

Report ERASMUS+

School of Arts, Ulster University Belfast, winter semester abroad 2022–23.

Preparation

How much preparation time should you plan?

Organising my stay (finding accommodation, planning and booking a transfer to Belfast, making arrangements with the host university, etc.) didn't require much time in advance. Since I received my confirmation from Ulster University quite late (end of July), I planned my semester abroad in about a month and a half. I had enough time, but I would of course recommend starting planning as early as possible.

Because I did not need a visa, I was spared the stress of getting one. I also took enough information from their website and the transfer to Belfast (university and student residence) was quite easy.

Since it can be cheaper to rent a room privately in Northern Ireland than to live in a student hall of residence, I looked for private rooms on various internet portals for a long time. However, I didn't find anything suitable and received no responses to my queries. At the same time, I contacted the people responsible for the student dormitories and informed myself about available rooms, the conditions and prices.

Application deadlines, documents

The International Office of the HfK informed me about the application deadlines and they kept me updated on that. In addition to the Transcript of Records (in English), a copy of the passport, proof of language skills and registration of the application in the university's online portal, a portfolio must also be sent in for an artistic degree programme. The Ulster University Study Abroad Team also contacted me after the nomination to inform me of the application deadline and the necessary documents. I had until June 30th to do this. Time. They offer the "Ulster University Password English Test" as proof of language proficiency. You book it and choose a date for it. You will then receive a password as access, which you enter at the beginning of the test in order to register. This test is online and takes approximately 3 hours. The minimum language level required is B2. It is possible to take the test after the application deadline, the dates are until the end of August (if I remember correctly). But here too, the faster the better, because otherwise you have to wait longer for the study place to be confirmed (that is how things went in my case).

Finding information

I think Ulster University has a well-equipped website with almost all the information you need to get started. Information on: applications, studying at the university, required documents, student accommodation... About one to two months before the start of the semester, information events were held via Zoom where you could register and ask questions. An app was also launched a month earlier to prepare you for your stay in Northern Ireland. The information is structured into different levels in which you either have to read posts, answer quiz questions, watch videos or listen to an audio recording. Even though it was often just repeating information that I already knew or that did not concern me (visa, etc.), sometimes it was good to go through it again. Maybe a bit superfluous with a lot of "bells and whistles" and you actually need to finish the required

levels (this is checked for each person and if you do not complete these tasks, they follow up), but you could tell how much effort they were putting in to make the start as smooth as possible.

Travel from Germany to Northern Ireland

Like most of the other ERASMUS students I then lived with I chose the route via Dublin. This means we flew to Dublin and took a shuttle bus to Belfast straight from the airport. This is not only more affordable, but also less stressful, because otherwise you often have to pay a lot more and then fly via London, where you then have to change airports. Entering the country is also less stressful because you enter Ireland at the airport, which is still part of Europe. On the way from Dublin to Belfast you cross the border into Northern Ireland, i.e. the United Kingdom. However, due to the entry agreement between Ireland and Northern Ireland, there are no controls at the border.

Formalities

Documents/certificate to be brought from Germany

Since entry through Ireland was very easy, as described above, and I traveled without a visa, I did not need to show any documents at the airport. However, in an emergency, I would recommend bringing along a printout of the acceptance letter from the host university, the contract with the accommodation or something that confirms that you have a place of residence (even if temporary) there. I also obtained a printout of my current account balance. During my research, I learned that you may have to prove that you can support yourself for the duration of your stay. But no one ever asked about it and as far as I remember, the information did not come from the University itself, I just wanted to be sure. In addition, and this should go without saying: passport and health insurance card. I also had my vaccination certificate with me, but I never had to show it either. In Northern Ireland/Ireland, there was no mask requirement anywhere during my stay.

Finances/credit card

British pounds are the currency in Northern Ireland. If your credit card does not already include it, I recommend the free credit card from XXX for fee-free payments and withdrawals of money from ATMs. XXX is a well-known debit card in the UK. You simply top it up (easily via the app) with money (from your own bank account and in euros) and can use it to pay in pounds. It is automatically converted using the current exchange rate and no fee is charged.

General information about the partner university

University buildings and accommodation

Ulster University has several campuses in Northern Ireland. One location is in Belfast. Previously, the location wasn't exactly in Belfast, but rather a bit out of the way in Newtownabbey, Jordanstown. This site was closed and a brand new building was constructed in the centre of Belfast, which opened winter term 2022/23. This means that we were the first year/semester to move into the new building.

The Belfast School of Arts (a department of the University), on the other hand, has always been at this location in the city centre. So the rest of the building was added there. Two new student residences were built in addition to the new building, which are very popular and feel more like a hotel. However, most ERASMUS students were accommodated in Jordanstown, in the dormitories on the old campus, which are still in operation despite the university building being closed, as are the sports facilities and pitches there. The demand for the new dormitories is very high and they are always fully booked. Local students have priority. As an international student, it's not impossible to get a room there (I met a lot of people there), but you just have to be lucky, because asking early did not pay off for many of them and they were still accommodated in Jordanstown, so I can't say exactly what the allocation of places is based on.

In my experience, staying in Jordanstown means that you mainly live with other international students. Some students there also come from Northern Ireland, Ireland and England. The campus is quite large and the rooms are divided into individual blocks/houses with several apartments. We residents noticed that the apartments were mostly divided according to nationalities. I, for example, was assigned to an apartment with other Germans. It was very similar for other nationalities. Unfortunately, that's a bit of a shame because it's easy to fall into a kind of comfort zone every now and then. Besides, you don't do a semester abroad just to be surrounded by your own culture.

Nevertheless, I came into contact with a lot of other cultures and learned from them. The community there is very large and you can quickly meet new people if you want. Right from the start, the accommodation team organises welcome events in the common room for all houses, which has established itself as a general meeting point. I made many friends through the dorm who I continue to stay in touch with.

The coast with a small beach is very close to the campus. I went there almost every day for a short walk. Unfortunately there is also a busy street right there, but the view is beautiful and you can take a little break from everyday life there. Many people go jogging, walking or walking their dogs there. This area is part of Northern Ireland's Coastal Route.

To get from Jordanstown to the centre of Belfast, you can take the bus or train. The train station is about 15 minutes away by foot and it takes about another 10 minutes to walk from the destination station to the University. The bus stations are closer, but the buses are rather unreliable. They often come much too late or not at all. During the lecture period, a certain bus (line U2) runs regularly from the old campus right to the University door. This only stops once along the way and is therefore the fastest route. If you live in Jordanstown you get a public transport ticket which gives you unlimited travel towards and within Belfast.

Dining in the University

There is no real cafeteria. Instead, there are several small open cafés spread throughout the buildings where you can get coffee, tea and small snacks. However, there is a small vegetarian/vegan restaurant with access to the terrace on the sixth floor. The food is very good and the prices are affordable. Two minutes from the university is a "Centra", which also sells warm sandwiches/baguettes etc. There are vegetarian options there, but not many. I didn't look for vegan options myself, but I rarely noticed any.

Semester times

The semester started with courses in the last week of September. I handed in my work before Christmas and at the same time the courses closed. The winter semester ends at the end of January and my contract for the student dormitory ran until then. I then used my remaining time to travel.

Life in Northern Ireland and conclusion

The people of Northern Ireland are very friendly and relaxed. You quickly feel welcome and I was able to settle in there quickly. The nature is incredibly beautiful, so it's worth taking the train or renting a car and driving further into the more remote places in the interior and along the coast. The evenings in the pubs are also a part of the culture, with live music almost everywhere and mostly traditional Irish music, a lot of good cheer is spread. I have had consistently positive experiences with my professors, who are very happy to see new faces and new views and impressions.

All I can say about the (former) conflict between Protestants and Catholics is that you shouldn't be afraid, because the violence between the communities is a thing of the past. The conflict is still noticeable and society is still very divided in some areas, but people live very peacefully. I was once told by a Northerner: "As long as you don't behave in an obviously provocative manner, nothing will happen to you." And that was my experience too.