

Exchange semester at the sunniest place of Germany.

I have spent 4 months, September till December of 2015 in the warmest, sunniest place in Germany, and it was not a resort. The place is called Mannheim, located between Frankfurt and Heidelberg, about 500km away from Rotterdam.

Preparation wise - there were a few things to get straight. Once accepted for a program by ESE, I had to fill out a few online forms at the Mannheim University website. Some time later, with the authentication details received I could simply follow the instructions published online at the student's portal. The details were in abundance. One may find there everything about how to register yourself for Uni's provided accommodation (which I did not choose), when and how to apply for the courses, where to go and what to be prepared for upon arrival. Do pay special attention to the timeframes on various courses applications as well as certain seminars registrations. The most interesting courses are filled up within minutes, hence make sure you know exactly when the count begins (online). Fortunately, the administration, as well as the teachers happen to be all very humane in allowing late registration. Do not hesitate to contact anyone by phone, email or in person. International Office of Mannheim University is all extremely helpful in every question one might come with.

There is a collection of cultural/language courses available, split by the level of student's German language skills. One is expected to cover a modest registration fee of EUR 15 per course to attend those.

A few things one must consider prior to getting the suitcase ready.

Visas. An exchange program is a four-month endeavour, hence, unless you are the EU citizen - a German student visa and a consequent residence permit covering the entire period are a must. The latter requires an application (see the German consulate in Amsterdam for the papers necessary) plus at least 6 weeks of considerations period. The visa must be collected in person.

Medical insurance. The insurer must be German or, in case of an international coverage (non German) - that must be certified at a special desk at the premises of Mannheim Uni. Fortunately - this can be done on the spot.

Accommodation. Rental is relatively inexpensive in Mannheim compared to Frankfurt or Munich. However, the location and timing are important. One may get a decent studio for 500-600 eur a month or less if shared with other students. Renting a place for 4 month only can be tricky in Germany, as most of the landlords prefer a year contract at least. However, there are plenty of local students willing to share, better still - some might reside in a different place for their own internships/exchange programs. It gets more expensive should one choose the districts like Lindenhof. It is in a great proximity to Uni, yet calm and green place to live. As I have started my house hunt late in the "season" - the obvious, and perhaps the only choice was to go private and rent an apartment for the period of the exchange. One has to both register (see Arrival) and de-register off the address in Germany upon leave.

Arrival. An online portal would stipulate the exact dates of preferred arrival as well as the list of actions needed to be undertaken for a successful enrolment. There is an active “buddy” program facilitated by the University, which would assign a knowledgeable student to help with all of the formalities upon coming to Mannheim. When enrolled at L1,1 (Quadrant coordinates system), one must still make sure all is well with the insurance (check with the International Office) and, should that be required, register at the town hall (K7) which is an equivalent of a Gemeente in the Netherlands.

Since visa is only issued for 3 months, one is required to ask for a “residence permit” (Aufenthaltsgenehmigung) for the period of the 4th month to cover the entire exchange period which would imply another visit to K7 to collect the document. During the first two weeks of the program - Mannheim University offers a number of introductory lectures to help incoming students find their ways around the place.

Courses. I have taken two courses from Economics department (The Evolution of Financial Markets, Communication in Games (intensive seminar) and one from Business Information Systems (IS 203: Business Informatics III). All of the above were worth 6 ECTS each. Additionally, I have attended three different German language courses of all flavours: general, grammar and oral communication which were 3 ECTS per course.

Communication and Games Seminar involved homework mostly. One is expected to read and analyse quite a few (10-12) scientific publications pertaining to the subject. The level was rather high given the majority of attendees followed a course in “Games Theory” earlier. Each article is assigned to a student to be presented at the seminar exam day (full day). Each of us had to prepare a few questions for every article in an attempt to find flaws or potential contradictions. Those questions would have been raised at the seminar at the professor’s discretion. A grade was determined based on one’s presentation, questions asked and questions answered.

Evolution of Financial Markets was a rather well structured and overall interesting course. It was not meant to be a technical subject, however one would have to apply quite some knowledge from macroeconomics reading, analysing and remembering all of the facts from the financial history of the world. An essay on one of the subjects offered represented 30% of the grade. The exam is an open question session of 90 minutes. You are expected to operate at your maximum writing capacity for the amount of questions would not allow for any slack during the exam.

Development and Management of Information Systems (Business Informatics III) course appeared to be a full blown IT management subject held for mostly computer science students around here. There was no textbook to follow which means better focus in the class. It gives a solid overview of IT project management approaches, higher management’s strategies different organisations of software departments and software development companies. For those, not familiar with IT world - I believe the course is one strong introduction to it from the business angle. Additionally to the slides and lectures we were expected to read and analyse quite a few publications. 21 pages-exam consisting of open questions, a bit of theory and all the rest based on cases to be answered in 90 minutes. One is expected to apply the knowledge - not simply remember it. I believe very few students could manage all the questions with full answers in time.

A general remark about all of the courses would be that no course books were offered at all. Lecture slides and additional reading (articles, books) were the only sources of information beyond lectures available for the students. The lecture slides published on the Illias portal could be particularly frugal in content (extra explanations and off-side notes not given), hence the necessity to attend the lectures at all times. Another point to take into consideration - the exams are all about speed and application of the knowledge, hence one would do better by quickly selecting the question one is certain about.

Regarding the language course - 100% attendance is a must (no more than 2 classes to miss) to get the score right in the end. The majority of peers went for a summer academy course (intensive language course) which does obviously help boosting the skill.

Finance. A Dutch bank card is widely acceptable, however, there are quite a few little shops where one would do better with a German (EC) bank card. Paying bills (should you need to) is as simple as in the Netherlands, however, some of the subscriptions (phone contracts) would only be available with a local bank account. Most of the bank (Sparkasse, DKB) offer student account for free (including the cards).

Other than the rental expenditure - staying in Germany proved to be reasonable in price. A few major supermarket chains are open 6 days a week 7-23 (Rewe, Penny) which is a huge help for a student. A University's card allows to buy a semester long ticket (150 eur) for all transport types excluding cabs and ICE trains (a surcharge would be in order) covering the greater Mannheim Area. It is worth mentioning that since 2015 - everyone registered in Germany is expected to pay a TV license fee which accounts to 17.5 eur per month. Food is generally cheaper than in Holland. Bahncard can make train journeys even less expensive. Frankfurt airport is accessible by train just as well as Schiphol from Rotterdam.

Daily Life. The city is rather practical in terms of facilitating all of the basic needs for its residence. Quadrant in full of shops and cafes, cinema and a few sport facilities. Sundays are, of course, for studying and sightseeing as all of the shopping places including food markets and groceries are closed. Waldpark in Lindenhof, Luisenpark with its turning Turm, Heidelberg and of course Frankfurt's museums are all available for the taking. The Uni pitches in with its International Study Organisation called VISUM offering various events to the newcomers.