

Erasmus Exchange at
Edinburgh Napier
University

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Preface

This report is about my time as an exchange student in Edinburgh at the Edinburgh Napier University in the spring of 2017. I had a full semester there and finished three modules. In this report, I will write about my own experiences of the university and the city of Edinburgh, and share the most relevant and important insights I gained while being on my Erasmus exchange for 5 months.

Introduction

I am currently a student at KEA studying the Danish line of Construction Management and Architectural Technology (bygningskonstruktør).

I chose to study abroad for one semester because I like the excitement of moving to a new place, getting to know new cultures and new people, and also very much because I wanted to improve my technical terminology in English, as my degree is fully taught in Danish.

On the 9th of January in 2017 I went to Edinburgh, Scotland, because of two reasons; it had been recommended by a few people, and I was drawn to the country. I turned out to be a really good idea.

Why Scotland?

Yes, “*Why Scotland?*”, you may ask.

I knew from the very beginning of my degree that I wanted to study abroad for a semester. At first I imagined going to Australia. But when the time came to start planning, I realized that going to Australia would take much, much more preparation time, and money, than I was willing to spend on it – I wasn’t willing to risk not getting a scholarship and as a consequence go into dept. Also, I had circumstances in my family which made me want to be close by in case something came up.

So, I took a step back and asked myself: “*Do I really need to go that far away to improve my English, and to experience a different culture?*”

No. Obviously there are several options for English in Europe, and different cultures are everywhere. I chose Edinburgh because I prefer smaller cities over bigger ones (like London). Also, I was told by my coordinator that the level at Edinburgh Napier University is of a good standard. An Irish friend of mine said all his friends loved living and studying there. I knew that the Highlands were supposed to be incredibly beautiful. I had even read that you can surf only 45 mins from the city.

What’s not to like?

So I went.

The city of Edinburgh

The city is roughly the same size as Copenhagen, so it felt familiar. The architecture is beautiful and draws you back to the medieval times – if you haven’t watched the series *Outlander* yet, you should. Edinburgh is full of cosy little cafes and has a really cool nightlife. The Royal Mile is a main street and a tourist attraction as it leads up to the Castle. But there is so much more to see.

Arthur’s Seat is a dormant volcano just a 25 min walk from the centre, and at its peak it will give you a beautiful view over the city and the harbour of Leith.

There is also a beach in Edinburgh (Leith) – unexpected, right?

Scottish people are extremely nice and helpful. I also always felt safe walking around at night, but it should be noted that the city has a heavier profile of drug abuse and people living on the street, so just avoid obvious dangerous situations.



Prices and costs

The UK in general is cheaper than Denmark, so that was nice. Rent was a bit high (see *Accommodation*), but the Erasmus grant of about £160 really helped.

There are very good supermarkets there; Lidl is good and cheap, and I recommend buying necessities there – they also sell many organic foods. Tesco is in the middle, and as the most luxurious option you have Sainsbury's.

Accommodation

My rent was of £430 per month, including bills, which is slightly higher than my rent at home. I had friends there who paid a bit more, and a lot who paid less.

I lived in Marchmont, an area close to The Meadows and a 25 min walk from the city centre. It's a student and family area, nice and calm. Look for accommodation early so you avoid competing with the high influx of students who all arrive just before the semester starts. There are platforms on Facebook, and see if you can make a fair deal with an Airbnb host, like my friend Ida did. I was lucky to take over a room from another exchange student. I lived with two girls (English and Canadian) and really enjoyed it.

Remember to bring thick socks and a jumper though, because the buildings are old and on the cooler side.

Studying at Edinburgh Napier University

There is a trimester structure at Napier University, which means that the time there is a bit shorter than in Denmark. My study period was from the 9th of January to the 28th of April. It could have been a bit longer, though, but my exams were a bit earlier than others.

Make sure you coordinate your exam in Denmark with the startup at Napier – mine overlapped which was stressful and annoying, but I made it.

My coordinator

My coordinator at Napier was Alastair Stupart, and he was helpful from the very beginning. We had a few issues with my choice of classes in the beginning, but Alastair helped me fix it straight away. He was very good at recommending courses and would research anything I wanted to know. In general, I felt that the system functioned well, and email communication with him, and others at Napier, was always quick.

Campuses

Edinburgh Napier University has three campuses: Craiglockhart, Merchiston and Sighthill.

I studied at Merchiston (pronounced Merkiston). It has a very big computer center there, as it is not common to bring your own computer to class; here its only pen and paper.



I chose three modules that each counted for 20 ECTS points (60 points in total), and I only had one class per module per week. This meant that I only had classes 2 days a week – that means you need to have good self-discipline. The lecturers are very helpful and are happy to make appointments with you to discuss the material you have in class.

I had the following three modules:

Module 1: Contract Administration and Practice

This class went through the Scottish Standard Building Contract (like Denmark's AB92). We were walked through the most relevant clauses and taught how to dissect the academic language in such legal documents. We had several guest lecturers and the level was high.

Our main lecturer was strict but fair; he told us to put our mobile phones away and to come to every class, since this class had the highest fail rate of the entire construction degrees altogether – challenge accepted! He was always extremely helpful when I sought him out for help, and our one-on-one conversations also taught me a lot.

Module 2: Building Services Engineering

This class focused on learning how to calculate ventilation airflow, humidity, noise and heat transmission etc. It was very helpful for me as it took me through these topics at a pace I could handle, and I was able to meet with my teacher after class and get the help I needed. I cannot stress enough that I am *not* good at maths! But the help and time given to me in this class gave me a lot of new self-confidence and has showed me, that even though I'll never be a math-genius, I am still capable of doing calculations, I just need some extra time.

Module 3: Planning and Development 3

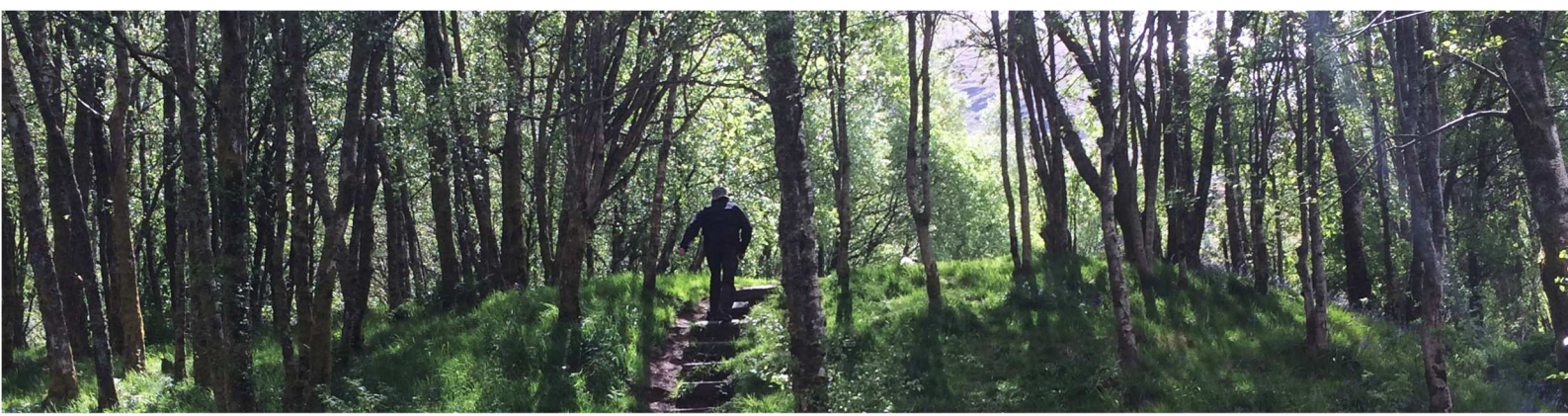
In this class, we read and discussed urban planning goals for Scotland. It was an interesting angle to suddenly have on the construction industry, as it was focused on understanding the political and emotional aspects of why Scotland wants to evolve the way it does. Of course, it was focused on Scotland, but the topics can easily be transferred to other countries and areas. We discussed terms like gentrification, sustainable developments and community-or market led development.

This class is interesting, but not very relevant to the degree. But for me it was nice to get a more political view on the construction industry, so I will recommend it for this reason.

Exams

In all three modules I had to write fairly long reports, from 18 to 27 pages. This may sound like a lot, but it is alright considering that there is so much studying time and a lot of help to seek. I actually enjoyed working this way, and as I didn't have any group work I was very free to structure my own time, which I love.

I also had written exams in two of the classes, where we had 4 hours with pen and paper.



Being the mature student

In all of my three classes I was one of the older students, and I am only 28. At Napier the students tend to be younger, around 18 to 23 roughly. In my course in Denmark its more normal to study this degree when a bit older.

I often felt like turning around to *Shhh!* the giggling students on the back row, but didn't, as I realized that would be social suicide. Instead, I learned to enjoy the atmosphere, and to enjoy my experience as a student so far, which meant that once in a while I could help my younger fellow students by telling them that *Yes, you will make it*, and *Yes, you'll be fine!*

The academic level

I have heard people say that their semester at Napier was so easy, and that they hardly studied – either these people are highly intelligent, and/or they were on one of their first few semesters, or they didn't go much into depth with their studies. I can only say that on the 5th semester courses they've turned up the volume. I went all in and learned *a lot*.

Social life

For social life, I can't say I was very active in the Erasmus group. I would meet up with them once in a while which was nice, but I very much had the same life style as I do in Denmark – relaxed. I know that the Erasmus group partied a lot, but that didn't really interest me. I made a few close friends from the group and from school, and when I got a job I had some friends from work, too. That was enough for me.

My point is that this trip abroad doesn't have to be one long party if you don't have the desire for it to be – I found it very enjoyable to be away from home with lots of time on my hands to just wander and ponder. Erasmus can be extremely giving at a slower pace, too. Just chillax, as they say.

Getting a job while on exchange

I got a job as a kitchen porter (the fancy title for the person that does the dishes) in a hotel in the city centre. It helped me a lot financially, and I had enough time to work 2-3 times a week. When my exams finished at the end of April, I chose to stay all of May to work and explore, and this job is what made it possible.

You can also talk to lecturers about internships on part time – they seemed to be available, but I didn't do one.

You may have to twist the truth a little when applying for jobs, because not many want to hire someone for a short time period.

I opened a UK bank account and got a tax number because this was all necessary for the job, and even though it was a bit of a hassle, it made me feel very integrated, and now I can come back and slide smoothly into the system again if I wish to.



Culture

The Scottish culture is similar to Danish culture in some ways, and different in others. The Scots are very friendly, but also very honest. In Edinburgh, they tend to be a bit more gentle in their language, but in Glasgow they will tell you to F off if you're in their way – no hard feelings afterwards, though.

Scottish food wasn't particularly interesting to me, but I did try the national dish Haggis (minced meat and intestines in the skin of a sheep's stomach) and it was very good – I recommend that you try a good quality one, though.

I will now share my understanding of the languages and dialects spoken, but please cut me some slack as I'm no language expert:

Personally, I think the Scottish accent can range from being easy to understand to being a bit challenging. I never had a problem understanding my lecturers, though. In the cities it's quite mild and never a problem.

Then there is Scottish, which is spoken typically in the outskirts of cities and in smaller towns and villages – this was hard to understand for me at times, as they have completely different words and the pronunciation is different.

And then there is Scottish Gaelic, which is an incredible and whole different language. Many important buildings in Edinburgh have the English and Gaelic name written on it, and as soon as you drive up into the highlands the road signs are written in both languages, too. From my understanding, not many people speak it fluently.

I have to say that I benefitted from understanding the language upon arrival, as it gave me more energy to focus on more detailed experiences of the city and culture. I had it easier than if I'd gone to Spain. It gave me the possibility to dig a bit deeper into my studies, too, because I understood most of the basic stuff and didn't have to start from scratch.

Travelling

I rented a car and drove up north into the Highlands. Words cannot describe how beautiful it is – it has to be experienced. I was only away for 4 days but saw a lot in that time. The landscapes are constantly changing shapes and colours, and the environment is rough and natural.

Don't go into the highlands when it's too warm, though, as insects (midgies) roam the fields then.

Friends of mine also travelled by buses and trains which just gives another type of adventure.

There are many options for tours to go on – they start in Edinburgh and finish there. A bus will drive you back and forth. In my opinion they are a bit expensive, but on the other hand the areas they visit are really worth seeing.

The city of Glasgow is only about 1 hour and 30 mins away by bus, and a ticket can be purchased from down to only £10 for a return.

It is also easy to go to England and Ireland. There are trains to London that take about 6 hours.



Conclusion

I really enjoyed my stay at Napier University and in Edinburgh.

The academic side was very interesting and I learned so much. Even though subjects are focused on Scotland, the knowledge can easily be applied to other countries. The lecturers are all very helpful. I liked the self-studies because I think the group work in my Danish degree is very excessive. I have built self-confidence in subjects that I wouldn't have if I hadn't gone away.

Edinburgh is beautiful in spring, so even though the apartment was a bit too cold for my liking, it was all okay when the city started to bloom.

Again, I really want to advocate that Erasmus can also be for people that are sometimes a bit of a loner - like me! There was so much time to reflect and explore the city.

It was also a great chance to experience a different school system and tradition.

I could easily see myself studying a masters programme at Napier University, or to just live and work there.

There are still many things to explore there – for example, I never went surfing.

