

Studying in four different countries

Author's thoughts



Before going abroad, to pursue my master's degree, I was living in a little paradise called Cyprus. A sandy island in the Mediterranean sea surrounded by three continents, offering strong sunlight most of the year, amazing beaches, kind and friendly people with great hospitality, chill and easy going lifestyle. However, the world was much bigger and attractive, in many and different ways, than I initially thought. Once I visited four different countries,

in the context of my studies, I came to realise that I have only read a chapter of this book called "Our World". I never thought before that: travelling; meeting new people; learning new things; accepting facts and mentalities from different cultures; will be an exciting and a large part of my daily life. I have met people who gained my utmost trust and respect, and no matter how far away they are now they are still close and always in my thoughts. And one thing I know for sure is that I could never be the person that I am today if I hadn't taken the big leap and exit my comfort zone.

— Stefanos Georgiou

What was I thinking?

by STEFANOS GEORGIOU

Growing up on a small island (i.e. Cyprus), I had limited knowledge regarding the vast experience, new ideas, and cultural benefits I could assimilate while travelling abroad. Being in the last year of my undergraduate studies, at the University of Cyprus, I had an aim of doing my postgraduate degree in the United Kingdom or any other English speaking country. Besides, alongside the University, I had full-time barman responsibilities at Starbucks cafeteria to collect money for my studies. While being in a family of six, with four siblings, I believed it was im-

portant to get funds by any means to reduce the burden on my parents for doing my postgraduate degree. The opportunity was given, to do my studies, while being eligible and qualified to receive an Erasmus Mundus scholarship, after I applied for PERCCOM (PERvasive Computing and COMmunications for sustainable development) program. A fact that made me super happy and left a huge smile on my face for many days.

The master program mentioned above offered studies with the subject of GreenIT and sustainable development with the opportunity of studying in four different counties (France, Finland, Russia, and Sweden) for 18 students for two years. Moreover, it was a unique chance to meet peo-

ple from different cultures and backgrounds since it was an international program and one of its purposes was to bring together students from various countries. However, a bit skeptical about this choice, as a person who never lived abroad and who do not even know how to cook, I took the decision for exiting my comfort zone and in September of 2013 I started my studies abroad. But who would know that I will end-up addicted in living abroad and having the travelling aspect as part of my life?

During these two years of my postgraduate studies, I acquired knowledge and experience that I would never have if I only stayed in a tiny island. My purpose is to share and motivate young people to

get out of their comfort zones, travel a lot without overthinking, meet a bunch of crazy people with no limits, and never forget to take your smile whenever you go or whatever the situation it is.

First stop: France

France, the country of great wines, delicious cheese, funny English accent, and kind people was the first stop of my studies. More specifically, the city Nancy (located in Northern France) offered its hospitality for the 18 PERCCOM students. The dream team composed from three French, two Nigerians, two Indians, two Bangladeshi, two Indonesians, a German, a Peruvian, a Ukrainian, a Romanian, a Vietnamese, and a Cypriot/Hungarian (myself).



City of Strasbourg

I arrived in Nancy late in the evening, being exhausted from the trip, sweaty and dirty, and more importantly super hungry! That was my first encounter with Fisayo Caleb Oluwagboye, a guy from Nigeria also a student in my program about the same age as I. A kind, smart, and quiet person who is a very dear friend of mine and who later on asked me to become his best man for his wedding. Even now (years after my studies), we regularly speak over Skype, or we try to meet at least once a year. Long story short, he was the first person who cooked for me when I arrived in Nancy during that night once he realised how hungry I was. After that day we were always going out together, he was the person I trusted to speak my mind and the things that were bothering me like relationships, family staff, or studies.

Our studies, at the University of Lorraine, where intense since we had to follow lectures eight hours almost every day. The French education system is built mainly from long hours of lectures and less load on homework. In addition, we had to speak formally with most of the professors compare to the Scandinavian Universities. We received most of the student guidance in the French Universities from our cohorts' students, Alexandre De Masi, Baptiste Louis, and Dorine Petit. Alexandre was our group's techno-freak, he was always connected and following every step of different technological advancements, but, mainly in the communications field. Baptiste was our group's princess, a nickname that everybody liked and used. The nickname was given by Dorine and me while searching for a picture with the "thank you" description, and the princess word was also written there. Dorine was our group's dance addict, she was always willing to help us while staying in France, and she was responsible for writing the PERCCOM's blog and news. These three were the people who mainly help us to bypass the hard French conversations in different domains. Also, they gave us the first flavour of France while partying and organising social events with them.



Baptiste and Alexandre

During our stay in France, our program organised trips such as visiting winery villages where the French speciality lies. These are fantastic places to get tipsy while testing the different variations among the most excellent wines from years of knowledge that France has. The locals tried to help us to understand what are the differences between a good wine and

how we should handle it based on its age. For instance, you should be more gentle and careful with handling old red wines and less time is required to let it "breathe". We also learned that the difference of champagne against the other sparkling wines is nothing more than the production place, the region of Champagne. However, with our still immature and youngster nature we were only focus on getting drunk and having fun instead, I still feel lucky that I remember all the above information that I am currently sharing.



I am left, Fisayo mid, and Rohan right

Another great experience that we had in France was the international evening we organised among the PERCCOM students at Alexandre's apartment. The aim was to bring traditional food and alcoholic drinks from our home countries and let everyone to have a taste from it. We tasted food from approximately eleven various kitchens, the apartment of our host had smells from different spices and food for at least a week. I guess these smells also disturbed Alexandre's sleep since for some time he looked really sleepy, or maybe it was the intensive courses from our University with the combination of French professors accent while trying to teach in English. Nevertheless, we extended the night by having some beers at a local pub. As a non-beer drinker, I decided to try one; however, the options were various and all unknown to me. That was the time when one of our fellows, Vlad (Romanian scout guy who was wearing a distinctive red jacket, drinking beers like water, and skilful programmer), told me the fantastic quote that I even use nowadays. "*Stefanos, when you don't know which one*

to pick just go for the blondes, they are always a good choice". By thinking of that quote again, I am not aware if he only meant that for beers.

The first semester was quite fruitful for me in both terms of education and life experience since I have leaned new things like basic French conversation, activating my apartments fire alarm a couple of times while cooking, building home automation systems for smart houses and so on. After an excellent first semester in France, we packed our stuff and travelled to our next destination, the ice-cold Lappeenranta of Finland.

Second stop: Finland

The country of the thousand lakes and two millions of saunas is Finland. Where people are quiet, peaceful, barely speaking to strangers, not making eye contact, and they feel you are invading their personal space if you stand too close to them. However, when they start drinking alcohol and partying they become open and cheerful.



Lappeenranta University's entrance

At the beginning of January 2014, Finland welcomed our cohort with snowy days and long nights. In the north, most of the countries have long nights during winter times and long days during the summer times. Some common patterns of the Scandinavia countries are: sun is rare and a valuable; prices of alcoholic and cigarettes are high due to taxation; eating at a restaurant is pricey; expensive bus tickets; getting a decent haircut costs; high and well-structured education system; amaz-

ing public health service; buses on time; and every single person knew English and with a proper accent.

To reduce some of these costs above since we had a small scholarship and definitely not one that is enough for Scandinavian countries, we took some necessary steps. For example, we bought a complete haircut kit, and we entrusted our hair to Alexandre—who only had experience in trimming sheep's fur as one time he said while being tipsy. Worth to say for a free haircut it wasn't that...bad! For reducing the transportation fees, since I was leaving five kilometres away from the University, I used to walk every day. Luckily the lake Saimaa, the one I had to pass by to get at the University, got frozen. Therefore, it offered a direct part to the University if someone was crazy enough to risk working on the frozen lake. However, a bit uncomfortable initially—because as a Cypriot I am only experienced on walking on the sand or swimming in sea—I took the big step and started every day going to the University through the frozen lake. This brave decision of mine reduced the walking time, towards the University, from 30 to 15 minutes.



Walking on a frozen lake to go home

Regarding the Finish education system, is considered to be one of the most successful ones. Some key factor to their success is the reduced lecture hours and the increased load on homework. In addition, most of the Finnish students do not study more than eight hours, University's lectures included in their studying hours. They are trying to keep a balance between studies and student life instead of spending endless

hours at the University. Also, the Finnish Universities are open 24/7 without any guards and student can access different parts of it while using their student cards. Moreover, students can book different classes, meeting rooms, and saunas in the University to organised social events like project meetings or even parties. In our cohort, the chief organiser of the PERCCOM parties and our ambassador was Vicky Palacin Silva. A crazy Peruvian girl who has an unlimited source of energy and patients, great organising skills, and who is always in a party mood. Also, no matter what questions we had, Vicky always knew, or she could find the answers. Alongside with Vicky, you could always find Vlad and Maike; a vegan German girl who I often used to tease with bad meat quotes and jokes, even tho we became great friends, but I still tease her. Also, she was always overfilling her plate so much, like a Zombie Apocalypse is around the corner and the stores will run low on food. See, I am still teasing her, even on my blog!



Jumping in a frozen lake after sauna

Sauna is undoubtedly one of the most severe social events in Finland since business man can close deals there with just a simple handshake. For Finish people giving your word that you will do something is a serious fact. Moreover, Finland has five millions of population and two million saunas. Most to the buildings offer sauna facilities, and it is a habit followed by Finns very frequently during the week. We had also adopted this habit and we even tried the most extreme types of after sauna, like jumping in the snow or in a barely frozen lake. If anyone

thinks that your body can withstand the cold lake of 2-3 degrees just because you were in the sauna where the temperature is around 80 is mistaken. The experience was freezing of course since we were running immediately back to the sauna after jumping in a cold lake.

During the summer period, in Finland, the days are longer and as an outcome, we experienced only four hours of night time. This is usually the perfect period of the year to start social events such as barbecue and parties near lakes until late hours. However, be advised that summer in Finland is not like a normal Mediterranean's country. It can even snow in May!

By the end of the second semester, we had two weeks of seminars in one of our partners University, the ITMO University of Saint-Petersburg. To this end, we packed our luggage for the next adventure by the middle of May in 2014.

Third stop: Russia

"When will we reach the Russian borders", was my first question, while travelling to Saint-Petersburg by bus, towards our Ukrainian fellow Vitali Poliakov (another techno-freak, that you can align with Alexandre De Masi, combined with the slow eating behaviour, his usual quote "*no no stop stop stop*", and his unique surprise expression every time he sees something odd). Vitali then took his serious expression and said *"You will realise it because your ass will start hurting from the bumpy road"*, he said. I could not agree more, the bumpy road combined with the strict check-up of passports and languages was our welcome ceremony to Russia.



Maike's face for our accommodation

During the first day, Saint-Petersburg's beauty was hidden from us by the cloudy, moody, and rainy weather, a fact quite usual for this city even during summer time. Nevertheless, the combination of the neo-classical architecture, bridges, monuments, theatres, operas, and ballets are giving the city a beautiful, attractive, and cultural view. In addition, the party places, cafeterias, and restaurants, that vary in the city, are providing comfort and many options for its locals and tourists.



Vasiliovsky island

The expression on Maike's face was priceless (see the first picture) since it was illustrating her whole opinion about our accommodation. The dormitory had a lot of sandbags packed in the entrance and high iron gates; which made it look like a war zone. In addition to that, four old Russian ladies were guarding the reception and monitoring every movement in the building. At every wrong action, like coming back at the dormitories late night, they were taking an angry look and start shouting some unknown Russian words to us. However, small daily actions such as smiling and greeting them in their native language contributed in a very friendly behaviour later on.

Our hosting University, ITMO, had a research centre at Vasilievsky island next to the State University of Saint-Petersburg, where the current Russian president (Vladimir Putin) graduated. The seminars took place at the research centre mentioned above, a building that is mainly decorated with marble, a circular staircase, and mosaics that gives a flavour of classical style. The same fact applied for almost all metro stations in the city, they displayed a museums look atmosphere covered with mosaics and marble pillars.

An exciting event happening in Saint-Petersburg during June are the white nights. The outcome of this event has daylight all time long even during night time. Something that caused me confusion for many days since most of the time I could not distinguish if it morning or night time. Sleeping masks or tick curtains are necessary if you end up in Saint-Petersburg on that period of time. The white nights are starting on 11th of June and last until 2nd of July. Furthermore, during summertime, when the ice in the Neva river is melt (river connected with the Finnish Gulf), the bridges are rising to pave paths for the transport ships. Even tho it happens every year, you could still see many people standing by the river's embankment to view this event, listen to music played near the bridges by local musicians and to enjoy the moment.



The summer palace, Peterhof

For our Master Thesis, we had to choose a topic of our interest during the first semester. The associated partner for my topic was ITMO University of Saint-Petersburg. A choice I believe it was the finest after experi-

encing for two weeks in that magical city.

Forth stop: Sweden

Sweden, the country where most of the people are blonde with blue eyes, where *fika* (a coffee break habit) is mandatory after every lunch, even at fast food places. The country where our PERCCOM team experienced numerous hockey games, Northern Lights very often since our hosting University was located in the north (Luleå), and felt the freezing Swedish cold weather of minus 30°. Also, compared to Finland, Sweden is still very expensive and the student housing is a mess since there are not enough facilities to host all students.

Since Luleå is located in the far north of Sweden, we often had the opportunity to see the Northern Light. Northern Light is a beautiful view of the sky and there is the need for certain conditions to experience it. For instance, it shouldn't be very cold or windy; also it is far more clear and visible when there are no city lights close to it. In this line, many teams are organising the so-called "*Aurora hunting*" where they travel in the North of Sweden, places distant from cities, to experience the full view of the Northern Lights. I had the opportunity to see them a couple of times from my apartment's balcony. It never stopped to amaze me, every time I was just staring the view with silence and respect towards this world's wonder.



Cultural centre and library¹

Housing in Luleå was a big headache since houses are few against a large number of students studying at the University. For the

first month, me and a friend of mine, Iqbal Ahmend, we rented a cottage that was ten kilometres outside the city next to a beautiful forest and lake, and had terrible internet access. Also, the bus schedule was very spare and from time to time we had to wait more than two hours (changing buses) to go from the University to the city's centre and then back to our cottage. However, after the first month, we successfully rented a big and beautiful apartment in the city centre just next to the city's cultural centre. The cultural centre was a magnificent four-storey building that had modern architecture and a whole site was made of glass. This fact offered a beautiful view of the Gulf of Bothnia from the top floor with a pleasant working environment for the University students. We used to go there regularly to study and discuss different working projects, ideas, plans, and we stayed for hours while enjoying the view.

The Technological University of Luleå's campus composed of some old but beautiful buildings. The whole campus had its own underground tunnel system that was interconnecting all the University buildings. This was done to help students from moving to different buildings during winter without the need of going outside. Also, in a similar manner to Finland, the University of Luleå offered 24/7 access to its facilities for the students, even in the library. One of our favourite facilities, in the University, was the STUK. A place where many social events were organised and many parties took place. Something noteworthy facts about the parties in STUK, every time a party was finished security personal was sharing anti-hangover pills at the exit. At the begging, I didn't believe that these pills are working. However, I greatly utilise them during my party times in Saint-Petersburg in Russia (I was studying there during the next semester of 2015).



Coding Camp, sleeping in the lab

Apart from partying and spending a good time, we also took some challenges, in the context of our studies, such as the Green Coding Challenging Camp. 48-hours of non-stop and no sleep was my team's resolution for the above task. In my team, we had Baptiste as team leader, me and Zaine (a Nigerian girl with huge tolerance towards alcohol) as main software developers with two more students from a different cohort than ours who just started their post-graduate degree. We even packed our bags with my team, took our pyjamas, sleepers, towels (we were having our shower at the University's gym) and we had as a collaborator unlimited access to coffee machines and meals from Professor Karl Andersson every day. It was a crazy experience and a one I wouldn't do again sleepless. Nevertheless, the gains we got regarding team collaboration and coding were inestimable.



Luleå's University Campus

Eventually, the third semester of our master program came to an end. As a next step, we had to do our thesis in the partner host we have selected. At this point, we took separate ways with my fellow PERCCOM

¹retrieved from <http://www.arcticairlink.com/kulturens-hus-in-lulea-where-business-and-culture-meet/>

friends until we meet again in France for presenting our thesis work.

A never ending journey

The PERCCOM master experience was unique and life-changing for me. I meet so many different people from various cultures and backgrounds. Even so, we were very different we end up being close, reliable, and great friends. Strong bonds are connecting our cohort, we still keep contact with most of the fellow participants, we talk over Skype, we update our contact and address details on a shared document, we send post-cards during Easter, Christmas, or on New Year's Eve. All those magical moments I spend during my master in all these different countries are carved deeply in my memories and thoughts. The story does not end here, we are organising meetings with my PERC-

COM fellows at least once a year in various countries. From time to time we even spend holidays together, like spending New Year's Eve on Alps. However, I wish I could turn back time and relive this enjoyable and unique journey over again.

As a conclusion, I would like to urge young students, still under-graduated, to follow my path and not to focus only on mainstream choice for their post-graduate degree. Getting a degree from a highly ranked University is of paramount importance. However, stressing mentally and over-pushing yourself to its limits very time it is not healthy. Many opportunities are available with various scholarships that European Union offers to study, travelling, do something different, get experience, and make new friends. *Also, we should all keep in mind that nobody will remember the time spent on studying or working, but instead, all the crazy moments with joy*

and fun we had with friends.

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Front row: Dorine, Baptiste, Zaine, Mid row: Alifia, Maike, Alexandre, Viki, Back row: Stefanos, Vlad, Fisayo, Vitalii