



## 2015-2016 Student Mobility/Exchange Program Returning Undergraduate Student Report

**Student Name:**

**Host University:** Universität der Kuntse

**Host Country:** Berlin, Germany

**Faculty/Department at Host Institution:** Faculty of Design: Visual Communication

**Semester:** Summer Semester 2016

**Date of Report:** September 13<sup>th</sup>, 2016

### 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.**

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

I chose this institution particularly because it was highly recommended to me by the chair of Graphic Design when I went to speak to him about my plan to go on exchange. I wanted to go on exchange somewhere in Europe that offered classes in English (and I was very nervous about the language barrier but it is honestly not a big deal at all) but I didn't want the language barrier to stop me. I decided on Berlin itself as well because it was a city I had always heard good things about and there is just something about that city. I cannot really explain it to you unless you experience it yourself.

German/European design in general has always had such a huge impact to me as a graphic designer and I thought if I were to experience it first-hand it will definitely be such an amazing opportunity. I would develop a unique skill/design experience after giving myself the opportunity to experience both European and North American design.

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

I cannot express how much I ABSOLUTELY LOVED my time in Berlin. Four months was too short a time and I wanted to live there and not return to Canada. It was my first time moving away from home and it was absolutely terrifying because I was moving out into a new country that didn't speak my language. I remember the night before I was flying off myself for the first time to a

new country and I was having a mini panic attack. I couldn't sleep and I was just so terrified. I arrived about 2 weeks before school started so the first few days were quite depressing. I never felt so alone and homesick and I was crying quite a bit to my boyfriend and my family because it was a bit too much of a shock to my system I think, emotionally and mentally. Although I do have to say this whole experience has made me such a strong person I don't recognize myself anymore. I am a lot more confident and Berlin has taught me to deal with situations in a much more reasonable and rational way that I did before. I would say one of the most challenging thing was to deal with the government offices because it was quite confusing to get my papers (Registering my Address, Study Permit) due to the high rate of immigrants and refugees in the country at the time I was there.

I cannot express how much I loved the culture, the history, architecture, and life in Europe in general. Everything and everyone is a lot more laid back and relaxed and life in Europe was not as stressful as it is here (that might be because I have two jobs and is studying full time) and it is such a beautiful place to live in. I experience a bit of a culture shock (it wasn't my first time in Germany as I have travelled there before so it wasn't too bad) as the people may be a little bit too abrupt sometimes.

## **2. PREPARATION**

**Please describe your preparation for the exchange, including banking, travel documents and student visa application. In retrospect, would you have done anything differently?**

We had a family friend in Dresden which is two hours south of Berlin so my parents had connected with him and we opened a joint bank account with him. If you have a Canadian passport you just need to get a Study Permit from the Ausländerbehörde when you get to Berlin. You have 3 months to do this but I suggest getting it done as soon as possible. You do have to register your address when you arrive in Berlin but Ursula (exchange coordinator at Udk for Canada) was really nice and she provided me with all the information I needed. You would need to get travel insurance as well and I believe that is all.

**Are there any important items (e.g. art & design supplies, documents, specialty foods, health items) that a student should take to your host country?**

There are two major art stores people go in Berlin: Modulor and Boesner where you could get all your art/design supplies so don't worry about that. The food in Berlin is amazing and quite cheap compared to other European countries so do enjoy it as much as you can because I miss that so much.

## **3. ARRIVAL**

**Was anyone at the airport, train station, etc. to meet you? Did you experience any difficulties upon arrival?**

I was a little crazy and managed to take the public transportation (BVG) by myself from the airport to the AirBnB I was staying at. But it was just a little strange because I wasn't used to the subway station names and the pronunciation so I was very confused but there is usually a guy

selling tickets at the bus section of Berlin's Tegel Airport so he can help you find your way to your flat. You would have to pay 2.70 for a single ticket to travel on the BVG.

**When should students plan to arrive at the host university? When did you arrive? Would you have benefited from arriving earlier?**

I arrived 2 weeks before the school semester started so it really did help me get acclimatized to life, culture, and Berlin in general. It was easier to have the two weeks to just explore and enjoy yourself before school started. I definitely recommend it.

**Was there an orientation session offered at your host university? If yes, did you attend and what did you learn?**

I arrived in the Summer Semester so the orientation isn't like the big O-Day we have every fall. It was just for Exchange students and it was great because that was when I met all my friends from all over the world. I definitely recommend it. You can ask all the questions you need to know and meet all these wonderful and talented people.

**Is there a coordinating office for international students, including exchange students, at your host university? Is there a staff person you would recommend students approach with their questions?**

Yes, there is a coordinating office and if I am not mistaken Ursula Reiter's office is on the 5<sup>th</sup> floor of 43 Einsteinufer. It is in the international office and she is really nice as she answered all the questions I had. You would have to make an appointment with her to settle all the important school documents when you arrive so you would meet Ursula who was really understanding and was always available when I needed her help with anything.

#### **4. ACCOMMODATION**

**Where did you live during your exchange? Were you happy with your accommodation?**

UdK does offer international student dorms where you would meet a lot of people but I do not recommend it because of the living conditions. It is a bit dirty and messy and the bathroom/kitchen situation is a bit of a mess. That is just me personally as I visited the dorms a couple times and I didn't like it at all.

Initially I booked an Airbnb for 4 months but my host was doing it illegally and I couldn't register my address which is compulsory for you to get your Study Permit to stay in Europe for more than 3 months so that was a big issue as I was almost homeless. I had to find a new place to live within a week but I found a place with the best flatmate and landlady ever. The apartment was twice the size of the condo I live in here in Toronto and it was so beautiful and rustic it was perfect. My landlady/flatmate was a landscape architect and a Professor at the University in Postdam so she was often not at home and I had this huge apartment all to myself. I paid about 500 euros a month as it was in Charlottenburg so it was a little pricier but it was so worth the comfort and space and it became home. In fact when I returned to Canada I was homesick from that flat because I loved it so much! So I would say my first month with the Airbnb was quite

awful because of the stress but the rest of my time in that beautiful Charlottenburg flat was a dream!

**Did you have any difficulties arranging accommodation yourself? Did the host institution assist you in finding accommodation?**

I was very lucky to find my flatmate in one of the websites UdK had suggested I look for when I found out I could not stay with my Airbnb host. They will provide you with a list of websites but be VERY CAREFUL because there are a lot of scammers out there. I suggest doing this as soon as you can because you do not want to end up like me. Please make sure you ask if you could Register the Address. That would probably be one of the most important things about finding a flat in Berlin other than it having Wi-Fi (lol)

## **5. STUDIES AT HOST INSTITUTION**

**To better understand the similarities and differences between academic studies at OCAD U and at your host university, please comment on the following:**

**Level of academic difficulty and challenge:** Similar to OCAD mainly because I felt the professor at UdK did not provide as much feedback as some professors at OCAD do.

**Time spent in class (# of hours per week):** 10-15 hours depending on how many classes you are taking.

**Time spent working on projects outside of class (# of hours per week):** 4-8 hours depending on how many classes you are taking.

**Studio-based work:** Not much. Mostly in class critiques.

**Written assignments:** I had one written assignment for the museum class they offered there.

**Interaction between students and professors:** The students were friendly but you have to understand they much prefer to interact in German and sometimes they forget you don't understand the language. The professors could be a little friendlier in my opinion but again, it is the language barrier.

## **6. SERVICES**

**Were there any extracurricular activities/events scheduled for exchange/international students at your host university (cultural visits, trips, workshops, etc.)? Which ones would you recommend?**

There was a trip to Dresden which was a lot of fun and I definitely recommend it. During the semester there are a lot of fun workshops (mostly in German) that you could also attend. I also recommend this one Museum class where there is a prof that takes you to a different museum each week which was really interesting!

**What were the library and computer facilities like?**

I had a laptop so I was fine and I didn't get a chance to visit their library but I hear it is amazing! Depending on your core class, there are usually computers available for you.

## **7. COST OF LIVING**

**How did you prepare yourself financially for your exchange? Did you pay for the experience entirely out of your own savings? Did you receive student or bank loans? Did you apply for / receive any financial awards (scholarships or bursaries)? Did you have help from parents / family / friends?**

I received a bursary which covered my tuition for the summer and I used my savings and my parents also helped me out.

**In general, was the cost of living in your host country higher, lower, or similar to that in Canada? Please explain.**

I live at home so I am not too sure but I would say if you were working in Berlin the cost of living is really affordable there. It would be quite similar to Toronto I am assuming.

## **8. EXPENSES**

**Exchange rate with host country:** It was about 1.14 CAD equals to 1 Euro

**Time spent in host country (month/year - month/year):** I spent about 4 months in Berlin.

**Would you estimate that you spent more, less, or the same amount as an average, local student attending your host institution?**

I spent more because I did some travelling as well. And the CAD currency exchange rate was not the best.

**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):** \$3194
2. **School supplies:** \$200
3. **Rent or university residence:** \$ /month = \$730
4. **Rent-related expenses:**
  - A) **Electricity/Water:** \$ /month (Included in rent.)
  - B) **Telephone:** \$20 /month
  - C) **Cable:** \$ /month (Included in rent.)
  - D) **Other (specify)** \$ /month (Included in rent.)

5. **Groceries or Meal Plan:** \$ /month = \$130
6. **Personal expenses (toiletries/cosmetics, etc.):** \$ /month = \$50  
**Laundry:** \$ /month (Included in rent.)
7. **Transportation:** We pay the school about 250 euros to get a student metropass.
9. **Leisure (Sports, Entertainment, etc.):** \$N/A
10. **Travel health insurance:** \$200
11. **Medical expenses in host country:** \$N/A
12. **Round trip plane ticket:** \$1000
13. **Travel/trips during exchange:** \$300
14. **Student visa:** \$150
15. **Other expenses (please specify):** \$N/A

**Estimated Total Expenses:** \$3740 (without tuition) \$6934 with tuition

## 9. ADAPTING TO YOUR HOST COUNTRY

**Did you experience any “culture shock” during your exchange? How did you deal with it? Do you have any advice for students on how to adapt to life in your host country?**

Yes I did. It is Europe and not North America so certain things would be different. I guess you just need to have a good mind set about the situation and always remember to breath because everything will be alright at the end of the day. ☺ I just paused and took a moment to appreciate the fact that I had the honour to basically represent OCAD in Berlin.

**Was there a lot of interaction between local students and exchange/international students? What is the best way to develop friendships with students from your host institution?**

Yes and no. I spent a lot more time with the exchange students because we all were going through a similar situation. I would say just put yourself out there and don't be afraid to say hi.

**Did you have any unforeseen problems? Was there anything that you felt was strikingly different from what you expected? If so, is there a way that you could have prepared yourself?**

Just remember that you are on Exchange and there is always someone somewhere to help you. I got through all the minor problems because at the end of the day, think of it this way, whatever

it may be, when you look back at it after 5 months you would think why did I freak out so much over something like that because you will get through it. 😊

**10. ADDITIONAL COMMENTS:**

My experience would have been 10/10 if I was fluent in German. I definitely think you have to try a Currywurst, a döner and a Club Mate when you are in Berlin. Feel free to contact me if you have any questions whatsoever. I totally understand what you are/will be going through so I am so happy to help. My email is [samanthanicolegoh@gmail.com](mailto:samanthanicolegoh@gmail.com)

I also just wanted to say it is an experience I would never regret or forget and if you have even the slightest doubt about going on exchange: Just Do It. Like Nike. ;)

*Please email your report to Susan Kemp, Student Mobility/Exchange Coordinator, at [skemp@ocadu.ca](mailto:skemp@ocadu.ca)*