Report on my Work Placement in Plymouth

I want to start out by saying that my work placement at the University of St. Mark and John in Plymouth was not only very interesting and helpful for my career, but also a whole lot of fun. Even though my initial search for work was rather disappointing, *Student und Arbeitsmarkt* really helped me out in the end. For many months I tried my best with speculative applications and consulted my parents' connections in England, unfortunately without success. Mostly, the English companies chose native speakers from their respective cities or did not have work for a student at all. When time started running out, I went to Mr. Johannes Hoch's office hour, who showed me a partnership programme with the Totnes European School. Even though it costs quite some money, I decided it was still a lot more attractive, compared with the fees other companies take for arranging a last minute work placement. Furthermore, it included housing, dinner and a very friendly and helpful staff, which helped me out with a few details concerning my travels. Therefore, I can recommend this programme as a last resort for students running out of time like me. After only a few weeks, I was offered a work placement at the University of St. Mark and John in Plymouth, which I immediately agreed to take.

My expectations for this internship were neither the greatest nor the lowest, but somewhere inbetween. Since I have only worked in journalism before, I was unsure about how quickly I would pick up on the library computer programs and the media department work, which were both part of my placement. I was also unsure about by English skills in practise, since talking to English native speakers had seemed more demanding to me than my presentations and seminar talks at the LMU. However, these concerns turned out to be unnecessary. I was introduced to all my tasks with great patience showed by my co-workers, and I barely had any problems talking with people with any kind of English dialect. I was able to learn the basic functions of the library computer programs very quickly, as well as the shelving and signature systems. I even got my first insight into the iOS and Adobe Photoshop in the media department called JAM (journalism and media). My positive expectations included improving my English speaking skills, making friends, further practise in working with others as well as an insight into the British culture and mindsets. These were fulfiled in every aspect, even though I am still not quite sure about my spoken English, but I will elaborate on this point later on in this report.
Since I study English in my final MA semesters, I barely did any preparation regarding my stay in England. Mostly, I planned on what I would want to see over there, and trusted on the skills I already acquired during my studies. The only workshop I visited was the pre-departure workshop of the Intercultural Project (ICP), which was very insightful and entertaining.

My tasks at work included a multitude of little things I could do for both the library and the JAM department. In the library, I would assist the counter staff, research self-evaluation methods for library service and put them into presentable form for meetings, shelf books, help my co-workers with everyday tasks, do surveys among the students and much more. In the JAM department, I was trusted to gather an academic format stock list of all the different kinds of media related books in the library, helped students and staff with camera work, helped recording the student news shows, did research about things like potential Erasmus partner universities and went downtown with the media students. My experience in research proved very useful, as well as my few media related qualifications. Also, my written English was important for the reasearch tasks, while the confidence I acquired during my studies presenting information in front of others was incredibly useful in general. Switching from my role and my tasks as a student to being on the other side of things in the university was smoother than I expected, and many of my skills translated quite nicely into work.

Most of the time, I had plenty of things to do, even though there were some slow days as well. The nature of university libraries is such that after exams or deadlines, there tend to be a few rather boring days for the staff. But since I switched between the two work places every week, I never felt really bored. The kind staff helped a lot there, and whenever there was a little downtime, they had a chat with me about all kinds of intercultural topics, which was a very fruitful thing to do in itself.

New things I learned during my stay include, apart from what I already mentioned above, the very basics and logistics of running a library, a relaxed way of working with university students, how to have good meetings, working smoothly with different "supervisors" instead of professors, and a whole lot more. Of course I also learned some very specific things, which will most likely not directly translate into my later work, like shelving books properly or taking and editing photographs. But one can never know for sure when certain experiences might indeed prove useful in the future.

The work placement was, apart from all its fruitfulness, incredibly fun. I had many occasions in which I would drift away into genuinely interesting conversations with my co-
workers and my fellow student friend from Italy, who also worked at Marjon's. The cafeteria food offered great variety and made lunch breaks a thoroughly fun way to try out English (or Indian) dishes, even if some still seemed weird to me. For example, there always was a massive pot of baked beans simmering, from breakfast time until the cafeteria closed, and a great number of students loved it, even just as a plain plate of baked beans in tomato sauce. Still, I was shocked about how quickly I adapted and actually enjoyed English breakfast, including fat-dripping sausage, scrambled egg and bacon. Another fun aspect of my work in Plymouth was that most people I worked with complimented me on my English and the way I quickly carried out my tasks, since as a student, compliments for good work are basically non-existent.

As for problems during my stay, there were very little. A little thing I was not used to was the lack of sound isolation in small, British houses. The way the rooms and doors were built, you could hear a needle drop outside of your room, which struck me as rather strange considering that the host father usually got up and showered at around 5 in the morning. However, this was just a tiny problem compared to how loving and social my hosts have been. Another very minor aspect was that most aspects of living were more expensive for me than back here in Germany, from food and drinks to bus and train tickets, which was, however, to be expected. Furthermore, you should definitely not visit Plymouth during February if you can not handle permanent cold winds and rain, even though the gulf stream makes it a little warmer than other places in Britain. Intercultural problems were very rare, and the only time I had to change subjects was when the conversation at the dinner table had somehow got to England and its stance towards the EU. I quickly found that many English people actually share Cameron's EU-sceptical tendencies, which so many on "the continent" think to be misleading and worrying. On a similar note, I met a few people who thought of Germany as a ruthless, stubborn force in the middle of Europe, trying to impose our financial politics on weaker countries. Still, most young people I talked politics with were very open towards me and "the continent".

My relationship with the colleagues was through and through fantastic, as both the more seasoned and the younger ones were interested and nice from the very first day. The Marjon staff included genuine hippies from closeby Totnes, young women at about my age, and former Royal Navy generals. The city of Plymouth attracts a wide range of the most different people, since it is both a port and university city at the same the time. Furthermore, the relationship between employees and supervisors seemed somewhat more relaxed and
personal than what I experienced in Germany so far. They listened to and considered all kinds of suggestions made even by me as a placement worker, and never came across in an unnecessarily authoritarian manner. After a few weeks Marco, a young Italian journalist, arrived at Marjon's, which meant I always had someone to spend my lunch brake with. Whenever I had questions regarding my tasks, even if they turned out to be rather stupid at times, my co-workers would take the time and help me out without ever getting annoyed by it.

My contact with locals outside the university was not the most extensive, as I was working most of the time. Most weekends, however, I got to go out to eat and drink in the great pubs of Plymouth with friends I made. I had very long talks with girls from Plymouth, Switzerland and Italy, and repeatedly went out downtown with a few different groups of friends I met in Plymouth. I also got to know a lot of older people there, since my hosts introduced me to some friends of theirs and took me to some events at their local church community. It was very fun to see the older generation do their classic British parties with haggis and Scottish dancing. My experience with English salespersons, bartenders and pretty much everyone I met on the run was amazing. Supermarket staff was incredibly nice, and everyone took a lot more time and seemed more kind than their counterparts in Munich (which might have to do with the fact that I was a foreigner there). Grown men and women greeting each other with "cheers mate!" seemed very down to earth to me, and especially in the university there was a perfectly open and inclusive atmosphere.

If anyone should consider Plymouth as a potential place for his or her work placement, I can definitely give a few recommendations. First, the University of St. Mark and John is a very welcoming and open environment to work in, and they won quite some prices for their great staff and inclusive policies. If you want to study in Plymouth, there are plenty of foreign students and events every year. Even though I was rather lazy when it came to sports, the university has its own swimming pool and giant gym. They also organise bus trips to different cities or places in Devon, which are incredibly cheap for students and work placement students. Since pretty much all bigger museums in England are free to visit, I can definitely recommend visiting the Plymouth museum and the art galleries in town. The only pub I remember by name is the Brass Monkey in very centre of the city, which was great. However, I can say that it is fun enough to just go out into the old docks at night, there are some very nice places to discover, for example an exquisite Himalayan restaurant near the Mayflower dock.
My accommodation was, as I already described earlier, conveniently arranged by the Totnes European school. The house was very small, like most houses in Plymouth, but perfectly clean and homely. My hosts picked me up at the Plymouth train station and were very caring. The lady cooked dinner every single day, ranging from traditional British dishes to Italian or Indian cuisine, which left nothing to desire. The house was quite close to my workplace, and it was a 20 minute bus ride both to the university and the city centre. Nearby, there was a little forest and a supermarket, which was nice for short walks. All in all, I can say that I was perfectly content with my accommodation.

I do not think that my relatively short stay in Devon qualifies me to write on the culture and ways of Britain, so I will keep this paragraph rather short. Furthermore, I already included some short observations about what I thought to be "the English culture and mindset" above. Still, I can say that all the people I met and heard about seem to be very humble, hard working people who know how to have a good time in that small city. However, I also noticed quite a lot of frustration with their government, mostly concerning the terrible state of the NHS. However, this frustration was not directed against the Cameron government, but much more against politics in general. Only a couple of weeks later, my feeling was confirmed when Cameron was re-elected. All in all, I never felt like people looked at me as a foreigner, and even less so confronted me with any kind of WWII grudge.

My spoken English definitely improved during my stay, since got to practise a lot both during work and on weekends. My German accent is still there, apparently, but I guess a slight accent is nothing to be afraid about. I learned quite a few new words by simply talking about everyday-life topics, like certain kinds of food or household articles, which you barely ever come across in university lectures.

Working abroad changed the outlook on my career in so far that I became more confident. I am currently writing my MA thesis, so there is little influence on my studies, but I can surely say that this great working experience helped with the anxiety of an almost-finished English student. Even though I do not see me working in the university, the fact that I managed to all the tasks I was given quickly and got along well with my bosses and colleagues helped me having a positive outlook on my career.

To sum up, I found that my work experience placement in Plymouth really helped me in a number of things, ranging from language to self confident and cultural education. The cherry on top was the fact that I met a lot of nice people and had a great time.