

Case Study

Title: *From Maynooth University to Universität Mannheim: Supporting a student with a significant physical disability to participate fully on the Erasmus + Study Abroad Programme.*

Overview:

Maynooth University aims to empower all students to achieve their full potential and participate fully in all aspects of their Maynooth education. Study abroad represents an amazing opportunity for students, both in terms of their personal development and post-graduation employment opportunities. While a number of Maynooth's non-traditional students have participated in outward mobility programmes, 2017/18 marks the first time the University is supporting a student with a very significant physical disability – Orla Jordan - to participate in the Erasmus + programme.

Case Study Background/Context:

Orla is a third-year student studying a BA International Degree in Computer Science and German. She entered the University via the Disability Access Route to Education in 2015. Since September 2017, she is studying at the Universität Mannheim, through the Erasmus + programme. Since coming to Maynooth, Orla has engaged with all aspects of university life and acts as a peer mentor with Maynooth Access Programme, supporting non-traditional first year students with the transition to the third level. From Dublin, Orla lives at home with her mum and dad. Orla has cerebral palsy, so uses a three-wheeled bike to get around the campus independently. To assist with her studies, Orla received extensive support from Maynooth University Access Programme's disability team, including daily transport to and from her home and a personal assistant who supports her in class and takes her lecture notes. She also meets regularly with her disability advisor.

Summary:

From the beginning of her second year, Orla knew that the study abroad experience was something that she wanted to engage with. However, whilst Orla had previously travelled a lot with her family, she had no experience of travelling longer distances alone and was naturally daunted by this aspect of the Erasmus adventure. Having always lived at home, Erasmus was also the first time that Orla would live alone, independent of her family. Extensive planning was therefore required to ensure she had the appropriate support, not only academically but also in terms of her new and very different living arrangements. A chronology of the collaborative planning for Orla's Erasmus adventure is detailed below:

October 2016

Initial planning with Orla for her Erasmus experience began in October 2016, with the aim of supporting Orla to participate in Erasmus for the 2017/18 academic year. Disability staff and staff from the International Office met with Orla to provide her with an initial overview of the Erasmus + programme. The meeting also provided the International Office with an opportunity to meet Orla in person and to learn about her specific needs. As this was Orla's first time away from home alone, it was clear that a number of supports would need to be in place to allow Orla to get the most from the experience. Supports which were identified at this initial scoping stage included a full-time PA for at least 10 hours a day and fully accessible student accommodation. Choosing an accessible city i.e. one which was not too hilly or cobble locked, with good domestic and international transport links, was also identified as vital. Another factor which was discussed was central European weather, especially in winter, and how Orla might cope in snowy or icy conditions.

October 2016 – January 2017

Following on from the initial meeting. Orla worked with the disability team to identify her specific requirements for Erasmus +. In the mean-time, the International Office began the process of investigating which international HEIs might be most suitable for Orla. To assist with this process Orla and the disability team worked together to identify a series of questions to assist Orla make an informed decision about where she would study during her Erasmus year. Questions included:

1. How are PAs and notetaking support services provided in the host HEI?
2. Is affordable, accessible campus accommodation available?
3. How accessible is the campus and local town/city?

February 2017 – March 2017

The International Office provided Orla with an overview of German and Austrian partner universities so she could decide on the university that would best suit her needs. Her course and subject options were also a particular consideration. Orla decided to study at Universität Mannheim because of its convenient location and the availability of disability supports. However, it was discovered that one significant difference in how disability supports are provided in Germany is that students must coordinate their own supports, e.g. by managing their own PA supports and invoices. In Ireland, supports are co-ordinated by the University. The experience of taking responsibility for coordinating her own supports would be totally new for Orla and she identified it as a challenge.

Orla was advised by the disability team to partake in a preparatory trip to Mannheim with her family in advance of selecting it as her ideal location. This was something that she decided against. In hind-sight, a preparatory trip would have been useful as it would have helped

identify some challenges at an early stage (e.g. there were some issues which cropped up later on in relation to Orla's accommodation).

June 2017- September 2017

The disability team worked with Orla to support her to make an application to the HEA's Erasmus + Fund. While the amount of funding received was significant, it did not meet the complete costs of Orla's study abroad year. This shortfall was met through the Fund for Students with Disabilities.

Meetings and Emails September 2017- onwards

Orla and the disability team are in regular contact through Skype calls and emails. On-going contact is important for maintaining a connection with Orla, proactively identifying issues and ensuring that she has the required supports in place to get the fully benefit of the Erasmus + programme.

Measuring Success/Outcomes *(Please provide 3 measures of success for this project- if no formal evaluation has taken place, it can be anecdotal but we would encourage specific and measurable)*

The measures for success of this program as follows:

1. The student is participating fully on the Erasmus + programme. She is able to engage in all aspects of university life as well as participating in sightseeing and additional travel opportunities within Germany with friends.
2. Orla is building vital self-advocacy and independence skills. She is now responsible for engaging and managing her own service providers (e.g. the PA). This experience will be crucial for her life after university.
3. Orla's Erasmus + experiences are enhancing her employability post-graduation. This is vital for young people with disabilities, who are more likely than peers to become unemployed.

Quote about the programme/initiative i.e. Senior Champion, Staff member, Student on programme etc. (optional)

Supporting students with significant disabilities to pursue Erasmus + and study abroad opportunities is a key component of the work carried out by Maynooth University Access Programme and our colleagues in Maynooth University International Office. It is vital that non-traditional students are proactively encouraged and supported by University staff to experience living and studying in a different country. It's an unmissable opportunity for students to develop their independence skills and to practice self-advocacy - maybe for the

first time in their lives. Erasmus also gives students with disabilities a competitive edge in the graduate jobs market, an advantage that can't be underestimated.

Grace Edge, Disability Service Head, Maynooth University.

Three tips from your institution for other HEIs:

1. A collaborative approach between the student and key HEI services is required. In Maynooth's case this involved Orla, the disability team and the International Office.
2. Allow for plenty of time to plan. There is a lot for all parties to consider and explore. Every student is different so there is huge learning involved each time for all stakeholders.
3. It is important that the student feels well supported in their new environment. They will undoubtedly face a variety of challenges as their year progresses. Regular check in and follow-up skype calls are a useful way of staying in touch and identifying potential issues or concerns proactively.