

## Evaluation of my Erasmus exchange

Overall my experience has been very positive and I would recommend everyone who is considering it, to go for an exchange program. This exchange allowed me to experience different style of teaching and expand my knowledge in areas Uni Wien rarely offers, namely political sociology, which is the theme of my thesis. It has exposed me to a different academic environment and student life, which has broadened my horizons.

### **ERASMUS ADMIN BEFORE GOING**

I started to think about the Erasmus program more seriously on the orientation day for MA Sociology students, where the administrators brought up this program as an option. However at this time, it almost discouraged me to do it, because it seemed that due to the organization of the curriculum plan, it would be difficult to do. I thought that they weren't able to explain well how it could fit into the new program, when would be the best time to go on Erasmus and to still finish within 4 semesters. Looking back, I think they were right especially if one works on the side. If I wasn't working on the side, I think it would not be a problem, but one has to make sure that the pre-requisites classes (MA methods) are completed before going.

The application was relatively simple and easy to understand. In the motivation letter I stressed the importance of the field of my interest, which for me personally was that classes offered at the faculty in Frankfurt were not available in Vienna. Personally I think, that as long as one can demonstrate some intent and motivation and is able to justify it why, then anything goes.

One part of the process before going, that was a little bit unfortunate, was the learning agreement. One needs to fill in the courses, which s/he intends to attend but in my case those change from semester to semester. So in the end, none of the courses I selected and filled out in my learning agreement were actually offered during the semester I was there. I cannot stress enough the importance of communicating with the Erasmus coordinator at your home institution to clear with them if they are eligible, how many credits would they have and how they would be recognized - in which modules. The actual list of courses for University of Frankfurt wasn't up until February since they start in mid April, so it was a bit nerve wrecking and last minute. The Erasmus assistant was very helpful and quick to respond, so it was no problem.

The process of approving and administering the Erasmus program is a little bit complicated especially because there are at least 3 institutions involved, but the website was clear enough and the International office at Uni Wien very helpful, so I didn't have any problems with that. They provided clear explanation of the process (gave it also printed out and went over it in person, to make sure it is clear), which also made the separation between the OAD and International office clear.

## **ADMIN AT GOETHE UNI**

My case and experience may be a bit unique because of my personal situation (I lived in different city than Frankfurt, seat of my University), but I will share it anyway, as some things may be applicable to more people.

In terms of administration at Goethe Uni, there were a few things that I didn't like before going. First of all, before my arrival they wrote me from the international office that they are not able to provide help with accommodation and that the semester fee is 304 Eur. Since I wasn't planning to live in Frankfurt, this was not a problem for me. But from my classmates I know that Frankfurt is not a cheap city to live in as it is a financial capital of Germany with many international institutions, which makes it hard to find affordable accommodation for students. I would have appreciated to be of more help to the international students who have no ties in the city.

As to the 304 EUR semester fee, as was explained on the website, this fee is for the public transportation in and around Frankfurt and not for the tuition. I wasn't able to take advantage of this service, as my train ticket from the city I lived in already included a free public transportation anyway. Based on the advice from International office in Vienna I tried to get this fee waived but my request was denied. I did not meet the specific criteria that would make me eligible for waiver that included that you are living too close to the university campus, but not if you lived too far ;) It is not a barrier for going to this Uni, just something to factor into your budget.

Another issue to factor in was the immatriculation of international students. It was allocated to only a few days, so one had to plan arrival around those dates. At the immatriculation they were extremely helpful with providing information for the administrative affairs. A visit to the Erasmus person at the Institute of sociology and political sciences was very helpful, but one needs to come prepared - ie with the list of courses and specific questions. They were very helpful with recommending number of classes and which courses go together well. They also explained the German system for registering - international students who don't yet have a student card, stg one receives about 1-2 weeks after Immatriculation (which is already when semester starts) cannot apply for courses online. The international student advisor recommended to email the professors directly, explain my background and express desire with reasoning why would it be good to have me in the class. The advisor informed me that certain classes limit the amount of students. In the end, I was able to get to all classes I wanted. They ranged from 5-45 students per class. The student card also gave you access to library, copy services and login codes that came along with it to Internet network. However, it was unfortunate that if one wanted to put credit onto the student card (to copy, to pay food at Mensa), one had to have a German bankcard with chip.

## **CLASSES AT GOETHE UNI**

Classes I chose at Goethe University were very interesting and gave me the depth that University of Vienna thematically doesn't provide - political sociology. I was also able to attend classes of a professor that completed her dissertation thesis in exactly my topic for MA thesis and political participation became her field of expertise. Additionally I was able to go more in depth into biographic research in terms of methods and research, which is what I will be using in my master thesis. University of Vienna also offers some biographic

methods classes, but these are offering a different perspective on the method as well as different focus, so it was very enriching. All in all I was very satisfied with the level of the classes and it met my expectations fully.

The only thing I would recommend before starting/ or at the beginning of the classes, is to clarify the required assignments one has to complete in order to get a grade and how many credits is the class (with the particular assignments) worth. Why? The German system allows students to just attend classes without writing final paper or giving oral presentation, which gives them attendance proof (teilnahmeschein) but not a grade (leistungsschein). In German system, they still count as ECTS credits, but attendance proof (teilnahmeschein) gets you less credits than the graded work (leistungsschein). On top of that Uni Wien has until the end of 2015 not been recognizing ECTS for classes without grades (teilnahmeschein). So in your own interest, please clarify this with Erasmus coordinator at University of Vienna and the Lecturer at Goethe Uni at the beginning of the class what are requirements so that your work is recognized when you come back.

In terms of difficulty, time spent at the classes or preparation for them, in my experience, they required more time than average classes in Vienna. As a compensation for that you also get more ECTS points. For every seminar (weekly) class I had to read somewhere between 30-50 pages and for colloquium classes (Master thesis seminars) I had to read exposes or chapters that were 10-15 pages long as we all had to provide feedback every single week. For seminar classes I had to prepare 1-3 presentations, some focused on theoretical concepts, some on case studies and some involved role plays.

Most classes that I took had the deadline for submitting final paper in October (3 months after the class finished) or later, since the summer semester ended at the end of July, but these can be different for each class, so make sure to specify that before class ends. Also I would advise to submit these paper before leaving and handing them to the professors personally, along with the form for grading international students. Most of my teachers had no experience with international students and so did not know precisely what the procedure was. International office at Goethe University knew the administrative procedures, but couldn't help answering questions about credits, so to get a final answer, it us up to the student to combine the information from the lecturers and the International office. I cannot emphasize enough that it is your own responsibility to make sure that you get your grades report to the International office. In my case it took very long to finalize the process of grading and submitting the final report of grades, so I wish retrospectively that I had submitted my papers way before the deadline, during the course/at the end of the course and overemphasized to the lecturers when I needed the grade and how to proceed.

## **SOCIAL LIFE**

Since my personal circumstances didn't allow me to stay in Frankfurt but in other German city, I wasn't able to participate at many of the Erasmus student activities organized by the IST, which is a student run organization helping the international students at Goethe uni. However I was included on their mailing-list and they organized many diverse activities that included trips or gatherings in and around Frankfurt at least once a week and invitations to events that were taking place at the campus. They were both academic and non-academic/social. I felt welcomed to join in anytime.