

My Erasmus experience

Many students like me have thought about studying abroad at some point even before starting to apply for university. Then actually in your first and second year you start to research what universities you can choose from because you had enough to see the same 4 walls every day. My journey began in September 2012.

Early in my second semester of my second year I began to research the options I had. I definitely wanted to go somewhere in Europe with Erasmus exchange programme whereby they were financially supporting me with 370 EUR a month (it changes every year though), which was a great help in order to buy flight tickets and get basic things that you would need when you settle in. I had an option to go to USA and Brazil also, but it did not appeal to me as the costs were significantly higher than if you would go somewhere in Europe.

The choices of the universities were similar level of education as the one from Southampton, but most universities on offer were in Nordic countries like Norway and Sweden, which did not appeal to me because of the cold and higher cost of living. I choose in the end to go to Frankfurt, Germany as I spoke German and the cost of living for students was a lot less than many other alternatives I had. In addition Frankfurt was in the centre of Germany so I thought you could travel to different cities around Germany and beyond as it had good travel links to the rest of the country.

Besides Frankfurt was the only location that was on offer in Germany and I really wanted not just to speak German but also experience the culture and being one of the Germans!

So once you choose your destination you had to check if the courses on offer are in German or English. If they are in English, then there is no problem but if they are in their native language then you had to show some evidence that you speak the native language to a good standard either by attending one of the language modules or doing evening classes. In addition your grades had to be on average 2.1 in order for the department to feel confident in sending you abroad, so you might have to work hard during your first year in order to get 2.1, but in my case it was not a problem.

So after the approval by your department, you would have to register with the host university and apply for accommodation and my advice is always to stay in student dormitories because this is where you will meet other Erasmus students and you will be able to support each other and it is considerably cheaper than private rented accommodation. It is difficult though to find accommodation in Frankfurt, so always apply early in advance for halls. Otherwise you end up paying fortune living in private accommodation.

So once you chose your destination you have to think about the biggest issue moving abroad and that is accommodation where you intend to settle in once you arrive! This is particularly very important as you do not know how to exactly search for a student accommodation for a short period while you are abroad!

My advice would be always to apply for student halls in the host university because when you will live in halls, you will be able to meet other exchange students like yourself, which makes it more fun to hang out with people who are in the same situation as you. But you can also mingle with native students and this can be a good way for you to improve your language skills, especially when you speak poor host country language.

Once you decide to move to a place/country where you have little knowledge about their way of life, it is better sometimes to know some basics before you embark for your new adventure. Especially as you might be going on your semester/year abroad it is essential to prepare yourself as sometimes you might offend somebody by e.g. showing gestures that are classified as being rude in the host country and not in the home country.

What if you do not know any Germans in your city? Well how about you try get in touch one of the German societies within the University that often organises German themed events where you can explore the culture on your own or with your friends. They also often organise trips to Germany, which can prepare you well for your time abroad!

When you choose your destination, don't just think about the city itself and all the fun you could have, but you also have to think about quality of education that you will get.

Obviously to have fun is the most part when you are abroad. At least I had that idea in my mind, but when deciding which city I should go for, I wanted to attend a university that would be as good as or better than my university as grades during semester abroad counted towards my degree.

Only if you usually do a whole year abroad, your grades won't count towards your degree but you will still have to pass the modules and sometimes in their native language, which can still be difficult. But don't worry about it too much! Most universities have on offer many modules in English as well to ease up your life.

Another aspect is the grades which are different in the rest of the European countries. In Germany for example 1 is the best grade, so therefore conversion of the grades might influence your final grade back in your home country.

In my personal opinion the best universities to choose from are the ones up north in Scandinavia. In terms of rankings and quality the universities are really good, but the weather in those countries is known to be very harsh and this puts off many students.

You will also find out that universities where they actually pay for their fees get a good student support whereas the case with Germany the support for students is pretty low.

Therefore when people talk about paying fees, it actually does benefit you in many ways having a better experience at the end of your degree!

Once you are in Germany and especially in a small town, you might want to get out of there for a weekend to see a bigger city!

Frankfurt, where I studied abroad, is an amazing medium-sized city and there are lots of things to do and explore. Nevertheless after 2 weeks I got a bit bored and decided to get together with my friends. The best way to travel in Germany is by using the weekend group ticket.

When you decide about your exchange destination, bear in mind that being in the centre of the country has its advantages having it more convenient to travel to various places quicker and cheaper!

The places I can advise you to visit are Cologne, Hamburg and Berlin that are awesome cities with a lot of history and culture. Besides the big cities there are many small old towns like Marburg where you can see one of the German castles!

And this has been my experience. I hope you have liked it!