Analysis and Evaluation of Germany’s Current Migratory Status and Foreigners’ Cultural Integration

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Ever since the creation of the European Union, Germany has been one of the main powerhouses of the European economy, alongside France, the United Kingdom (UK) and Italy [1]. Due to this fact, immigrants from all over Europe as well as other nations around the world try to find the opportunity to enter Germany under a wide range of residency statuses and stay in the country for its employment and high social benefits. People from Eastern Europe, Southern Europe, countries of the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), North Africa and Western Asia are the main contributors to immigration statistics numbers who move into German land as refugees, workers or students in search of a better life opportunity.

Many university students tend to apply for institutions in Germany for their exchange programs due to the lively culture of the country and its low education fees. Canadian students, specifically, discover a dramatic decrease in their expenses after comparing the tuition fees they have to pay for one term of post-secondary education in Canada and what would have to be paid if they were to live in Germany. Therefore, going on an exchange program in Germany does not only benefit these students by gaining academic and cultural experience, but it helps them financially. However, cultural integration for newcomers to Germany is one of the main challenges faced by thousands of people every year, a group which international and exchange students form part of. Compared to other European countries, Germany has a very different cultural protocol for communication and behavioural norms. These concepts will be explained in detail throughout the paper.

The purpose of this report is to analyze and evaluate Germany’s current migratory status and cultural integration by focusing on the challenges of this nation compared to those of North America, as well as to compare and contrast cultural and behavioural norms, and economical
differences between the two regions by explaining personal experiences as an exchange student of Latin-American origin in a German university. Final conclusions specific to government policies, language learning and local activities will be stated, followed by recommendations about how to deal with the cultural integration as well as future improvements if another international education opportunity were to come.
2 Immigration in Germany and Cultural Integration

2.1 Germany as a Point of Settlement

In recent years, due to the financial crisis in Europe, immigration to Germany from countries such as Spain, Greece and Portugal, which are some of the countries most severely affected by the Eurozone’s debt difficulties, has increased up to 45% in 2012 compared to the previous year. In total, Germany has received an increase in immigrants of 18% in 2012 compared to the previous year, making it a total of 369,000 new German residents for that year alone, receiving the highest number of immigrants since 1995 [2].

Germany, being aware of its current migratory issues, has done everything in its power to implement policies that aim to reduce the inflow of immigrant workers, refugees and other social benefit seekers. These policies range from workplace limitations, as to whom the companies may hire if they are not already German citizens or permanent residents, to limitations on who can possess German citizenship. However, it is important to point out that surveys have shown that immigrants who live in Germany have an easier time finding jobs directly related to their skills compared to other European countries [3]. These national policies, and sometimes even the lack of them, encourage immigrants to keep themselves within their own culture or social circles of people who share similar backgrounds to them. Newcomers to the country ignore the fact that they are guests to a host nation, turning sections of the country into an extension of their own, secluding themselves from cultural exchange with the local residents and creating cultural pluralism. This behaviour prevents newcomers to the country from integrating into what could be a multicultural nation. Data collected from surveys suggests that only 25% of immigrants claimed language barrier as their main problem and this does not even fall within the first three problems
for new residents. This suggests why many immigrants choose Germany as their settlement point in comparison to other European countries [3].

2.2 Interculturalism, Multiculturalism, & Cultural Pluralism

Multiculturalism, interculturalism and cultural pluralism are usually terms confused between each other, especially in nations such as Canada. A great part of the population in Canada is made up of 1st or 2nd generation immigrants, and people known to have established roots in the nation are merely referring to a very long standing family of immigrant origin having come from the old continent one or two centuries ago. However, it is important to make a clear distinction between the three terms in order to discuss the importance of cultural integration from immigrant residents into a host country.

North America has two countries that are the perfect examples of the difference between interculturalism and multiculturalism. The USA and Canada, also referred to metaphorically as a “melting pot” [4] and a “tossed salad” [5] respectively, are examples of these terms. The USA is said to be a nation where its once heterogeneous society 3 centuries ago has now become more homogeneous, melting together into a harmonious entity under the umbrella of the American culture. On the other hand, Canada has come to be known as a nation that respects its immigrants’ identity and background. Unlike the melting pot, Canada is known for its multiculturalism and open-mindedness toward numerous cultures; therefore, the homogenous lifestyle that is known to Americans is foreign to Canadians. However, this does not suggest that Canadians are not living in harmony; it only implies different points of view between the two countries and distinct places where each of their values and pride lie. The following example is presented to better explain the difference between the two concepts:
Many American citizens, regardless of their background, display themselves as proud Americans; however, people in Canada keep their original background when they are asked where they are from (e.g., Mexican-Canadian, Indian-Canadian, Chinese-Canadian, etc.). Now knowing the difference between interculturalism and multiculturalism, it is important not to mix it with cultural pluralism, which is the case among German residents.

In the eyes of native Germans, and in spite of the multiple efforts of creating a culturally integrated nation, the terms of interculturalism and multiculturalism are rather distant. Scholars and government have come to realize that new immigrants tend to stay within their own society rather than mixing with the native German population. This cultural segregation is what leads to cultural pluralism in Germany. Unlike the American and Canadian populations, immigrants in Germany do not refer to themselves as Germans or, for example, Turkish-German, but their perceived nationality stays as Turkish, regardless of their passport. Cultural pluralism creates several problems for both immigrants and native Germans. For instance, language decay is one of the most severe problems that the immigrant population faces due to cultural segregation. Cases have been observed where later generations of Turkish youths have difficulty communicating in either Turkish or German, because they do not learn either language to its full extent, making a hard-to-comprehend mixed language [6].
Hamburg, by population, is the second largest city in Germany and the ninth largest city in all of Europe, having the third business port in the continent. These characteristics make Hamburg a major hub for international exchange from students and guest workers coming to the city through the port and other inbound modes of transportation. Because of this, Hamburg tops the charts in Germany as one of the cities with the largest number of immigrants, having a total population of only 70% native Germans [7]. In terms of student population, Hamburg has about 70,000 university students (3.9% of the total Hamburg population), of which 9,000 are foreign or undergoing exchange programs. However, in spite of the low percentage of university students in the city, the members of this community remain close together as the local public and private universities promote relationships between each other.

Events targeted to the university students demographic are usually not restricted by institutions or the members of their own community, rather these events are open to a broader audience of young adults with the objective of fostering non-competitive and friendly rivalries between them. By becoming more flexible towards who can and cannot attend these types of events, they help those who are new to the culture and country to feel more welcome and included, which increases the sense of belonging and reduces the negative feelings that one might experience after moving to a new environment.

In addition, post-graduate education in Germany is heavily subsidised by the government. For example, a Canadian citizen has to pay between $2500-$5500CAD per term only for an undergraduate tuition (not including books or transportation between cities in the province) depending on the course load and the university policies. However, in Germany students pay less than the equivalent of $1000CAD per semester for tuition, books and local transportation within
the state, regardless of whether they are German citizens or foreigners. As it is presented, the difference is extreme comparing the two countries. Therefore, it would be much cheaper to study in Germany than in any Canadian province.

Furthermore, universities are much more different in Germany than in North America. Bachelor education in Germany is mainly focused on theoretical learning whereas masters programs are more focused on practical work, such as projects and/or internships. The culture behind higher education is also very distinct in Germany. Since education has such a low price tag for students, they do not feel the need to rush through their studies and find a job that will pay for their debts and costs of living. And unlike North America, students do not feel as if they have to graduate with the rest of their classmates, and it’s not uncommon to find students on sabbatical breaks, annual internships or taking extra courses which do not necessarily relate directly to their field of study.

For international and exchange students, higher education in Germany can be a stepping-stone for becoming a landed immigrant in the country. There is a variety of programs targeted at international exchange students, for instance, the Erasmus programs and other language and cultural learning programs. These help students all over the world, who study abroad to learn more about the host culture and traditions. Many of the students call the Erasmus experience a great opportunity to both socialize and learn [8].
Previous to the start of the academic semester at the Technische Universität Hamburg-Harburg (TUHH or Technical University of Hamburg-Harburg), a two-week optional intensive German language course for incoming international and exchange students was offered with the purpose of easing the process of integration to the language and the city. As newcomers to Hamburg, most students with this status decided to go ahead and enroll in the course as a way to practice the language and meet new people. Unfortunately, the practice was limited to class hours. Most of the international students did not really speak German outside of class, and communicated either in their native tongue or in English, the default international language. A great majority of these students did not want to get out of their comfort zone and speak in another language that was not common and as easy to them, which left the few students with real interest in practicing German on their own. These students were rather surprised when one of the international students wanted to speak German, and they were considered outsiders within the international group due to their interest in learning something new out of theirs and their peers’ comfort zone.

These language classes, just like in any other language school in Germany or the rest of Europe, were divided by levels according to the speaker’s proficiency [9]. All of the students in the class came from different cultures, coming mostly from other European countries, North America and Asia. During the class there were small debates about international topics that some people in the class felt very passionately about. Differences in style of debate came from the background of the people, and the directness of the German professor gave students the perfect example of how to speak by taking into account the German culture. As a specific example, students coming from a Latin-American background, where debates are usually non-direct, found
it more challenging to get into a conversation or light debate with Germans, who are not very fond of small-talk or indirect approaches to a general topic.

Throughout the rest of the school term, language exchange meetings with native German speakers, also known as language tandems were very helpful to learn the new language. In these meetings, native German speakers who were interested in learning a new language would meet with international/exchange students and speak half of the time in German and the other half in the secondary language of interest (i.e., Spanish, Turkish, French). Both parties would benefit from this arrangement because each would practice the language they were not completely proficient in and receive feedback from a native speaker.

In comparison, a language tandem was in general a better option to integrate with the German culture. However, technicalities about the language that would easily be learned during a formal language class would be overlooked in a tandem due to the lack of technical language knowledge from some of the language tandem participants. A combination of these two would usually bring the most significant improvements for non-native German speakers looking to better their language skills, and culturally integrate.
5 Personal Exchange Circumstances & Experience

My personal exchange situation in Hamburg at the TUHH from the Mechatronics program at the University of Waterloo was quite unique in terms of my residency status and country of origin, compared to my Canadian counterparts. As a Mexican citizen with a temporary residence status under a study visa in Canada, going through the process of arranging a one-year exchange experience from Waterloo to Hamburg was slightly more challenging that it would normally be for a Canadian permanent resident or citizen. Starting with the fact that all my Mexican and Canadian papers had to be in order and have an expiry date past the end of my exchange period, I had to submit some paperwork previous to my departure that was not required from my Canadian classmates. All of these had to be done on top of what was asked of the rest of the non-EU residents, such as acquiring a European insurance for the length of the exchange program as well as registering to the Hamburg city hall at arrival.

Being the only group of exchange students from a Canadian university – as well as one of the few coming from a country with English as one of its official languages – my Waterloo classmates and I were in an advantageous, yet unfortunately effortless position. For us, communicating with the rest of the exchange and international students was as easy as speaking in our primary study language – regardless of our mother tongue. In terms of cultural integration, coming from a country known for its multiculturalism, introducing ourselves to and interacting with people from other nations was a rather seamless process. This situation was quite beneficial during the early stages of our stay in Hamburg, given the challenging process of adaptation to a new country with different language and culture. However, this initial advantage became an issue in later stages of the exchange period when practicing the German language and integrating to the local culture became a priority over meeting other international and exchange students. A clear
example of this was the social gatherings that this group had to visit different areas around the city. As temporary residents of Germany, to experience the city as a group of tourists was expected during the first few weeks after arrival, but to roam the city discovering local cafes or side-alleys only known to the locals while striking unexpected conversations in German was an expectation that was not personally met until after several months, when my close ties with the international students were loosened up.

As mentioned in section 4 of this report, there were enough opportunities at the university as well as around the city to practice the local language. Nonetheless, after having spent the first few months bonding with students from other countries who shared a similar exchange situation, it was not easy to let go off those ties and look beyond this circle of people to experience the true local culture. In a certain way, our group of approximately 150 international and exchange students – mostly conformed of the latter – became a part of the cultural pluralism in Germany, which within itself was a multicultural group conformed of members from Portugal, Spain, France, Italy, Sweden, the UK, Poland, Romania, Russia, Turkey, India, China, Singapore, Chile, Colombia, Brazil, Mexico, the USA and Canada. This number may not be representative of the university’s total foreign student population, since there were a few students from non-German origin who would completely blend in with the locals, as well as several other bigger groups of students from countries like India and China who would only interact with each other, and therefore not be considered part of our group.

One of my objectives for going on exchange to Germany was to learn a new language, on top of my native tongue (Spanish) and my primary work and study language (English). Due to the mentioned objective, it was paramount for me to move beyond this limited group where only a very few students could communicate with near-native proficiency, and start meeting local students. As I knew from previous experience, language lessons inside the classroom can take
learners up to a certain point, from which immersion in the language and culture is required to actually make significant progress. Given my basic knowledge of the German language and reluctance to approach locals with the sole purpose of practicing the language – as I felt this was an unnatural way of starting a conversation – I decided to leverage my skills and interests to blend in and immerse myself.

Ever since a young age I’ve practiced dancing as one of my main hobbies, one that I consider myself good at. As a way of “feeling at home”, I started dancing Latin-American rhythms few months after moving to Canada for the first time, 3 years previous to my exchange to Germany. Realizing the success that this activity brought to my social life in Canada, I decided to replicate this in Hamburg and register for Salsa dance lessons. To my surprise, there were not very many dancers of Latin-American origin, and most of the members of the Salsa group were native-German speakers. I knew I would not be able to communicate with them fluently as I used to in Mexico or Canada. However, after dancing the first class’ warm-up songs and observing the other dancers in the class, I knew I would be able to make up for my lack of verbal communication with dance skills.

Near the end of my stay in Hamburg, and after approximately 10 months of attending the salsa dance classes, I was able to retain and improve my German immensely. In addition, I was able to meet a great deal of locals as well as learn some of the German etiquette and traditional, yet unspoken, customs that they have. Aspects as simple as how to pay a bill and tip a waiter, to how to talk to women at clubs and parties and the sort of things that are considered rude or inappropriate. In other words, all the things that I learned with the locals in Germany, I would have not been able to pick up from a textbook or purely by observation as an outsider. Unlike most of the other international and exchange students who continued living in a culturally
unintegrated group, I had succeeded in immersing myself in the culture, achieving the level of language fluency that I was expecting and building great friendships in the process.
Government initiatives, language classes and local activities are all approaches which foreigners can take advantage of in order to become integrated with the German culture. A greater insight into the university student culture was examined in this report from a personal perspective and put in the context of an exchange student actively pursuing cultural integration. The contrast and comparison between personal goals, immersion and outcomes against the average incoming students at the university was done with the purpose of highlighting the differences between multiculturalism, interculturalism and cultural pluralism.

In chapters 2 and 3, containing factual information on Germany’s way of living and the culture of the locals and foreigners, it is clear that the German government and residents have a long way to go in terms of immigration policy regulations. As long as Germany’s economy keeps strong in comparison to other Eurozone countries, more and more immigrants will come to this country in search of better opportunities, and students with intentions of residing there permanently will keep making their way to the workforce through the international educational programs that Germany offers. Moreover, chapters 4 and 5 which take a more personal view of cultural assimilation, showed that international and exchange students have plenty of opportunities to blend in with their local counterparts, but it’s not an easy task and cannot be taken for granted, especially when life in the city becomes effortless within a culturally isolated group.

Overall, it can be safely stated that in most cases a foreigner’s adaptation to a new country depends heavily on how far the individual is willing to get outside of their comfort zone and experience new things. One might argue that it mostly depends on the acceptance of the host
country; however, one should not underestimate the effort that one has to put in to blend and adapt to a new culture.
Recommendations

Based on the analysis and observations made throughout this report, my main recommendation to future students who wish to join an international exchange anywhere outside their home country or the country of their home university, is to do as much as possible to get outside of their comfort zone and be willing to make mistakes in order to learn. By getting outside the traditional classroom and stepping into the real world, the learning process is accelerated and the retention of the language is likely to increase.

One major improvement specific to my personal exchange experience would be to read the type of literature and listen to the type of music that the people of the region as well as of the age the same age group consume, previous to the exchange. This is because many concepts used by the locals cannot be easily learned unless they are placed in the context of those who consume the content (e.g. radio news, pop culture media, etc.). For instance, slang terms or commonly heard phrases that students use to describe a situation are rarely up to date in former language curricula. Therefore, it’s important to access this content ahead of time and familiarize oneself with it.
References


