



Erfahrungsbericht

Programmlinie: Studierende

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- Hiermit erkläre ich mich einverstanden, dass mein Bericht auf den Internetseiten des Baden-Württemberg-STIPENDIUMs und der Baden-Württemberg Stiftung veröffentlicht werden darf.

Study Abroad: My Semester in Germany

I first heard about the student exchange programs from attending the Study Abroad Fair at my home university (NMMU); it was fascinating to hear about all the possible places around the world where one could go and study. As an academically-minded person, I'd always dreamt of one day being able to live and study in another country. It appealed to me on many levels, from experiencing a totally different culture and way of life, to the learning opportunities afforded of studying at an international institution.

Of course, being an engineering student, I did not hesitate in my decision of where to study; Germany's reputation as an engineering and technological leader are well known, and although I did not know any German at the time, I saw this as a great opportunity to learn a new language, rather than as a language-barrier. Indeed, while applying for the exchange program, I began German lessons at my university, which helped a lot in preparation.

In terms of selecting which institution to apply to, the NMMU International Office was very helpful and informative in everything regarding the exchange programs. Looking through the list of German partner institutions, Hochschule Reutlingen stood out for me as a highly internationally oriented, strongly academic, institution, and with its diverse international programs, I was sure that this was the place where I wanted to study. During the semester prior to leaving, I also met a student on exchange from Hochschule Reutlingen. We had some classes together, and he assisted me with information about the city, university and engineering classes.

After being accepted to go on exchange for the 2013/2014 winter semester, I was so excited I couldn't actually believe that this was happening. Though there was a lot to organise, I received all the help I could need from the international offices of NMMU and Reutlingen. As the day of my departure drew near, my excitement was mixed with a certain nervousness at the prospect of being so far from home for so long. Fears set aside, I packed my bags with all my warmest clothing and, hopefully, everything I would need while I was away, said goodbye to my family and friends, and let the adventure begin.

I arrived in Reutlingen in early September, prepared for what I thought would be months of cold weather, but was instead welcomed by sunny blue skies and intense summer heat. This was quite surprising, though it would soon make way for the rain and cold of autumn and winter. I was also very lucky to meet up with my student4student friend from the previous semester, as I almost got lost trying to find the university, and he showed me to the Reutlingen International Office (RIO)

RIO was extremely organised and helpful upon my arrival, and pretty soon I was settling into my dorm room, which would be my home for the next few months. Not used to really sharing a room, I was a little apprehensive at first. However, after meeting my roommate, we got along well from the start, and have since become good friends. In hindsight, sharing a room was a much better way of getting out of one's own comfort zone and meeting new people.

Since the semester only began officially in October, I spent the first three weeks in Reutlingen attending the university's Pre-semester Intensive German Language and Culture Course. Right from the welcoming evening through to the final exam, this was an

unforgettable experience. I met many fellow exchange students from all over the world, had a great language refresher, and learnt about the local German culture and life. On top of that, the RIO arranged several special excursions; besides a tour of the city of Reutlingen, we were very fortunate to visit the picturesque and historic cities of Heidelberg, Konstanz and Tübingen, as well as Burg Hohenzollern, which was truly breathtaking to behold.

The time spent on campus was also a great way to become familiar with the university before the start of term, so that everything went smoothly once classes started. The campus itself was quite developed, yet still scenic. Despite it being a lot smaller than my home institution, there was so much atmosphere, friendliness and student life, with everything within walking distance, that it actually gave the impression of being much larger.

Due to differences in course structures between those at Reutlingen and at my home university, I did have some initial difficulties in choosing my classes, though they were soon sorted out. I was intrigued by the registration system, whereby students need only register for the exams they wish to take, during the course of the semester. This differs sharply with institutions in my home country, where one is required to register for all classes prior to the start of the semester. Another thing that surprised me was the lack of tuition fees; besides the basic administration fee, attending the university was essentially free. To me this highlighted an important point - That people were actively encouraged, by the state, to gain knowledge and develop skills - which I wish others would follow.

Ultimately, I attended classes, and wrote exams for three engineering subjects. From Mechatronics I took Microcontrollers, and from Mechanical Engineering, Quality Management Systems and Design Methodology. Being standard lectures offered by the university's engineering department, these classes were taught in German. Though I had tried my best to be prepared for classes in a new language, they were still quite difficult in the beginning, but after much time spent reading and translating notes they actually became very interesting. Furthermore, the classes and practical sessions were a good way of learning and also for getting to know some of the German students.

In addition to my engineering subjects, I also took two elective classes from programs offered by the international office. One was a highly interesting class on semiconductor physics and technology. The second was a fascinating class on international business and the German automotive industry, taught by Professor Veit of RIO. This class was a dream come true, and incorporated excursions to several of the major automotive manufacturers in Germany, including Daimler, Audi, BMW, Opel and MAN. The opportunity to witness and learn about this level of manufacturing and organisation was simply mind blowing.

Besides the German language classes, which had regular homework and assignments, my other classes all seemed to focus more on the final exam, rather than on grades achieved during the semester. This was quite a shock for me, as the system back home was very different; all classes have frequent assignments and tests before the final exam. While all this work does help in learning the subject, I found that the slightly reduced workload during the term actually allowed students the time needed to learn more from the classes, and encouraged independent study.

Although my primary reason for going was indeed to study at a foreign institution, there was much more to the exchange program than simply attending classes. With so many students from all over the world, it was impossible not to meet people and make new friends. Life in the student dorms was like a melting pot of cultures, and many great times were had with friends in the kitchen area. The dorms themselves were very well equipped, clean, and organised, particularly regarding recycling duties, and perfectly situated between the university and nearby stores. The university also offered many different sports and activities, which were good places to meet new people; I tried out at the rock climbing, but really enjoyed the capoeira classes most, they were a lot of fun and a great way to exercise.

Reutlingen itself was a surprisingly active and bustling city, for its size, there was always something to do or see. The Altstadt, or city center, was very quaint, with its old architecture, traditional establishments, and market square. The highlights, for me, included walking (shuffling), down the narrowest street in the world, Spreuerhofstraße, and visiting the local hilltop ruins of Achalm, which afforded magnificent views of the city and surroundings. A particularly special occasion was attending a performance in the new concert hall, by an ensemble from the Berlin Philharmonic.

The city is also very well located, the popular cities of Tübingen and Metzingen were both only a few minutes by train, and made for some great day trips. Tübingen in December played host to a massive chocolate festival, with more chocolate than I think I had ever seen before. Metzingen, aptly dubbed "Outlet City", was a shopper's dream, and the first stop in searching for warm winter clothing. Only about 30 minutes by train was the regional capital, Stuttgart. I was fortunate to get to visit it several times, most notably in October for the Canstatter Volksfest, where as a group of almost 3000 students we celebrated the final evening of the festival.

As the semester progressed, it was time to explore a bit further afield from Reutlingen. I had made good friends with some of the Russian students in my dorm, and together we made a couple of excursions in the area. We were lucky to visit the cathedral in Ulm, though climbing the 162 meter stone tower in winter was quite cold. We also made a day trip all the way down to Schwangau in Bayern, where we visited the unforgettable Schlosse Hohenschwangau and Neuschwanstein.

Rounding out the tour of German castles included a trip to Schloss Lichtenstein, just south of Reutlingen. After the tour of the castle, we ate at a local restaurant, where I tried some traditional Swabian dishes, which I really enjoyed. I think Linsen and Spätzle became my new favourite dish, though the Maultaschen came a close second. I've always enjoyed trying different foods, and I especially liked all the amazing types of bread one could get, the Laugenbrötchen were particularly good.

I was totally unprepared for the festive atmosphere around the Christmas season. The markets were a definite highlight, with all their stalls, lights and decorations. Though it wasn't really cold enough for it to snow, drinking a mug or two (or three) of Glühwein was a great way of keeping oneself warm. As fantastic as the holiday season was, it just seemed to pass by too quickly, and suddenly it was back to class and preparing for the final exams.

During the course of my semester, I was amazed by the number of job and work experience opportunities there were for students, and really liked the university's system that each student must spend one semester gaining practical work experience. Though I was only there for one semester, I would have loved the chance to spend an extra semester doing an internship or work experience with a company.

I also attended the careers fair held by the engineering department, it was very interesting speaking to people from industry, and was nevertheless exciting to consider for future possibilities. In addition, I took part in the South Africa Workshop, for German students interested in going on academic exchange to my home country, and helped answer some of their questions about the country, my city and home institution.

I cannot even begin to describe how much I enjoyed every moment of my time in Reutlingen, and Germany in general. It was the experience of a lifetime, from getting to learn about German culture, learning a new language, and making friends and contacts all over the world. Regarding hands-on tips, I would say the most important thing was to just make the most of every opportunity that came my way. I found it very true, that one learns as much if not more outside the classroom, as there are so many opportunities and things to experience. While it is still important to take the classes seriously and to study, getting out of one's own comfort zone and trying new things was what made the entire trip so very special and unforgettable to me.

Finally, I wish to thank everyone who made this possible for me; the friendly and helpful staff at the NMMU and Reutlingen international offices, who offered much help and support every step of the way, in particular the respective directors, Dr. Jooste and Prof. Veit, for arranging this partnership between our institutions. And last but most importantly, I wish to sincerely thank the Baden-Württemberg Stiftung for their generous financial support during my stay. Without them, my dreams of spending a semester abroad would have remained as such; thank you, for making it all possible.

Jean-Gabriel Hartmann