

Erasmus+ Traineeship Reflection Paper
Humanitarian organisation, [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
Ruhr University Bochum

Before the traineeship:

As a student at the Ruhr University in Bochum, I am enrolled in the NOHA+ Master's Degree in International Humanitarian Action offered by the Institute for International Law of Peace and Armed Conflict (IFHV). As the name indicates, the program aims to train future practitioners in the Humanitarian field, and it combines theoretical and practical teaching. In my second semester, I was supposed to go to Malta for an erasmus semester, where I could pursue a forced displacement specialisation. Due to bureaucratic delays, I was not issued my German residence permit until the semester had started and I had to do the semester online from Germany.

In this two year program, the students are given the choice to either pursue further academic training in a partner university, or to opt for an internship that will train them more practically. Having a background in Social Sciences, I knew I was already equipped with the tools for Academic work, but I lacked practical field experience, and still felt completely external to the Humanitarian domain. In order to feel more equipped and prepared for humanitarian work when I graduate, I chose to do an internship. Moreover, due to Covid, and to the delay with my residence permit, I felt quite isolated, and I had a great need to find an in-person internship that would reintroduce me to workplaces and to in-person learning.

Why this internship:

I was offered an opportunity to work at the organisation Defence for Children International, Greece (DCIG). I accepted this offer for multiple reasons. Firstly, in my academic training and throughout the master's, I chose to specialise in migration issues. Even prior to studying Humanitarian Action at the RUB, I was always very interested in Human geography, and how migration affects our world. After enrolling in the NOHA Master program, the topic continued to pique my interest, and an internship in Greece felt the most suitable. Being an EU border country means Greece is the frontline of border control, the so-called refugee crisis, and migration control overall.

Moreover, the organisation is a local branch of Defence for Children International. It was founded in 1979, and has since developed 47 country branches. I knew I could benefit greatly from an internship where I would be working in an institution with this kind of expertise. And lastly, the Greek branch of the organisation had a wide array of work. They provide legal and psycho-social support to vulnerable children, children on the move, migrants and refugees, including victims of trafficking. They also advocate for the rights of these groups at the UN and EU level, and train professionals in the field. They also do this through a team of 6, although they also cooperate with many volunteers and partner organisations, this means I would be really involved, and not simply printing copies and doing menial tasks that would not teach me much.

During the internship:

I arrived in Greece in time to start my internship in February, but I had previously agreed with my supervisor that I would work the first week from home. This would allow me to familiarise myself with my surroundings in a new city, as well as give myself a buffer period to get tested for Covid and not infect anyone at the office in case I was positive. During this first week, I was given readings, such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, reports produced by the organisation, and previous project proposals and other documents. I was also asked to attend online meetings with partner organisations and make meeting minutes. The next week, I got to meet my coworkers and see the office, and I was quickly involved in many aspects of the work. My tasks included: drafting and revising project proposals; researching and writing Country of Origin Information (COI) reports; drafting advocacy reports, social media captions, and press statements, and occasionally, graphic design. I also did interpretation and translation, from French or Arabic to English, in asylum preparation interviews or general outreach to Arabic or francophone beneficiaries. Although my tasks were often clear and I had a basic structure to my internship, my day-to-day tasks often varied, and I was able to learn a lot without ever falling into a routine or getting bored. Due to the small size of the office, I was very frequently in contact with my coworkers, and can say that we have developed warm and respectful relationships. There was also another intern, which allowed us to become close and work together as a team.

During this time, I lived in a shared flat in a central area of Athens. Although I did not manage to meet many Greek people outside of work, I still got to learn a lot about the society and the culture. Moreover, I developed a great appreciation for Athens and Greece in general, and found it quite difficult having to pack and come to terms with the end of my time there.

Challenges and learning:

This internship taught me a lot. I learned to do COI research, project proposals, and drafting press and advocacy statements. I also got to practise my linguistic skills through interpretation and translation. I also developed a deeper understanding of the European and Greek migration systems, and got to interact more directly with beneficiaries.

On a personal level, I sharpened a lot of my skills, and am now more aware of what I can bring to the table. Some of the challenges I faced were intricately related to the nature of the field; Asylum applications are usually on a tight schedule, and it meant having a hectic workload, in supporting the research for the legal memos while making the time for outreach and preparation sessions, often on a short notice. It also meant being exposed to the often traumatic stories that led the refugees to flee and seek shelter in Greece. I didn't feel prepared to handle the extent of the gravity of stories I heard during preparation sessions or while doing research, as well as the stress that comes with the tight deadlines, and the responsibility that comes with translating information as accurately and understandably as possible to support such vulnerable groups of people. On the one hand, I think this helps me adjust my expectations of the field, and am now more aware that I need to tend to my psychological health. On the other hand,

the organisation did not alert me to what I would be exposed to and hadn't offered any type of mental health support, which made it really difficult to navigate this new territory on my own.

Other challenges were context specific; I lived in Greece, and the work culture was generally less punctual and more impromptu, which taught me to become more adaptable and quick to re-assess the urgency of my tasks.

Conclusion:

This internship with DCIG was perfect to prepare me for what comes next in my career, as it equipped me with personal and professional skills that are crucial. I have a more concrete idea on the migration and humanitarian response in Greece and in the southern European region. I also feel more confident in my ability to work in the field, and to actively help people. It also gave me a lot of internal insight on how the reality of humanitarian work can be. Although I was not working in a refugee camp, I still got to interact regularly with refugees and other vulnerable groups, and I was able to learn a lot from it. It also was very gratifying; every successful asylum application I assisted reminded me of why I want to enter this field. Moreover, I got the chance to live in Athens and experience a different reality, a different culture, and become attached to a new place. I was also sad to leave it because of the great feedback I got from my supervisor, but it's also a great encouragement to know that my mentor is satisfied with my skills. In conclusion, I'm happy to have taken this opportunity, because it has taught me more than I ever expected and I know it will open many doors in my academic and professional career.