
Navigating Erasmus with a Disability

I am a final year European Studies student at Trinity College Dublin. I completed my Erasmus during the 2019/2020 academic year in Milan, Italy. Throughout this article, I am going to discuss my experience of Erasmus as a person with a physical disability who uses a manual wheelchair. However, I am going to write about my experience in a way that will hopefully be helpful to everyone regardless of what disability they may have.

The first piece of advice that I would give to any student with a disability who is considering Erasmus would be to try to be as organised as possible about it from the start. I would recommend meeting with your Disability Officer and Erasmus coordinator as early as possible to discuss your requirements and your options for Erasmus. Giving yourself plenty of time means that you can explore the various options available to you and you won't have to rush any decisions, which means you can go to the most suitable country and university for your specific needs. My Disability Officer in Trinity was able to contact the different universities that I was considering for my year abroad to ask if they had had an Erasmus student with a disability before and what services and accommodations are available for students with disabilities. You can see from the responses that you get back if the University is a good fit for you. This allowed me to make an informed decision on where would be most suitable for me to study.

Another really useful thing to do, particularly under the current circumstances with Covid-19, is to use the 'Street view' feature on Google Maps to see what the city you want to go to is like. This is especially useful if you have particular accessibility requirements. You can go online and virtually walk around the city. For me, I wanted to see if there were many steps or cobblestones that would hinder my ability to get around independently. This was a really handy way of seeing what Milan was like without having to travel overseas to see it in person.

While every Erasmus student receives a grant to help to cover the costs of studying abroad (the amount of which varies depending on what country you go to), there is also additional funding available to Erasmus students who have a disability. This funding is administered by the Higher Education Authority and you have to apply for it before your Erasmus begins. The funding is allocated to students who are going to incur extra costs that are directly related to their disability. If you are eligible, a certain amount of funding will be put aside for you and you can be reimbursed when you provide receipts for the extra costs you incurred. I worked on the application for this with help from the Disability Service and the Erasmus office in Trinity. I heard back quite quickly that I was eligible. I was allocated funding for someone to travel with me in order to assist me with the move to Milan and to help me with carrying my bags. I was also allocated funding to use when public transport was not accessible. In Milan, some of the metro stations are inaccessible and some of the tram lines are also unsuitable for wheelchair users. Therefore, if I needed to go somewhere but there was an issue with the transport, I could get a taxi and send the receipt back to the Erasmus office in Trinity in order to be reimbursed. Another example of what I used this funding for is an extra piece of equipment that I got for my wheelchair which allowed me to wheel safely and more easily over cobblestones.

When you arrive at your host university, I would recommend that you arrange to meet with the Disability Service. The Erasmus Office in Milan arranged this meeting for me as soon as I arrived. This meant that I could introduce myself and make sure that they were aware of what I needed. We went through my timetable to make sure that all of my classes were suitable, and they gave me their contact number in case I had any problems and needed to

contact them.

I want to emphasise that you shouldn't be afraid to ask for help while you are on Erasmus. Between the Disability Service and Erasmus office in Trinity and that of the University of Milan, I had so many people there to support me and to make sure that my requirements were met so that I could participate in the Erasmus programme as any student would. Don't feel like you have to do it all by yourself. Don't worry if at the start it's challenging and takes some time to settle in. Every student, whether you have a disability or not, will be overwhelmed at first. Moving to a new country is challenging for everyone, so give yourself some time to settle in and get used to your new surroundings! I'll admit that it took me several weeks to figure out where some of the lifts were located in the metro stations, but I found my feet eventually!

Overall, Erasmus is a really great experience. It's an amazing way to meet new people, make friends, memories and to travel around Europe. I hope that students with disabilities don't feel discouraged or miss out on this incredible opportunity because they feel that their requirements cannot be met. It might take a bit of extra planning, but it's worth it!

[This article is based on a recent presentation: Erasmus and Inclusion webinar November 2020, available here: <https://www.tcd.ie/disability/services/erasmus.php>](https://www.tcd.ie/disability/services/erasmus.php)



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