



2014-2015 Student Mobility/Exchange Program Returning Undergraduate Student Report

Host University: BTK University of Applied Sciences

Host Country: Germany

Faculty/Department at Host Institution: Photography

Semester: Summer 2015

Date of Report: Oct 14, 2015

1. OVERALL EVALUATION

How would you rate your exchange experience overall?

Poor **Excellent**
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Please explain your rating.

While the experience was good overall, I did have some issues finding housing (this seemed to be a problem for most other mobility students as well), and there was a bit of a language barrier.

Why did you choose this host institution? What key factors or issues influenced your decision?

Berlin is a booming city with an amazing art scene, and therefore I was very interested in being able to get too experience that. Photography is also one of the most popular visual work that's coming out of the city and I find their approach towards it to be rather unique.

What was the most meaningful thing you learned while studying off campus?

The one thing that took me completely off back was the attitude that people have towards life and work in Europe. While I've travelled in Europe before, being on vacation there is very different from working on a project. It's much more relaxed and laissez-faire, but at the same time there's an incredible amount of competition and potential in the city.

Please share a few of your most positive experiences and a few of the biggest challenges you faced.

2. PREPARATION

Flights: Try to fly from the States, it's usually cheaper and don't try to fly directly to Berlin, take and intercontinental flight, it's much cheaper. Flying on off days, or during off "peak" weeks is better, because the difference is startling.

Living: Being a Canadian citizen, I'd had almost no prep to do with regards to travel documents outside of making sure I booked my ticket for the correct dates. I would suggest that if you're doing an exchange with BTK, that you take a couple of weeks on either end to make sure that you have time before school starts to find a place to live as well as at least three weeks afterwards to wrap everything up.

Finding a place to live may take time, so either have something before you leave, or have time to look for places in person before school starts. BEWARE OF SCAMS! There's a lot of scams on websites like WG Gesucht, so be careful for anyone saying that they're out of the country but will mail you the keys or something like that. Try [this place](#), it's safe and they're usually really good for finding something within budget that's good.

While most of the places are nice, I would suggest something in the following districts: Wedding, Schöneberg, Kreuzberg, Mitte, Friedrichshain, Prenzlauerberg, Moabit, Tiergarten, Charlottenberg. And that you should maybe look into buying a two or three room flat to rent with other students, since there's a larger chance of finding something better and more affordable that way. Average suggested rent is: 450€ - 500€ (no more than 550€).

Res-permit: Try to get a residence permit before you go, since that make it easier to find a bank in Germany is that's what you'll do. If not look into your bank's European options/ cash withdrawal in Europe. But if you don't, you can always go to the nearest Bürgeramt early in the morning to get your permit after you find a place to stay. It usually takes a few hours, but depending on the country you're from, it's done within the day.

NOTE: BERLIN IS NOT CREDIT CARD FRIENDLY! MAKE SURE YOU HAVE CASH!!!

Food: I'm a big food lover, so yes the lack of "ethnic" food was a drawback for me, but being in Berlin, you get to try a lot of foods that you'll most likely come to love (DÖNER!!). If you've got certain foods you're unable to live without, make sure that you do your research about the availability before you go, since people tend to get confused when you ask for things like real-actual-Cheddar cheese. Also, if you're vegetarian, beware that produce and fruit is expensive, so maybe consider meat (or another country). On a plus side, there's amazing bier at incredibly affordable prices and no open container laws, so you can drown your cheese related woes in good bier.

3. ARRIVAL

Pickup: I had a friend pick me up from Tegel because I had a lot of stuff, so that wasn't a problem. However, Berlin has an amazing transit system, and usually you'll find someone nice enough to tell you the directions. If not, most times cabs will cost about 20-30€ and will get you to the place you're staying without hassle.

Arrival in Berlin: I got there with about a week to spare, but most of it flew by without my realising. If you've got a place to stay, then you're good with a week before school. If not, then try to aim for something between two – three weeks before your start your semester. The housing situation in Berlin is not a joke and you're going to have to put in some miles to get a good and affordable place.

Orientation: BTK had a helpful orientation, as well as a couple of students acting as mentors to help the students settle into the city and school. I think at the end of the day, it was a great thing for the students, since I personally sought them out on more than one occasion.

International Office: The exchange co-ordinator, Johanna Kunze, was super helpful and made sure that I was comfortable and had whatever help I needed. And in general, the staff was welcoming and accommodating.

4. ACCOMMODATION

Flat: I rented via Nestpick, and the flat I shared (with three other strangers) was great! It did leave a little to be desired in terms of lack of in door ventilation and the kitchen was equipped with the bare minimums, but it was definitely something that was good for someone living there for four months. There is a bit of a problem with housing in Berlin, so I had to spend about 10 days in a hostel looking for a place, but the host university, BTK, was nice about helping me out.

5. STUDIES AT HOST INSTITUTION

Level of academic difficulty and challenge: On a scale from one to ten, I would say about a five.

Time spent in class (# of hours per week): 15 hours

Time spent working on projects outside of class (# of hours per week): 30 hours

Studio-based work: YES, all my work was studio based.

Oral presentations (Individual and Group): There were two oral presentations, and one of the classes required weekly presentation of work.

Written assignments: Artist's statements, as well as concept statements and proposal about each project.

Interaction between students and professors: The interaction was good in general, and most people were very interested in learning about what I thought of the system there as compared to the one back home.

There was one class (and one particular instructor) with which I had some difficulty regarding professionalism in class and the boundaries between a student and a teacher (the instructor has had problem with several other students before and I'd gotten a lot of complaints from others in the class with me).

It really upset me that the instructor thought that she had the right to delegate the work to student without ever taking the responsibility to guide them, or ensure that decorum was maintained in the class. As such, there were several problems with incomplete work, late submission, inability to meet deadlines and general dissent among students.

The most troubling instance with me in particular, involved her screaming at me in the middle of class with other students present, for being "unable to manage the other students and make

sure that everyone's work was done one time" as well as "not fixing the mistakes that she [hadn't] pointed out the weeks before".

While the school overall was a great place to learn and for my to explore my own work conceptually, this one class really troubled me and was the result of more than half my stress.

6. SERVICES

Extracurricular: There were several "fieldtrips" organized by the international office's student mentors for exchange students, and it was great to be able to explore Berlin with the others.

Facilities: While I didn't really have much chance to visit the library, BTK does have (a small) one, as well as several computer labs for students to use.

7. COST OF LIVING

Finances: I got a bursary from OCADU, as well as OSAP, to go to Berlin, and as such, I didn't have to worry about the expenses quite as much. However, the trip cost a significant amount even with that and put quite a dent in my savings.

Cost of living: The cost of living is in general slightly lower in Berlin, as compared to Toronto, since rent tends to be much cheaper, and there's a generally lower day to day expenses, but certain things that I'm personally used (like fresh produce) to cost a lot more there.

8. EXPENSES

Exchange rate with host country: 1€ : \$1.41 (at the time of exchange)

Time spent in host country (month/year - month/year): 4 months

Expenses: I personally think that I spent more in Berlin, simply because I spent a bit of time travelling, as well as money on a hostel until I found a place to live. That compounded by the fact that food overall is more expensive there, was the reason Berlin ended up being more expensive for the four months I was there.

Please complete the following budget to give other students an idea of what they can expect to spend in the host country.

Basic Expenses in Canadian Dollars:

1. **Tuition and general fees (paid to OCAD U):** \$ 3225
2. **School supplies:** \$ 1500 (approximately)
3. **Rent or university residence:** \$ 700/month = \$ 2800
4. **Rent-related expenses:**
 - A) **Electricity/Water:** \$ 0/month

- B) **Telephone:** \$ 15/month
- C) **Cable:** \$ 0/month
- D) **Other (specify)** \$ /month

- 5. **Groceries or Meal Plan:** \$ 375-400/month = \$ 1500-1600
- 6. **Personal expenses (toiletries/cosmetics, etc.):** \$ 50/month = \$ 200
- 7. **Laundry:** \$ 15/month = \$60
- 8. **Transportation:** \$ /month = \$275
- 9. **Leisure (Sports, Entertainment, etc.):** \$1000
- 10. **Travel health insurance:** \$0 (international coverage from parents)
- 11. **Medical expenses in host country:** \$0
- 12. **Round trip plane ticket:** \$1700
- 13. **Travel/trips during exchange:** \$2000
- 14. **Student visa:** \$0
- 15. **Other expenses (please specify):** \$

Estimated Total Expenses: \$ 14,420 (approximately)

9. ADAPTING TO YOUR HOST COUNTRY

Culture Shock: Being Canadian, I liked to think that I was aware of the different way of living around the world, but there was a large part of the cultural behaviour in Germany that I was not prepared for.

Not only are people a lot more blunt, but there's a shocking lack of "un-necessary" politeness there. Most people don't help someone on the U-Bahn when they see you struggling with grocery bags. And the lack of in door ventilation put me off, given that I can't handle heat too well. The city is very old, and as such, there's a lot that goes wrong with the infrastructure (like not having hot water for weeks without reason or explanation).

But there's always things that are great, like the fact that food places and bars are open all night. Döner. Amazingly cheap beer. S-Bahn strikes making you take new interesting routes home on the daily. Post strikes that last a whole month (just kidding, that was horrible and I hated it).

Local Students: I got to meet a few local students, as well as several international students (not exchange students, but students in the international program). There were parties that I was invited to regularly that helped with getting to know people and finding out more about the city.

Unforeseen Circumstances: Other than the lack of ventilation, and the whole regular public strikes, the police was the one thing that completely took me off guard. I've come to expect a certain level of responsiveness and attentiveness from the police, and the fact that it doesn't really exist in Berlin was something that really made me upset. While it was had mostly to do with the fact that they didn't want to deal with someone who didn't speak German at all, the slightly rude and generally stand-offish behaviour was something that I don't think I could ever have prepared for.

10. ADDITIONAL COMMENTS:

Please email your report to Susan Kemp, Student Mobility/Exchange Coordinator, at skemp@ocadu.ca