

BADEN-WÜRTTEMBERG-STIPENDIUM

SEMESTER ABROAD

Personal Experience Report

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I hereby agree to my personal report being published on the websites of the *Baden-Württemberg-STIPENDIUM* (www.bw-stipendium.de) and of the Baden-Württemberg Stiftung (www.bwstiftung.de).



PREPARATIONS FOR THE STAY ABROAD

During the past three years, I was eagerly seeking new opportunities to study in one of the best partner universities in Germany until the moment I noticed an announcement at the home university website for Baden-Württemberg scholarship notification forwarded by Hochschule Offenburg which became my favourite after knowing that it is supporting international students extensively and it also offers courses being conducted in English language.

I did not ponder this opportunity twice and I immediately began preparing all the required documents which took me a week as I had to obtain an approval from the dean of Faculty of Engineering at home university and two recommendation letters as well.

The application process took longer time than expected at home university due to deterrent and inconsiderate treatment I received from the Office of International Relations despite the fact I submitted my full documents early. However, the application process from the host university side went smoothly since the procedure was accomplished online in a step-by-step kind of way via BWS-World Portal as well as Mobility-Online (portal of the host university). Subsequently, the application got managed by the International Office in Offenburg that never failed to give kind and immediate help regarding the application and general questions on the exchange.

A few weeks later, I received a definite approval, which set things clear to go. Directly after that, I went to the German Embassy in Kuala Lumpur to apply for the D-type Visa since the application had to be done personally. However, the visa application submission could only be made by a prior appointment via the Electronic Appointment Management System which took a couple of weeks due to the high volume of applicants. At that time, the preparation process felt like a bit of a hassle, but in retrospect it is all part of the experience. The visa process was like a nightmare indeed. Months passed and I counted the days, sleep was evading me and nor did I feel hungry. The only thing that I had been waiting for was the visa approval. The butterflies of the trip multiplied in the stomach but at the same time, tension was getting to its boiling point.

Eventually, I received the visa approval notification by e-mail from the embassy right after I had just finished my last final examination at the home university. I immediately booked my flight to Frankfurt on the same day because I was behind the semester schedule at the host university by two weeks. I was feeling totally excited for the new experience that was waiting for me. I was pretty much on cloud nine and much energized forward looking with high spirits. I had an unusual feeling within me and I was psyched up for Germany which meant the

very first time in Europe, learning new cultures, meeting new people and at the same time enjoying my stay after two stressful weeks of exams.

Furthermore, Hochschule Offenburg runs a buddy program for helping new incoming international students during their initial days. My buddy and I were already in touch via e-mail long before I arrived in Germany and she was very helpful and friendly.

I arrived in Germany at 10 O'clock in the morning after 18 hours of flight to Frankfurt Airport. I then took the high speed train ICE to Offenburg station where my buddy tutor was already there waiting for me as we had pre-arranged our meeting to pick me up to the students residence hall by bus.

STUDYING IN THE HOST COUNTRY

Being an undergraduate student, I was fortunately able to select courses from the International Master Degree programme offered by the Faculty of Mechanical and Process Engineering. All courses I took were held in English language where, unfortunately, only very few German students were attending. Interestingly, one of the courses was just discussing on topics that I am currently working on during my internship. Offenburg Campus is small surrounded by a mesmerising grass field, thus the facilities are limited as well. However, the buildings are quite new and refreshingly modern and well-resourced with technical equipment. The library is new and always offers more spots and has many interesting books. The people in the international office are super friendly, always supportive and quick in answering questions. Academics are generally fine, in a sense that workload is manageable. In terms of module registration, Moodle is an online tool for registration where materials are uploaded by professors. Exchange students would have to submit their modules by paper to the international office. However, the exam registration is not automatic and must be made online via another online system.

The courses I attended were demanding, but the structure and syllabus turned out to be very appealing to me although I spent quite some time catching up the classes I had already missed during the first two weeks. The classes were small with just a handful of students which also made them more interactive.

The professors are experts in their own fields, and they have good references but most importantly they are passionate about teaching and are friendly with students. The quality of the lessons and the assistance of the host university have been excellent at all times.

The assessment and evaluation of the courses was based on written final exams at the end of the semester.

Most of my classmates were master's degree students and were diverse and hail from all walks of life, rarely students will hail from the same country as another. The multicultural atmosphere is additionally complemented with all the international students who spend their semester abroad at Hochschule Offenburg.

All the activities organized by the International Office have been good opportunities to get to know new people in multifaceted environment and to explore the local region (such as the Black Forest and the Ortenau). The Culture Programme consisted of some amazing events like WorldCafe'-once a month event- where students get the chance to practice their desired language in addition to the International Evening where international students have the chance to present their home countries and cultures. Moreover, the excursions to Alpirsbach in the heart of Black Forest as well as Constance Christmas Market were incredible. I was amazed by alluring landscapes, countrysides, lakes, mountains and picturesque towns along with the very good quality of local beer that I really enjoyed. Most importantly, the snow excursion to Oberstdorf in Bavaria was the highlight of my semester as we spent two days full of stirring fast-paced sleigh rides, fun snowsports activities and an unusual atmospheric torch walk at night.

It was such a rewarding experience filled with unforgettable memories. I made good friends, I expanded my network, I learned about German culture apart ,of course ,of the learning acquired in my area of studies.

STAYING IN THE HOST COUNTRY

Before arriving, the host university offered me a buddy programme that really helped me to adapt in the new environment easily. My buddy was a full-time German student who guided me to the dormitory, which is located next to the campus and showed me around the City Center.

My first impressions were very positive, everything seemed to be very shipshape and was surrounded by beautiful scenery but the weather was very cold for me since I had left an equatorial country located in South East Asia being hot and humid throughout the year.

It was a thrilling experience being in Europe for the first time, in a country absolutely different to the countries I had visited before, and with a language that I was not well acquainted with, that was indeed quite challenging as Germans spoke rather quickly with a strong accent. In fact, I learned some basics in German online before arrival because I knew that I would miss the four-weeks intensive German course which was arranged in September by the host university.

My first week in Offenburg was exacting as I had to register myself with the foreigners' office in Offenburg, open a bank account, obtain a German health insurance and complete my courses' enrollment at the host university whilst trying my best to utilise some basic German words.

Offenburg is a small city located in southwest Germany and a very gorgeous one having unique heritage and stylistic old constructions at the foothills of the Black Forest. The city is surrounded by forests, stunning landscapes and green hillsides. The town is marked with homes built in the classic European architectural style.

The city-life is very quiet and around 7pm in the evening, most of the stores in the City Center are closed, and on Sundays everything is closed.

Before I came, I was a bit worried because I heard that Germans are serious and unsmiling people. Although one should be very thorough not to overgeneralise this kind of perceptions, most German people are very polite and quite reserved. It is difficult to become their friend, and it takes time but after a while if they know you, you will basically realise that they are very nice people. To get in contact with them during the week is not that easy but they become more flexible and willing to talk on the weekend while partying.

One of the big differences between Germany and my country is that, in Germany, people care more about environmental protection, separating garbage and recycling, using the public transportation and car sharing.

The Christmas Market and snow were those moments I was so badly waiting for. When it eventually snowed, it drove me nuts. I walked outside and made all those snowman, and fought with snowballs together with other snow first-timers. I thought that I would freak out in the cold weather but it was not so. I was so dazed to not have fallen sick at all and I did not even catch the slightest of cold.

During the weekdays, my schedule was really convenient and I always had lunch in the Mensa at the campus, enjoying the local cuisine, and I also tried a few times some local German restaurants. In weekends, I made some unforgettable trips with some of my classmates to nearby cities such as Freiburg, Titisee-Neustadt, Konstanz, Colmar, Strasbourg and Basel wandering leisurely and exploring a bit more of Europe. These experiences are just not possible to be expressed in a few lines. I got to know about the architecture, history and culture of these places. New flavours of chocolates and cheese are also in my sweet memory list. In February, I attended some celebrations of the recent Carnival festivals in Offenburg and in Florence as well.

NETWORK OF THE BADEN-WÜRTTEMBERG-STIPENDIUM

BWS-World Portal was truly useful to contact other scholarship holders, alumni and the regional chapters. In fact, it allows users to register for new events, access to news, galleries, articles and announcements made by the foundation and the regional chapters, and to communicate within BWS community via messages.

BWS network is diverse consisting of incoming and outgoing students from around the world to connect with one another.

I attended the 2016 Annual Meeting that was held at the University of Tübingen under the slogan „Shaping the world of tomorrow“ which gave hundreds of new students the opportunity to become „global citizens“ for the day. There, I had the chance to meet tens of brilliant scholarship holders from all over the world and we went for the City Rally around the city of Tübingen to learn about some of the leading research institutions and visited a couple of museums. I was also involved in a practical workshop titled “MIGRATION UND INTEGRATION” where we discussed in groups about the most important challenges and solutions of migration worldwide. It was such a gratifying experience to hear and share different perspectives based on own-experiences from various backgrounds. That day was wondrous ended up with a delectable dinner.

Moreover, I took part in Regional Chapter Freiburg ‘s excursion events such as Historic City Tour in Freiburg and Snowshoe Tour in Feldberg.

These impressive occasions enabled me to make new friends from different countries and backgrounds and to celebrate our diversity.

PRACTICAL TIPS FOR FUTURE SCHOLARSHIP HOLDERS

Exchange Semester at Hochschule Offenburg has been a great opportunity that I truly recommend to everyone.

You have a possibility to get to know people from many cultures, participate on high-level courses in your own field, try different kinds of food and travel around Europe to get a genuine taste of European life and experience the bits and pieces of it. Attending the German intensive programme before the semester begins is highly encouraged as Hochschule Offenburg arranges a series of German-intensive course that targets at learners of various levels of proficiency from starter to advanced speaker.

In my opinion the best way to get to know new people is to staying in the Students Hall of Residence—and it is also a good option from an economical point of view because the prices of rental private apartments are quite high. The atmosphere in Sankt-Martin dorm is very good and people are very friendly. Such interaction is facilitated by a common kitchen, so it is always easy to have good time with friends. Participation inside the class is what is expected from you and other students as it is the best way to enhance your learning.

Concerning the cost of living in Germany, I would say that the financial support/scholarship is highly important.

Moreover, you do not need to buy a lot of jackets before leaving your own country because you could buy better winter clothes at a much lower price in Germany. Besides, it is important to apply for the visa as early as possible. In my case, I got my visa just on the same day of my flight. This really made me lose weight due to the bureaucracies.

It can feel chaotic at times, and bureaucratic (especially when it comes to your permit of stay or anything administrative), but Germany is certainly worth it.

It is also necessary to note that there is a lot of hard work and determination required from students going on exchange but the end-result is definitely worth it.

Students who wish to apply for a dormitory are required to apply early so I, personally, applied for the Sankt-Martin-Strasse Dorms due to the basic rules and policies. Most importantly, everything is accessible by bus, bike or by walking. The residential building is very well located, close to the university campus and to a supermarket, with a bus stop just around the corner.

I was offered a single room in a four-rooms apartment which was furnished and had all the basic amenities that are needed. The building mainly, consisted of other German and international students, therefore it means cooking some meals with others and some house parties.

In this building, I had the opportunity to meet and spend time with other German and international students from different majors.

In fact, the person who leaves for an exchange is not the same person that returns. An intercultural experience of such a length changes you in a positive way. After you come back from the exchange and as you sit down reflect, share your experiences with friends and family, the feeling that you get is remarkable.

Not everyone gets this sort of opportunities in life and once you have it, make certain you grasp it well.

If exchange students are going to be your main friends group, get involved with the host nation’s people in some way or form. It is natural that exchange students are going to get along with each other and stick together, but if you do not get out and mix with the Germans, it is a lazy effort. It is not only rewarding but very eye-opening to make some buddies from the host nation.

Offenburg prides itself on its history dates back to the Middle Ages and I would describe it as a shy city because you have to get to know it well and a good way to integrate into the German lifestyle.

Obviously it is useful to get a grasp of the language before arriving Germany because a lot of Germans do not speak fluent English.

For example the insurance company, post offices, restaurants and supermarkets primarily use Deutsch and rarely know a little bit of English. It is no secret that the best way to learn a language is to move to the country so you are entirely immersed in it, you have no escape so you learn it or you starve.

Getting to know different cultures, making friends and seeing new places was a phenomenal experience and I only wish for everyone to make the same experience and still it will be so much different.

There is a lot to do in Baden-Württemberg; the innumerable sights, monasteries, museums, theaters, galleries, restaurants, bars and clubs take more than a semester to explore. Many of the attractions in Europe offer discounts for university students.

You can obviously rely on any decent travel guide for sights and activities. It is very useful to get acquainted with International Student Handbook available on the website <http://incoming.hs-offenburg.de/en/exchange-students-and-special-programs/> containing all the necessary information concerning academic information, campus, paperwork, housing, cost of living, touristic information and other tips.

PERSONAL CONCLUSION

Throughout this exchange semester, I have not just created beautiful memories, I have also shown myself what I could achieve if I put my heart and soul into it and that made me realise I can do much more than I ever thought was possible. My objective for this exchange opportunity was to gain knowledge of a different culture in the Western world and to build up a personal and professional network.

The whole semester opened many opportunities to me, a lot of people I got to know and value, fantastic towns to explore, a culture to be fond of and an academic impulse, which granted me a broad learning experience than I could have imagined beforehand.

It is daunting to move to a new place, with no friends, strange sights and impressions but if there is one thing I have learned is that change brings more positivity, it brings opportunities, it brings new experiences and it always moves us forward.

Moving to a new country and getting immersed in a new education system has really got me feeling positive so I thought therefore, while it is fresh and real, it would be pertinent to sing the praises of studying abroad so here are a few reasons why it is such a good choice. Every day becomes an adventure, it shakes up the status quo and suddenly every meal time, every shopping trip, even every bus and train ride is an adventure. You will go to festivals you did not know existed before you came. You will eat delicious food that you cannot even pronounce the name. You will be blown away by the hospitality and welcoming nature of your new country, prepare to open your mind because it will change you in ways you cannot imagine.

After my semester exchange, I continued my travel to explore other glamorous cities in the nearby European countries where I had massive and fun adventures. I have never expected to have seen so much of Europe.

For me, the decision was spontaneous while I certainly sacrifice, I loved travelling this way. It was flexible and exciting and made it easy to fit in with people I met along the journey. One of the motivations behind my decision to travel around is that I did not have to apply for any visa since it is free to move within Schengen Area. Thus, I visited some incredibly spectacular places including those located in Berlin, Paris, Venice, Florence, Vienna and Budapest.

These impacted me tremendously as I have become a lot more open to new things and a world bigger than just my comfort zone which helped me to further understand various ways of living.

Having the opportunity to travel overseas has given me greater awareness of my own national identity. It has also allowed me to widen my perspective and become self-reliant. I am now always thinking about things from a broader point of view and I am more able to adapt in any new environment. My world has been expanded significantly and with it I have expanded as a person. I now have connections all over the world.

Travelling has given me a sense of wanderlust feeling as if I need to be in a career that allows me to work anywhere in the world. A journey of self-discovery and personal growth. I have gained more experiences, and self-dependence within this duration than ever and never regretted anything.

This exchange was one of the most rewarding experiences of my life so far and has completely enriched my university experience. It helped me to figure out what I want to work with in my future career, because we did so many applied things and I enjoyed learning in this friendly environment. Not only the country or the university, but the programme itself helps you to be more open-minded and curious about current global issues.

I now know how to develop my own strategies to solve different situations and I see myself working in an international context in the imminent future.

I cannot encourage anyone enough if they are thinking about doing an exchange at Hochschule Offenburg.

Studying abroad will change your perspective of many things and it will teach you to socially interact, learn a different language and make good decisions in your future based on the experiences you have reaped of other people and yourself. I think I put presently the basis for that.

Although my stay in Germany was for five months, time flew by in the twinkling of an eye. This phenomenal international experience shaped part of my character and changed my perception of life.

The unforgettable memories and impressions I had there will always cherish forever.

Lastly, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the Baden-Württemberg Stiftung for the generosity towards my educational pursuits which would not be possible without scholarship sponsors such your noble foundation. I am also thankful for the International Office of Hochschule Offenburg for their kind support.

Thank you for enabling this opportunity !

I am looking forward to returning to this beautiful country soon. More fun-filled times with loads of entertainment, and more challenges.