to support comprehensive communication. In a bill, besides the charge of analysis, there was an extra cost of 2800 Ft (approximately 7 €). The invoice was in Hungarian, so it was impossible for the non-native to understand. Asking the personnel was impossible as well, therefore the question was left unanswered.

A further part of being an exchange student and living alone is doing grocery shopping. It sounds easy, but in the beginning, it was a bit of a challenge. You do not know the right corner stores for the specific items you are looking for, you do not know where these shops are located and you do not know which grocery shop is better for what. Of course, Google Maps and Google are the biggest help ever, but it still is a minor challenge. Since most of the big supermarkets are open twenty-four hours a day in Georgia (even on weekends or holidays), we do not need to buy anything beforehand. For the first two months of our stay, we always forgot that Sunday is a short day in Hungary and somehow it was always on a Sunday that we needed new groceries. By the time we got used to the rhythm of the Hungarian lifestyle, we found out that if there is a holiday, everything is closed and people buy groceries as if they were preparing for famine. It was always fun seeing people taking “half of the supermarket” at home just before Christmas, Easter, or any other national holiday.

## Education Systems and Erasmus+

In this segment, we would like to inform you about the differences between the Hungarian and Georgian educational systems. Of course, we cannot offer you a complete review of differences. However, we still can write about our experience at ELTE and at IBSU, and the contrast we came across while being exchange students in Hungary. We would like to start this part with the biggest dissimilarity, which is different faculties. Back home we major in English philology, which belongs to the Faculty of Social Sciences, Humanities, and Education. It is a school for future translators, interpreters, linguists, and English language teachers who want to teach in high, middle, or primary school. There, students learn the English language, British literature, history, culture, and politics, and the university offers sixty free credits, which they can choose whether minor field from another faculty or teacher training program (TTP). TTP is for students who want to become a teacher, as there are offered courses like didactics, classroom management, educational psychology, etc. In contrast, at ELTE TÓK we study how to be an educator for children between five and twelve. There they teach not only English but other subjects to be taught to kids, such as playful activities, English Children's Literature, and Ball Geometry.

Another key distinction is that at Black Sea University we mainly have theoretical subjects and less practice. We study the theories of scholars, such as Piaget, and have courses on classical literature, in which we read famous authors like Geoffrey Chaucer, Jane Austen, and George Orwell. Most of the studying is based on reading. On the contrary, at ELTE they do it all differently. There we were introduced to less-known writers, such as Maya Angelou, Louise Erdrich, and Sandra Cisneros. Besides literature, courses that are connected to teaching programs appreciate using your body language more and being physically active during the classes. Instead of reading theories, we actually used them. An example of this is the course, "Foundations of the methodology on teaching the English language as a foreign language". We used different tools, cards, and pictures. We learned to stand, dance, and move around the room more than would happen at IBSU. However, our home university provides an incredible opportunity to acquire materials in an in-depth, theoretical stage.

Our discussion of the educational system is followed by the comparison of the two countries, Georgia and Hungary, regarding Erasmus+. According to our two-semester observation, we found out that for international studies Hungary is mostly beloved by students from Ireland, Spain, Germany, and Switzerland. Meantime, in Georgia, students visit from Lithuania, Latvia, and Poland. Besides, in contrast to Hungary, Georgia lacks opportunities for bachelor's students to participate in Erasmus+ program. Usually, you are attached to your university, as the university should have a partnership with the host educational institution. That is the reason for high demand

and competition, however, the situation is reversed in Hungary. As we have been informed by one of the native undergraduates, Hungarian students are frightened sometimes, and because of that, they need to be encouraged to participate in an exchange program by tutors and lecturers. Maybe this is conditioned by the financial support, as non-EU residents receive a higher scholarship than EU members.

### **Evaluation and foreign language education**

One of the most important matters for a student is exams. In Georgia, it is more or so settled. Our term is divided into two parts, in between, we have a midterm, and at the end, we have a final. Typically, in order to finish the course successfully, we need fifty-one points or more. The final is the biggest part of the mark: if you do not get the minimum grade in it, it is considered a failure, even if you have enough points to pass the course. In ELTE, exams are not fixed, it depends on the lecturer, but from our experience, the majority prefer to have projects, presentations, portfolios, or other kinds of assignments. We also want to underscore that the grading system, at ELTE TÓK is from one to five while in IBSU it is from zero to a hundred, or from A to F, where A is considered between the ranges 100-91 and so on.

To graduate in Georgia, we need two hundred and forty credits in total, which per semester would make thirty, as in our country Bachelor's studies are divided into eight semesters. Most of the subjects are within five, six, or even seven credits. This is different at Eötvös Loránd, in general, as an Erasmus+ student you needed at least twenty credits per semester and, the credits differed from one to four. In contrast in Georgia, a bachelor's degree is three years while in Hungary we need to study for four (depending on the faculty).

The English philology program at IBSU is fully English: we cannot choose whether we want to finish our studies in our mother or foreign language as the whole program is just English. At ELTE, things are a little bit different. Students can choose between Hungarian and English courses. While writing about languages, we have to mention the fact that at IBSU, having at least 20 credits for a foreign language is compulsory. The university offers various different languages such as Spanish, German, Russian, Italian, Turkish, Japanese, etc.

### **Admiring the Hungarian countryside**

During our stay, we traveled a lot around Hungary. We went to Győr, Vác, Gödöllő, Visegrád, Lake Balaton, Szentendre and our all-time favorite destination, Esztergom. We can say that traveling in Hungary is quite convenient. Trains from Nyugati, Keleti, Kelenföld, or Déli Stations will take you almost everywhere. The transportation company has a wonderful

website where you can check timetables and buy tickets, which is of course in English as well. For us, we typically preferred buying tickets directly at the train stations from ticket machines. Also, you can buy a ticket in the box-office area, and operators almost always speak English, so it is not a problem. Another great thing about tickets is that Hungary offers a fifty percent discount to students, and not only to Hungarians but to all undergraduates who carry valid student cards can use this advantage. Prices are quite cheap, almost every destination we ever went was a maximum of 10 Euro, one-way.

Now, as we have tickets, we can actually talk about what it is like to be outside of Budapest. We would say that every city is different, for example, Gödöllő was a royal place so you can see the influence of that on the place. Vác is a very old town, where you experience the atmosphere from the past centuries when you walk around this amazing part of Hungary. There are also mummies, which really underlines the fact that it is a very archaic city. Another astonishing place is Visegrád, the perfect place for people who enjoy hiking, adore nature, and are amazed by beautiful sceneries. On the top of the mountain, there is a castle and a fascinating view. We would like to recommend a Renaissance restaurant as well, there you will definitely be treated as if you were just crowned. In case you like crossing the river by ferry, we have some news: you can do it in Visegrad. Another amazing city out there is Esztergom, which is right on the border of Slovakia and Hungary. You can easily cross the bridge and in a couple of minutes, you are in another country, while on the bridge you can be in the two places at once if you will stand on one foot in Hungary and another in Slovakia. It really is an amazing feeling but besides that, the city has much to offer and one of the must-see places is the basilica there. We have seen many cathedrals and churches during our travels but this particular one had a great impact on us. We would also recommend Szentendre for a wonderful day trip if you want to “run away” from chaotic city life, enjoy ice cream and read an interesting book near the river. And the summer is a wonderful place to visit Balaton, which is a big lake near the capital, you can go there for a day or two, admire beaches, Hungarian food and summer. Győr is worthy of mention, it was different from Budapest or other places we went while our exchange year. It is a cozy city, where you have to stroll around and admire the gothic, chic, Mediterranean vibe.

Besides amazing experiences, we want to mention astonishing people all around Hungary. Our Hungarian starts with “Jó napot” and ends with “Viszontlátásra”, so we needed to use English everywhere we went. We would say that most of the people knew it or could make us understand what they wanted to say. In case you are wondering, not being able to speak Hungarian was not a big deal and we could get away without it in most places.



## Personal Comments

### *Gwanza Basilashvili*

I have always known that I wanted to continue my studies abroad. I had the expectation that I would be able to develop myself in many fields. If someone had asked me why I wanted to participate in Erasmus+, I would have listed career intentions and cultural aspects. However, during this year I have acquired much more than I expected. I not only gained qualifications and academic knowledge, but also life skills. I realized that my outlook has also changed regarding some cases. During this year, I received not only theoretical but also practical knowledge in my field. Thankfully, I even had an opportunity to practice in kindergarten, which was a wonderful chance. There I had close contact with children and had the opportunity to ask professional kindergarten teachers about everything I was interested in.

For the first semester, I took the class of Hungarian language, which was an amazing decision. Nevertheless, the time was short, it was possible to learn as much to have comprehensive communication at the supermarket. Though it was not much, being able to say hello, thank you, and goodbye meant much for me, as in my opinion learning about a culture starts from learning the language. Besides this class, literature classes deserve to be highlighted. I was always into literature, which is why I was always delighted to take classes. There I was introduced to not only classical authors but some unknown ones. We had discussions and it was like traveling into past centuries. In one class, we were even introduced to the book, written by the Hungarian author, Milán Füst. After the reading, we were asked to watch a movie based on the book, which was quite an interesting assignment.

As we have mentioned, studying abroad not only means learning academic material, but it is also learning how to deal with challenging situations. Erasmus+ is definitely a fun adventure, however as everything has its own ups and downs. One time, Lizi and I had Covid-19 at the same time. We had fevers and were weak. This was a hard time, and we would not be able to go through it easily without each other. Though some problems, the exchange program is still worth doing it.

To sum up, I would like to make a little recommendation for students who are afraid to participate in this program. I would tell them that there are lots of people working to make new students comfortable and to create an environment where they would feel like at home or at home university. So, do not be scared of this challenge: Dive right in! Do not forget to plan some things beforehand, but leave many things unplanned because one cannot imagine how wonderful spontaneous adventures can be.

### *Lizi Kolbaia*

They say that the best education you will ever get is traveling. I have always been fond of exploring new cultures and experiences, therefore I have always known that I wanted to study abroad. It was my aim from the first day that I enrolled in university, and I did everything in my power to gain enough competence for a scholarship. Now, as I have finished my exchange year, I want to say that it was the most splendid experience I could ever have gained. I can see not only professional but personal growth in me. Thanks to Erasmus+ now I am more self-reliant, confident, independent, and educated than ever. As for now, I am willing to share all this knowledge with students and people around me. By living in Hungary, I have encountered a new environment and educational system which is different from my home, and I guess that is the point of doing an exchange. This program gave me a chance to be a valuable member of the educational field not only for people my age but for future Georgian generations too.

In closing, I want to say that I am so grateful to the people I met during this stage of my life, starting from the fantastic staff at university, to people that became my lifelong friends. Moving to a different country and being away from friends and family comes with its difficulties but these amazing people I came across during my Erasmus helped me to feel welcomed everywhere I went.

