

I had first participated in a short-term exchange program during high school, which would turn out to be a highly impactful experience for me. However, both the limitations of a classroom context and the short timespan at my destination never allowed for much freedom to explore the country; right as I started feeling at home, it was already almost time to head back home again.

I set out for things to be different this time around. In order to allow myself the time to fully explore the country at my own pace, I made sure to finish my degree for the most part, leaving only the research for my thesis and its submittal to be done. In addition, I made sure I spoke the language spoken at my destination to a degree to which I felt comfortable communicating off the get-go, as not having done so prior to my first exchange was another mistake I had made back then. This prep work turned out to be a double-edged sword: While I did indeed end up finding much more time for various events at my exchange destination, as well as to find friends and spend time with them, I was not able to enjoy the academic setting that I am sure many seek to experience in a foreign country and wish to hear advice on how to navigate. I will try nonetheless to give as general advice as possible.

As an exchange was highly recommended by my department at Freie Universitaet, I knew early on both which universities would be available for the exchange and what steps to take in order to apply for a spot. I am very thankful for this, as the number of deadlines which would encroach during the eventual application process were nerve-racking at best and emotionally depleting at worst, leaving me on edge throughout. Applying for travel health insurance, heading to the municipal office for a visa... Having a clear roadmap on the steps to take, institutions to inform, and things to keep in mind was hugely relieving.

I had initially planned on applying to housing near my host university. However, since my partner decided to come along with me, we decided instead to look for an apartment in the middle of the two cities we would each commute to. Trying to find an apartment not terribly overpriced by virtue of being specifically marketed toward foreign students would

both prove to be challenging and also highly rewarding, as we ended up with a beautiful apartment on the outskirts, which was the exact environment we were looking for. It also proved to be a smart decision financially, as the apartments in said area were surprisingly affordable. Should you have planned on looking for an apartment in your host country, I can therefore not encourage you to do so enough; although I would bring some patience with me, as looking for the right apartment willing to take in foreign students might take time.

Finding accommodation may turn out to be the least of your worries; such was the case for me as well. A vital condition for the conduction of the research of my thesis, of course, would be access to the internet, which, while provided by my host institution, was not functioning properly for the first month of my stay here, despite having set up a contract with an internet provider preemptively. While the apartment was close to my host institution, it was not exactly within walking distance either. Light work on my thesis while at home trying to get settled in was therefore not an option for the longest time, as the internet connection at cafes in the area was middling at best. While we had made sure to verify whether international banking portals would work in transferring money to our landlord and wherever else necessary, it turned out that some institutions here only accept payments through a local account owned by the necessitor. As such, I had to set up a bank account as quickly as possible, a challenge exacerbated by the lack of banks allowing a short-term research student such as myself to do so.

With those initial hiccups out of the way, I was able to get started on the research for my thesis. Having known my main purpose for the stay here would be said research, I had to make sure to reach out to local professors willing to take me in as supervisors and who would help me get in touch with interlocutors. This initial process was very slow-moving, until at some point I hit my stride and was able to lay a good foundation for the work to be done while here. A huge regret for me personally is not having allowed myself the time to finish writing my thesis after coming back to Freie Universitaet instead. Even though I only took classes here voluntarily by virtue of not needing any more credits, trying to finish the entire thesis abroad turned out to be much more of a challenge than I

had initially thought, due to the many distractions that can arise from finding yourself making friends and participating in extracurricular activities. A third party deciding a schedule for you, or at least being in a situation in which you still need to acquire additional credits at your host university, may indeed make you feel as though you actually have more time on your hands than you would if you were to “only” have a thesis to finish. This, however, is largely an issue on my part and may well differ from your personal experience, so please take this advice with a grain of salt.

To many, getting to do an exchange through a program at Freie Universitaet is a large motivator in pursuing their studies and as such, it also symbolized a dream of mine long in the making. However, it also marked the end of a chapter in my life as I approach graduation, which is a bittersweet... mostly bitter feeling. I greatly enjoyed my time here, to the extent that I looked into options to extend my stay or look for permanent solutions on more than one occasion. Now being faced with the reality of coming back to Berlin with an uncertain future ahead, I can only count myself lucky to have gotten this opportunity to cap off said chapter in this fashion. I am thankful to both Freie Universitaet and my host university for this opportunity and would encourage anyone to take this step.