

Istanbul Technical University, Istanbul, Turkey
MSc in Environmental and Resource Management
Winter/Fall semester 20/21

Preparation

The preparation stage of my semester abroad programme went smooth overall, especially considering that this was all happening during the pandemic.

The credit system was a little complex to convert. In the masters modules, 3 credits accounted for 7.5 ECTS. However, this may vary in different courses and departments. But I didn't have to worry about the conversion at all as they already had all the modules converted in ECTS as well, so it didn't prove to be an additional hassle. If you know the department you will be studying at, finding courses is pretty simple on their website. However, it is another thing that some of the modules weren't being offered when the actual schedule was announced, around two weeks before the start of semester. There were also timetable clashes with some modules. So I had to change my second learning agreement completely! But I still loved the substitute modules I ended up taking.

The world was in an uncertain situation. My host university ITU couldn't confirm if it will be an online semester until one month prior. The semester was pushed back by a month, so instead of starting mid-September, it began in mid-October. I was pretty adamant to go and experience the Istanbul life, despite the fact that the semester would be conducted online. Plus I had to be present in the host country to be eligible for the Erasmus+ grant. Therefore, I decided to take a little time as advised by my home university, analyze the situations, see the experience of my fellow colleagues, and travel accordingly. So I arrived 2 weeks after the start of studies, which was relatively late as most of the students I know were already there.

The bureaucratic works were a hassle in Istanbul though. As a non-EU citizen, I had to get an e-visa, which was very easy. But the visa was valid for only one month, so I had to apply for a student resident permit within the month of my arrival. The regulations are different for EU citizens though. We had to apply online for the resident permit, and submit the application form along with other documents to the Erasmus Office, and then they did the rest. It took almost two months from the time of application to get the resident permits ready. My visa had obviously expired by then, but the fact that my application was in process, was enough proof for my legal stay.

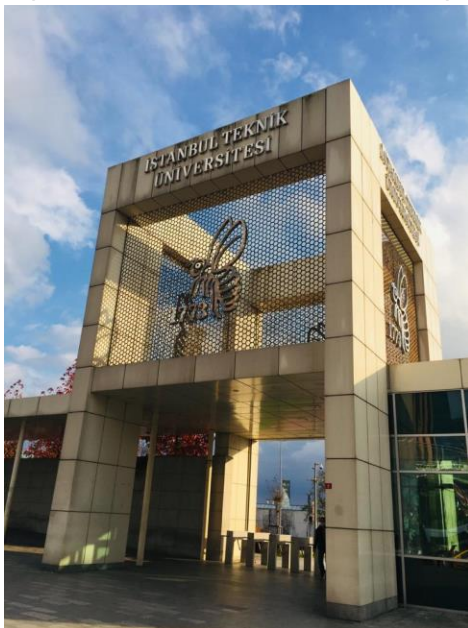
Accommodation in the host country

ITU didn't provide any student accommodation facilities to Erasmus students. But the Erasmus office of ITU did share useful links where we could find private accommodation. I ended up finding an affordable room in a shared flat. From living in a single room student apartment in Cottbus, to living in a shared apartment with four other people was a different experience. There was a lot of diversity within us, different nationality, religion, occupation. So it was a nice experience having had the chance to share our cultures. The apartment was completely furnished with all the appliances one needs. Spacious apartment with an amazing view from the balcony. If I would get bored of working in my room, I would just shift to the living room and work while I lay on the cozy couches!

It was really nice to have a completely equipped kitchen. I used to use the oven quite frequently. And the dishwasher did save us a lot of time and effort! With such a big apartment, one might wonder that it might be difficult to keep it clean. But the five of us took turns every week to clean the common spaces, so I had to clean every fifth week only, which didn't prove to be much. Since Istanbul is a big and densely populated city, all the essential shops were at walking distance. So getting groceries was convenient. Bus stops were also closeby, if I wanted to tour around the city.

Study at the host university

ITU is one of the most renowned universities of the world and not just Turkey. The lecturers were highly qualified. The modules I took up had a continuous assessment criteria, which proved to be very hectic. I didn't get the time to go out much because of the study pressure. But I see that as a major positive since it taught me how to work under pressure. None of my modules had more than 20 participants, so it was nice to have close interactions with the professors. I became really fond of the teaching methods as I felt like I did end up learning a lot. The lecture recordings would be uploaded as well in addition to the live lectures, so that nobody missed out on anything due to technical problems or poor internet connections. Since it was an online semester, I couldn't really go around their beautiful campuses. I just got a glimpse of it three times when I had to go for my paperwork. One credit equaled one hour of lecture, so I had 12 credits (27.5 ECTS) which was equivalent to 12 hours of lectures per week in addition to the hours invested in self-studies.



Everyday life and leisure

The ESN (Erasmus Student's Network) group of ITU were very engaging and made sure we didn't feel left out despite these difficult times of the pandemic. Before the start of studies, ESN ITU held some virtual events where all the Erasmus students participated in activities such as online games. Abiding by the safety regulations, ESN ITU organized trips and tours around the city, even to the beautiful Cappadocia.

One month into my stay, the government announced lockdown, which led to curfew at night and closure of museums and other tourist spots, especially the ones indoors. ESN ITU couldn't

organize physical events anymore, so I had to go around by myself within the city. But Istanbul is beautiful in that way, one can enjoy a lot just by walking around the streets with so many shops and Turkish food around. And if we are talking about food, then Turkey is the place to be! Starting from the refreshing soups, to the grilled meat, the varieties are endless. There are also a fair bit of vegan options. Overall the living expenses were comparatively cheaper than Germany. One should be able to cover their living expenses with the Erasmus+ grant. But however, I did have to bear additional expenses as the ticket prices kept fluctuating because of COVID-19, and also the mandatory COVID-19 test required before travel.



Unfortunately, the university doesn't provide a semester ticket. But public transportation in Turkey was relatively cheap with the IstanbulKart, which is the public transportation for bus, trams, ferries and metros. One Euro was equivalent to almost ten Turkish Liras. I bought the IstanbulKart with six Liras, and I needed to store the liras within this card and scan it every time I got on any means of travel. Whenever I would go out to explore parts of the city, it would cost me around ten liras on average in transportation. And it gets even cheaper if you get the special IstanbulKart for students. Unfortunately, I couldn't get the student IstanbulKart due to some technical problems. But my fellow colleagues had gotten it. I would often go to the Sultan Ahmet square to just sit there and get mesmerized by the views of the beautiful structures like Hagia Sophia and Blue Mosque.

I was tensed and scared to travel especially during a pandemic, but I took up the courage and went ahead with it; and honestly it was definitely worth the hassle.