First-year journalism students cut their teeth writing stories for iForum magazine

By Jan Velinger
September 20, 2018

De Monfort University in Leicester has cooperated for years with Prague’s Charles University within the Erasmus program, under which students apply to study in Prague in English or other languages for one or two semesters during the regular academic year. The summer months understandably offer fewer opportunities, given that students and staff largely have time off. Still, organisers decided something could be done to fill the gap.

What they came up with was a hands-on internship (now three years running) inviting first-year journalism students from De Monfort U to Prague. During their stay, participants get a taste of life in the Czech capital and at Charles University. Additionally, as budding reporters, they get a chance to work on original stories, broadening their reporting skills.

Ivana Herglová, head coordinator of the Erasmus program at CU, explains:

“The aim is for them is to write articles for the university magazine iForum. The reason why we invite them in the summer is because we cooperate with De Montfort University students of journalism under the Erasmus program. Regular Erasmus students write for the magazine from October until June. But over the summer there is a gap.

“The students who take part in the summer are those, who for one reason or another, didn’t study a semester or two under Erasmus but come for a shorter stay. This is basically another opportunity for them to see something outside of the UK and outside of their usual scope.”
Brian Dodds, a seasoned journalist and senior lecturer in digital journalism at De Monfort University, accompanies students on the visit as their managing editor. He told me that Prague offered an excellent opportunity for them to test skills they had learned in their first year.

“The iForum internship gives a structure to their learning experience here. They get a set of stories that they can go out and work on, stories that are important to the university and useful for iForum. And at the same time they can stretch their journalistic skills by interviewing people and writing stories which are then published.”

“The thing to realise is that some of them are abroad in a foreign country about which they know nothing for the first time, so it can be a little frightening and nerve-wracking. So it is about giving them guidance but also giving them freedom as well.

“They have to build on the lessons and course work they completed in their first year; the idea is to approach thing as closely as a professional journalist would. Married in with that, is their enthusiasm and ambitions and tailoring that into practical projects that they can do, rather than this great ‘I want to change the world with this one piece I am doing now’.”
I met with the group of students as they began their stay: Jessica Varia, Jacob Moseley and Nakisha Cazley told me why they had signed up for the internship as well as what they liked about their chosen field.

Nakisha: "I was just really interested in travelling and doing this internship abroad and I am interested in media and I want to be a presenter. I really like the idea of just being able to get out there and speak to lots of different people. I think that would really suit me, yeah."

Jacob: "I started with sports journalism, my interest in sport was rooted from the start. But then I changed course and began to study journalism more broadly. I was no longer sure that sports journalism was all I wanted, so I took a broader course. I thought that having a broader perspective would be worth it."

Jessica: "A few years back when I was doing my A levels, I got really interested in communication and culture which is similar to media, as well as English. I think that writing stories, finding potential news articles, just really interested me and I thought that overall this was a direction that I really wanted to go into: having my own opinion but also letting others know what is happening in the world, really.

“One of the stories I am looking at is how Charles University during the summer break offers a translating course. What I hope to do is interview one of your students who I believe is combining Czech and French. So I want to ask her what made her choose Charles University and uni in general, how she likes the course and her hopes for the future.”

Nakisha: "I will be talking to students who are doing Slavonic Studies. So far it hasn’t been that straightforward: our first tour didn’t leave me enough time for interviews but once I catch up with the people I want to talk to, I think it will go more smoothly and it should be easier.”

JV: You are looking at a story about a controversial ban on cycling in parts of the historic centre...

Jacob: “Yes. It’s hard to enforce a kind of ban like that. Other solutions are also possible such as speed limits, but I am not sure if speed limits are really heeded by cyclists. Just walking through Prague, this is a city with many different types of traffic, cars, trams, all fighting for the road.”
Charles University’s Ivana Herglová points out that students receive support and guidance not only from their accompanying teacher but also from her and other local staff:

“We try and help them contact suitable interviewees. So this year we have a student interning with us in translation studies so we thought she could be interviewed. Last year, we had articles by students about the Erasmus program – one who took part and the other who didn’t. It was an important year for Erasmus, also, because we were marking the 30th anniversary of the program.”

Organisers want visiting students to experience more than the Czech capital: getting to know the country and its people better, requires leaving Prague for at least one day, if not more.

“Not just one student but four people in the end went on the trip to Poděbrady as well as Brian Dodds as the supervisor of the group. This was great because normally many visitors wouldn’t get to visit a town like this. Usually they go to more tourist-oriented destinations such as Český Krumlov or Kutná Hora. Poděbrady is a spa town where Charles University has the Institute for Language and Preparatory Studies. Students who study there can then continue at any Czech university.

“So I wanted one of the students to write about what it is like to study there – in a castle. And they discovered much more: they went on a boat trip, visited a lake called Jezero (which means lake in Czech) and much more. So I am very happy they got out of the capital and saw something outside of Prague.”

Escaping Prague for a few hours can make a big difference. Ivana Herglová again:

“For them to go to a regional town, without so many tourists, where not everyone speaks English, where their bank card is not accepted everywhere, gives them a broader view of the country and that is very important. I would very much like this for my Erasmus during the regular school year, too.

“Often they come to Prague but then head for Krakow, Vienna, Budapest, but don’t travel very much in the Czech Republic. They often miss these smaller places which I think to a large degree make Czech people ‘Czech’. And they were able to sum it up in one of the articles.”

Jessica Varia and Nakisha Cazley said this about the chance to visit a prestigious university as well as one of the most beautiful cities in Europe.

Jessica: “I am a city girl, so I do enjoy all of the different alleyways and the architecture. It’s really amazing.”

Nakisha: “Being here is an incredible opportunity. So I am just inspired to learn as much as I can. Everyone from Charles University has been very supportive. I had never visited here before and learning about Prague and its history is very inspiring.”
De Monfort University's Brian Dodds shares their enthusiasm and is glad that the summer internship offers something they would be unable to experience if they came just on their own.

“They are getting under the skin of Prague in a way they wouldn't if they were tourists. They are going deeper. The experiences of writing here, using their mobile phones, working in cafes, producing all this material on the hoof with no newsroom, is invaluable.

“Students who did the iForum internship with me in the past still talk about the experience – it's wonderful.”