Introduction

Hello everyone, my name is John, I’m 22 and I’ve been living in Great Britain in Colchester slightly over three years. This blog is just an experiment as my main goal ATM is to gain experience with web development, however if the following content convinces even one person about studying abroad, I will consider it a huge success!

Although I can´t make an overall comparison as I don´t have any data which would support my claims, I found out by observation of my surroundings, that only a small percentage of Czechs going to study abroad, (just to clarify: I don´t count students who travel abroad to study only for one semester, but those who study for the whole duration of the course, which is 3-4 years), no matter if it´s because they don´t have enough information, from financial reasons, they are unnecessarily scared of such a big change, or they just don´t want to. When I was applying to universities in Great Britain, I was the only one out of all last years of our grammar school (which is approximately 80 students!), who chose to study abroad. At my university, there is several times more students for example from Lithuania or Cyprus, although those countries have much less inhabitants than Czech Republic.

How trustworthy you find this information, is entirely up to you. In my opinion, it will at least help you make an approximate picture.

How did I find out about the possibility of studying abroad? By coincidence. In my third year of grammar school, I was in Prague to visit Gaudeamus, which is a “market” of universities, where different universities introduce themselves and lure high school students to apply with them. I came across UniLink over there, which is an agency helping CZ/SK student with studying in Great Britain (I can highly recommend, definitely contact them!). I found out a plenty of useful information and started to seriously think about studying abroad thanks to them. On my way home I thoroughly read the flyer the gave me, when I got home, I visited their website and shortly after went to their lecture in Prague. Since then everything was clear to me. I became attached to the thought of studying abroad and didn’t even wanna consider anything else.

Motivation to study

I would like to start with what motivated me personally (I believe that plenty of people at high school feel [or felt back then] in a very similar way). When I started my final year at grammar school, nothing indicated I would change my attitude. I was sloppy at school as usual, had terrible grades, I didn’t care about my school report at all. I had to listen, that I could get top grades if I wasn’t wasting my potential, at home as well as at school. I didn’t care, no one was able to motivate me to study and explain to me, how to utilize given syllabus in practice, everything was always about learning a list of completely useless information for the test (which is IMO a stumbling block of Czech education system, I will get to it in more details later on).

During my final year I felt miserably, and I knew is time for a change. I was 18, adult by law, but I definitely didn’t feel like one. I was still dependant and financially reliant on my parents who I was living with under the same roof. I needed my own space for self-development, even the fact that someone could constantly check up on me what I was doing in my free time discouraged me from doing anything productive.

My final exams were coming, and everybody started to write me off. Teachers, even my parents doubted I would pass. My parents knew as well as me that I need an average of 2 (in our schools, we have marks from 1 to 5, 1 is the best, 5 is the worst), to be accepted to an English university. Because I refused to apply for any Czech universities as I didn’t even wanna hear about it, my parents were worried I’m not gonna get anywhere and I would end up in a warehouse working for minimum wage. In the second term shortly before my finals I had approximately seven or eight 4s. I started studying for my finals roughly a month before the deadline and I spent ten hours a day studying and revising. Result? Average of 1.75, almost passing with distinction and sixth best Maturita (that’s how our final exam in high school is called) from my class (there was 30 of us). I guess, I will be a student with the biggest grade contrast between mid-term and end-term school report, and Maturita exam in the history of my grammar school.

Why am I writing this? Certainly not to pour my heart out. I just wanna show on a good example, that anyone can get to England, if he/she does whatever it takes, studying abroad is definitely not just for “elite students” with top grades.

Beginnings

As I’ve already mentioned, studying abroad is really for everyone, your character doesn’t matter. Saying that you don’t wanna leave home, just because you are shy introverts, who hardly get to know new people, you don’t wanna lose those few friends you have at home and you would definitely stay lonely out there, is a completely nonsensical excuse.

I myself was at that time very closed person, who had huge trouble getting to know new people (who even had some symptoms of autism and suicidal tendencies at the start of grammar school). Besides, I went there completely on my own unlike some others, who applied to the same uni with their best friends. Although if you really want it, you won’t find any excuses, I saw it as a challenge and a new life opportunity.

I’m not gonna pretend, that the beginnings weren’t difficult, it takes some time, before you get used to the new environment, culture shock also plays its role. The more proactive attitude you adopt, the quicker you accustom. There are few hundreds of various societies and free-time activities on campus, which anyone can choose from, if you´re not a nihilist.

Advantages of studying abroad

* Getting to know people from all around the world

One of the huge advantages of studying abroad is to find friends from all around the world thanks to the blending of dozens of various cultures. GB is thanks to their colonial past one of the most multicultural societies in the world, which gives you the opportunity to broaden your horizons and learn about a lot of interesting things about life in different countries across the whole world first-hand. If you get lucky enough and find really good friends, it allows you to travel low-cost around the world (they invite you to their country for holidays and in return, you can host them in your country).

* Self-development

Probably the most important thing and the main reason why to study abroad. You’re here on your own, no one tells you what to do, no one checks up on you nor solves your problems. The beginnings tend to be harsh, before you accustom. But trust me, it’s worth it. You probably won’t notice that much how this experience changes you, but your surroundings will. When something goes wrong, you can’t just hop on a train and get home in 2 hours for minimal expenses. You learn how to be independent, responsible and reliable adults, who can arrange everything on their own. In other words, you will grow up several times faster than if you stayed home.

The only point, which doesn’t refer only to studying in GB, but to living abroad on your own in general.

* Personal freedom

University education in GB is much more focused on self-study and gives you much more space and opportunities, how to manage your free time (which I’m gonna write about in more details in the following chapter). No-one makes a big deal out of your attendance and the teachers try to meet your needs in everything. If your attendance is very low, you must attend a compulsory meeting with your personal tutor, who will look for a reason. Don’t be afraid, you can be as honest as you want, no-one is gonna judge you! The meeting is only informative and serves for data collection, which are then used to improve student’s welfare and overall satisfaction with the university. It’s not a problem to say that one of the compulsory modules doesn’t entertain you at all and you see the lectures as a complete waste of time, or that you have financial difficulties and you need to earn extra money, they really do listen to you and don’t judge you at all.

More free time mainly relates to the fact that you have the opportunity to become financially independent, which is something you can’t become fully-fledged adults without.

* You will become fluent in the most important language in the world

I guess I don’t even need to justify this point (plus you are reading this in English either just because you wanna practice, or because you don’t speak Czech and still somehow became interested in my blog which is mainly focused on Czech students). You will become automatically fluent in English without even having to study the language, which will open the doors to many international companies all around the world on the job market.

Education system

If you expect miracles from British universities, then I´m not gonna impress you. I had plenty of illusions before arrival and gradually came harsh reality and bitter disappointment.

I don’t really have any experience with Czech universities ATM and I don’t intend to deceive you with made up disinformation, so I’m not gonna compare too much. Both systems have their pros and cons and each person prefers a different approach.

However, I know a few things with certainty. As I’ve already mentioned, university education in GB is more based on self-study and self-presentation. You’re not gonna avoid essays, no matter which course you choose. You’ll be given a topic, or opportunity to choose from more options every trimester and write something about it with the help of academic resources, the essay doesn’t always have the same structure and it depends on the context, sometimes you’re expected to focus more on good resources and content and sometimes more on building your own argument.

If I compare a first-year timetable at a British uni and a Czech uni (obviously depends on the course, I roughly compare two different systems in general, if that’s even possible), I don’t like either of them. The Czech one is way too full and the British one too empty, a compromise between those two would be ideal. Thanks to some of my friends who study in CZ, I know that their timetable is so full that they are not even able to find a proper job beside studying apart from weekends. This is by the way one of the main reasons, why I chose to write a blog on this particular topic, you should be already able to become financially independent at the uni and if the university doesn’t even try to allow you so, something is wrong.

A university should be from principle mostly about self-study, but in some courses, you need a lot more interaction, let’s take foreign languages as an example. Last year I had four hours a week of Spanish (which is itself very low) and just two(!) hours a week of German. If you don’t wanna be a translator or an interpreter and wanna use languages purely for communication, don’t make the same mistake as I did, choosing a course focused solely on foreign languages is a waste of time. You can study on your own with the same efficiency.

Another important thing that I would like to mention, don’t be afraid to change a course, if you are really unhappy. It took me three years and two changes of course before I found a field which I find very entertaining, fulfils me and has a great potential on the job market. Although I intend to continue studying in Prague next year and I won’t bring any degree from GB, I certainly don’t see my stay here as a waste of time. There are such people, not just a few, who completely change their job after ten years of practice, some even later. By saying this, I definitely don’t intend to lower the importance of a degree on the job market! I believe if you meaningfully utilize your free time before even going to uni by looking for a field of study that you feel passionate about, you will be more successful in choosing your course than me (if not, nothing happens).

Work

The minimum wage in the Great Britain is currently £6.45/hr for 18-20 year-olds, £8.20/hr for 21-24 year-olds and £8.72/hr for 25+. If you are interested in an official document, you can download it here. (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-national-minimum-wage-in-2020>)

If you have financial difficulties, or want to become financially independent ASAP, or both, I highly recommend making a CV before arrival and visit all shops on campus and in the town centre immediately during the first week. Another important info you need to know: you have to arrange a NIN (National Insurance Number). You can make an appointment through uni, or you have to apply yourself here. (<https://www.gov.uk/apply-national-insurance-number>) The process takes approximately two months, but you can start working immediately, even if you still don’t have NIN.

I started looking for a job way too late myself, so I strongly advise you not to make the same mistake, otherwise you will have trouble finding something decent. Before Christmas, I came across an agency, through which I managed to find a job in various warehouses, but it was a very unstable income, although after a while I started to work in one warehouse on a regular basis finally being able to pay my own bills. I stayed roughly for a year and a half, before I found a better job where I got paid more again through a different agency as a care worker, which I have been doing until now for a year. If you find a really good job, you can save up during holidays up to £1000/month, considering you work full-time and spend your money only on food and rent.

Living costs

The biggest expense is by far the accommodation, which is the only regular expense along with the public transport, which is significantly higher than in CZ. I have already switched three accommodations, so I can show you how much I paid/pay now. I lived in campus during my first year for £320/month (although you pay in advance in quarterly intervals!), then a year later found a private accommodation for £362/month and last year found another private accommodation for £370-390 month (£315 fixed price and the rest are utility bills, which we pay separately).

Forget about cheap student bistros you might know from CZ. There is a plenty of restaurants on campus, however the prices are very high. Start cooking on your own and if you can’t, learn it! On average, you spend for food in supermarket the same price as in CZ and some products are even cheaper, for example 10 eggs for 77p or 1kg of frozen peas for £1.30.

I spend for food just under £30/week on average, although you can easily budget with 20.

The clothes are also cheaper here than in CZ. Let’s take jeans as an example, I buy middle-priced ones for £10, I can get them even cheaper on sale.

If I roughly round up my overall monthly expenses and count only rent and food, I get £500.

As students, it’s more than enough for you to work 20hrs/week to cover your expenses and you might even save up a little (of course depends what you spend your money on).

The last thing worth mentioning is the public transport. It obviously depends on which city you live in. I pay £2.60 for one-way ticket to the town centre and £4.30 for more favourable daily ticket that’s valid everywhere around the town plus a few surrounding villages. Most students I know of prefer to spend £175 for a yearly ticket. I walk almost everywhere, so I spend a negligible amount of money on public transport, but it apparently depends on the circumstances, everyone has it different.

Accommodation

When I was choosing my accommodation, I was advised by UniLink that on-campus accommodation is the best choice for first-years. I would say it depends on what kind of a person you are. If you are going to study abroad straight from the high school and you have minimal life experience, then I would definitely agree with them. You have right under your nose literally everything that’s happening on campus and it’s far easier for you to get to know new people and adapt to the new environment. Each university has obviously a different quality of accommodation, so it’s difficult for me to give you a universal advice.

When it comes to on-campus accommodation, all of the facilities except the cheapest ones are very expensive, most of them are 50% more expensive than my current accommodation even tho the living standard is lower.

I was living in South Towers during my first year, which are 15-floor huge blocks of flats. I chose the cheapest option for financial reasons. I shared one bigger kitchen with 15 random people and shower and 2 toilets with 7 flatmates (there was 16 of us in one floor and we had one shower and 2 toilets in each wing). It was a very unpleasant shock for an introvert like me and I would never want to live there ever again, although it was a life experience that taught me a lot of things.

I have some useful advice for those who intend to live in a similar facility:

1. Buy earplugs.

Unfortunately, you won’t get a proper sleep without them. Flatmates are sometimes noisy at night as well as random smoke alarms, which used to ring three times a week in the middle of the night (Obviously after ringing everyone was obliged to gather in front of the building, but why should I do that? I kept soundly sleeping with earplugs on and no-one ever found out.).

1. Learn how to be patient.

You get completely random flatmates, so you might not have the same experience as I had, could be better, could be worse. I got along very well with half of them and kept fighting with four of them. There was a constant mess in the kitchen, I didn’t have enough space to cook and several times someone borrowed my kitchen stuff without asking me and left them unwashed. It’s very likely you will come across such people. Vast majority of first-years from all around the world and from different cultures live on campus, most of them used to live with their parents until then, and so they still have to learn basic personality traits necessary for coexistence with others such as being independent, considerate and respectful towards their flatmates.

1. Try to spend as much time as possible outside of your room

Campus is right under your nose. Utilize it! I know from my personal experience that the more time you spend with people in an environment close to you instead of among four walls of a dark depressing cell (yeah, that’s exactly how my room looked like), the easier you find your first-year. Every day, there is a plenty of various societies and activities on campus, where it’s much easier for you to find friends than in your accommodation.

A year after that, I found a private accommodation, again with random people, who I got along completely fine with tho (although I didn’t really consider them as friends). This time, I had issues with the opposite extreme. I was living way too far from the uni, so I had less motivation to participate in any on-campus activities.

Last year, I started to look for an accommodation way in advance and thanks to my determination, I got lucky. I managed to find a very well-equipped house for a reasonable price close to the uni. Thanks to the fact I came first, I could choose people to live with, who I know well and can trust.

Conclusion? Again, I’m trying to illustrate and justify my advice by this example. I would generally recommend everyone in the first year either on-campus accommodation, or a private accommodation close to the uni, but only if you know people you will be living with, or you are willing to risk it (if you want to find the best accommodation for the next year, start in January!). If you have problems with your flatmates on campus, you can always discuss this with your RA (Resident Assistant), who is an older student, whose task is to supervise the coexistence of his flatmates and solve any issues whatsoever, or you can contact directly the university. If you are really unhappy, you can be moved to a different floor within the same facility. The same thing can’t be applied to private accommodation, the university can’t help you with that.

In case you are wondering about private accommodation, I would recommend you Facebook groups, where students share last-minute accommodation adverts (just use the right keywords, you should find plenty of such groups according to your location, or you can ask at different forums, I personally never used FB group to look for an accommodation). I can also recommend you Gumtree, which is where I found my accommodation. (https://www.gumtree.com/property-to-rent)