

“I did an internship at uB”

Arla, a Finn, Veronika, a Slovak, and Jacqueline and John, Germans, all did their internships at the International Office of the University of Burgundy during the 2014-2015 academic year. Here, we look at their professional, cultural and linguistic experiences in France.

Arla



“Living abroad. Misunderstandings. Frustration. Language problems. Extraordinary adventures, unforgettable moments, friendships across borders. Learning. Love. Living life to the full. Leaving your comfort zone. There is always someone or something you miss somewhere. Once you go abroad, you will never be the same.”

That is how Arla, a Nordic philology and French language graduate from the University of Oulu, sums up her experience of living abroad.

“Everybody should leave their comfort zone every so often to get to know themselves better, to realise their strengths and weaknesses and to have more confidence in themselves. And you also start to appreciate your own culture in a different way.

In Finland everything is better organised than in France but on the other hand the French know how to make the most of life, they are more sociable than the Finns. I noticed lots of politeness in everyday life, lots of *bonjours* and *au revoirs*, at the baker’s, at the supermarket... In Finland if someone asks you how you are, they really want to know how you are.

Before arriving in France I had heard that the French were much more open than the Finns but in the end I do not think there is a big difference. But it is true that I met lots of generous and open people who invited me to eat at theirs. Another curious thing, in Finland we are not used to showing our feelings so much in public and here I see emotion everywhere – in the tram, at university, on the street...”

“In Finland, we make decisions more quickly and I noticed that in France we talk more about problems together, there are more moments of exchange between colleagues, we always eat together and we eat varied meals which is nice. In Finland we say that the French do not live for work and I think this is true and they are more attached to their private life, family, free time, and life in general. In Finland we are so focused on careers... I think we could learn something from the French way of life.”

“However I noticed that in France there is an important hierarchy which distances people from each other, contrary to Finland where everyone is closer. For example, in Finland we even address professors at university in an informal way.”

“My internship at the International Office was very useful for me. I was scared about not understanding the language well enough to be able to work and it is true that at the beginning it was difficult but after two weeks I got used to it. Before arriving in Dijon I had a B2 level of French and during the six month internship I improved my French a lot, especially in oral expression.”

“I worked in two different services at the International Office: *Student mobility* and the *Centre of languages and culture for all*. In the *Student mobility* service I treated the documents of uB students who were going abroad and in the *Languages centre* I got involved in the organisation of events and I worked on reception. At the start it was not easy working on reception but I am happy I did it as it allowed me to develop myself on a personal and professional level. And the people who came to the Centre were all very nice and there was a good atmosphere.”

After her studies, Arla found a job in Mantyharju, a small Finnish town, in a company which makes sawing lines as a marketing assistant. “I work in communication and marketing, I organise events, and I take part in shows fairs where we present our machines. I do a lot of things, my role is very varied and above all I like the international side as from time to time I have the chance to travel in Finland or abroad.”

Jacqueline

Jacqueline Michel is a French, English and Dutch language student at Johannes Gutenberg University in Mainz.

“Before I could never have imagined myself working in a public administration office but in the end I liked it a lot. The tasks that I undertook were very different in the two International Office services: Student mobility and Centre of languages and culture for all. I have been learning French since I was seven but this internship experience really helped me to feel more at ease when speaking.”



“At university during our studies we do not speak a lot, we often read texts but we are not used to speaking. And in France I was able to have real conversations and I am no longer scared of speaking French. I chose to do an internship so I would be forced to speak French at work

every day. My French colleagues could correct me and this is much more useful than always being with other international students who all make errors when speaking with nobody to correct them.

My favourite tasks during my internship were linked to events and the welcoming of foreign tutors at the Languages centre. I had a lot of contact with international students who were very nice, open and grateful.

The French students were also nice but some did not understand the rules. *Why haven't I received my grant?* they asked me. *Because you have not sent us all the documents to complete your dossier!* I remember one student who sent me tens of emails each day – that guy did not understand anything,” says Jacqueline, laughing.

In terms of everyday work, Jacqueline notes that “compared with the French, Germans really work. If we work from 9 to 5 in Germany we really work from 9 to 5. There are always deadlines and we stress a lot. And in France if you do not do something today you will do it tomorrow. Some French students who were away on exchange sometimes took several months to send us all the necessary documents to complete their dossier to receive their grant even if the official deadline is two weeks after their arrival in their host country. In Germany, if you have a deadline and you do not send your documents before this deadline, you will not receive your grant, full stop,” Jacqueline firmly explains.

“The atmosphere at work was very nice, I was given a warm welcome, it was very friendly, we had coffee together and I would describe it more like a friendship than a professional relationship.”

“At the beginning it was weird for me to work at the Languages centre in contact with the foreign student tutors with whom I went out in the evenings outside of working hours. *Can I change my tutor hours?* they asked me while we were dancing in the night club. *Give me a break, please, I'm not working now, I'm dancing!* I replied.”

During her stay in Dijon, Jacqueline went on various trips. She had a chance to visit Montpellier, Toulouse, Bordeaux, Lyon...

“Dijon is also a very pretty city. It is a perfect city for a stay abroad – it is not very big but you can find interesting activities. I lived in the CROUS student residence on campus where I had a room of 9 square metres with a toilet, sink, and shower. I paid around 330 euros in monthly rent, but I had almost 100 euros of French government housing aid per month. During my stay in Dijon I had a chance to meet lots of international friends, especially Libyans and Czechs, and I hope to stay in touch with them.”

“In terms of some cultural differences, I find that food is expensive in France – in Germany people are more used to eating healthily, there are lots of restaurants with healthy food, fruit, vegetables, salad, natural fruit juices...

I visited France several times before doing my internship in Dijon and I already knew French culture a bit. Unfortunately there are things which shock me and which I find unacceptable. One example: French people do not pay attention to cars parked next to them. If someone scrapes against another car while leaving a parking space, this is not serious, they leave as if nothing happened. But you should not worry about it too much, because it is France and you cannot change the French, so you have to relax and make the most of your stay,” Jacqueline concludes with a smile.

After her internship in Dijon Jacqueline started her first year of Master’s in translation at Gernersheim in Germany and works occasionally in a translation office.

Veronika

From Bratislava in Slovakia, Veronika did an Erasmus+ internship at uB during the third year of her Bachelor’s degree in management.



“I did this internship as I wanted to gain a professional experience and get to know French culture better. I already learnt French at high school. I was enrolled at a bilingual high school in Bratislava and at the end of my diploma I already had a C1 level of French. At the beginning of my secondary studies I hesitated between the bilingual French and the Italian high school. I ended up choosing the French high school because it had a better reputation and because I preferred the language.”

“During my secondary studies we did various exchanges with France, I lived with French families which allowed me to discover the culture, go on trips and get to know the country. It gave me the desire to continue learning French at university where I got into the French-speaking programme at Comenius University in Bratislava where I took part of my courses in French. In Slovakia from a young age we are told it is very important to learn foreign languages.

During my internship the hardest thing was adapting at the beginning of my stay and then working and studying as I was enrolled in a distance learning programme in Bratislava at the same time. But the internship helped me to improve my French skills.”

“The work was very varied, I did administrative tasks, I worked with software, I took part in the management of student mobility. At the Centre of languages and culture for all I was in direct contact with students and other groups and I took part in the organisation of events.”

“It is true that I did not have a lot of responsibilities and I did not work on a specific project but in a general sense this internship was a useful experience in my life as I found myself in a professional environment where I could see how the system worked.

There were a few stressful situations but also those which were particularly nice like the intercultural events. But all of this made me learn things and it was interesting to see, as a student, how the Erasmus+ programme worked from another perspective – the administrative side of things. And above all, when you are working you realise it is a completely different life and rhythm to that of students,” concludes Veronika.

John

John, who comes from the German town of Wetzlar, studied English and French at the Martin-Luther University of Halle-Wittenberg.

“I wanted to do an internship abroad at the end of my studies. I had applied for several towns but in the end I came to Dijon. I prefer small cities, life is less stressful and I had never visited Burgundy before. During my studies I never went on an exchange and I wanted to finish my university journey with an internship as I am convinced that we improve our language skills more by working in another country rather than studying. In the professional world we are obliged to speak the language of the country all the time and if we go and study abroad as part of an exchange programme we do not always speak the language in question as often we are surrounded by people who come from all over the world and we speak in several languages.”



“By working at the International Office I learnt how the university system works in France. I was able to see the administration from another point of view: before when I was a student I often criticised the administration but now, having worked in a national administration system, I realise that things are much more complex than I had thought and that there is a lot of work. This experience was very interesting as I was faced with software problems, I was in contact with partner universities, I made phone calls abroad...

I was surprised by the hierarchy in France, the way of working is really different and you must always wait for the decisions and approval of your bosses. Sometimes I had tasks to do but I did not know why I had to do them because I did not have an overall vision of things. However, the atmosphere at work was friendly and relaxed. I was able to feel that the human aspect is very important, here we share a lot with each other whereas in Germany we keep a distance between colleagues, and lots of Germans do not want to spend time with their colleagues outside of work. Our professional and personal lives are often separated.

My memory of Dijon is that of an experience during which I improved my language level and went on interesting trips in the region,” concludes John, who started a thesis in linguistics after his internship in France.”



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→ Read also [Maddie's testimony](#), a young English student who spent a semester of study in Québec, followed by 6 months as an intern at uB's International Office.