

University of Waterloo
Faculty of Engineering
GENE 303

Going to Braunschweig?

Stuff You Need to Know

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1.0 Introduction

Once you have decided to go to Braunschweig, there are a lot of little details that you would greatly benefit from knowing in advance. My purpose with this report is to place as much of this as possible into a single location. This report is all of the things I would try to tell you if we were to meet for coffee for an hour and discuss the exchange experience. The intended audience of this report is someone who is seriously planning to pursue this exchange or has perhaps already applied. If you are not yet sure about the exchange, this report deals in specific details and so may have little value to you.

It is possible to get an additional two to three weeks in Germany at the beginning of the exchange year before the beginning of the intensive language course. My first intent in this report is to inform prospective students of this previously undocumented opportunity and the tricks required to succeed with it. This opportunity has proven valuable to the students who pursued it during my exchange year and is one that should be considered by all prospective students. In addition, I have included a chapter where I discuss some things that every exchange student can benefit from knowing but probably won't know. My objective with that chapter is to place all of the "knowing that would have been useful" items into a single report.

This report will only focus on these specific points and issues as opposed to provide an overall picture of my exchange experience. Other reports covering more general aspects of the exchange are already available and students seeking a general overview of the exchange should refer to them instead. I also will not reveal too much of the ins and outs of the experience as I strongly feel that some trials, surprises, and adventures are truly worth going through and should not be spoiled.

Lastly, this information is correct as of the time of writing, but may be subject to change as years go by. If anything jumps out at you as being extremely relevant, you can ask the exchange coordinator, the exchange office, or an alumnus of the exchange program for an update on the status of whatever you are curious about.

2.0 Three Weeks for Free

If you take advantage of a few things, you can manage to get an additional 2 to 3 weeks in Braunschweig for roughly 60 Euros at the beginning of your year. This can give you an opportunity to get over the jet lag, restore your sleep cycle, and start getting used to the fact you are no longer in an English speaking country. This opportunity hangs around the way that accommodations work for the International Summer Course.

The International Summer Course (ISC) is a highly recommended course offered by the University's language center, the Sprachenzentrum. There are multiple offerings, but the fourth offering (Summer Course D) is the one most often taken by students on exchange as it ends on the week immediately preceding the start of the fall semester. The date of the beginning of the semester varies within October, and this 4 week course also varies accordingly, but typically starts within the last 2 weeks of September.

In 2009, the D course cost 900 Euros, of which 200 covered accommodations for the four weeks. The accommodations fee does not need to be paid if you have your own place to stay, such as through your own residence contract. This meant that from September 20th until October 16th I would have had my accommodations covered for the price of 200 Euros. However, after moving into residence on October 16th, I would have to pay all of October's rent. In 2009 (it has since risen), rent in the Michaelishof student residence cost 220 euros per month. If I instead decided to live in residence for September and October, I would pay 440 euros for both months and have a place to stay starting from September 1st. If I took the offered accommodations, I would pay 420 Euros and have a place to stay starting from September 20th. In my case, a chance to get nearly three weeks for 20 more Euros was a deal I could not refuse.

In the interest of full disclosure, I should mention that it is occasionally possible to get your money back for the language course after you pass it as part of some governmental initiative. In this case it may also be possible to get back the money for the accommodations as well if you take the offered accommodations, thus making this opportunity no longer a bargain. This reimbursement isn't documented anywhere and

seems to vary from year to year in terms of whether it appears or not. Since there is no way to be sure beforehand if this will happen, I wouldn't depend on it for any serious decisions. Therefore, my recommendation stands.

2.1 Requirements

This opportunity is not as simple as just manipulating the different rent options to get the most for you money. There are several serious points that need to be observed. An early arrival means that you will arrive before all of the planned orientation meetings and welcome events. You will be on your own in Germany, which in my opinion has some stark requirements.

Apply for Residence Early

You can't come to Germany early if you don't have a place to live for September. There is one point I would like to make on this topic. There is never a full group of UW students participating in this exchange. This exchange program has an astounding 10 spots available. You can take advantage of this fact. The lack of competition means that so long as you fulfill the requirements, you will be able to go. If you are fairly certain that you are going to make your grade requirement, then you do not have to wait to get acceptance before applying for residence. I applied for residence on June 1st for housing in September and managed to get my first choice. I received acceptance on July 30th. You should at least wait until UW's exchange office has sent your application to TUBS so that they have you on file though.

The next thing that should be mentioned regarding residence is time. Unlike UW, TUBS is not strict about when you may live in residence. There is none of this "move in 2 days before classes and move out within 24 hours of your last exam" kind of stuff. If they have you on file as an exchange student, you can move in during September even though classes may start late in October.

Apply for a Peer Student

The international office has a peer student program that pairs up exchange students with local students who can help them figure things out during their first days in Braunschweig. This is highly recommended because it will give you someone to go to with the myriad of questions you are likely to encounter. If they don't know the answer, then they will probably know someone who does. Meeting people before the welcome events can be difficult without stronger German skills, but your peer student may be able to point you to a local student bar or other events to alleviate this problem.

Meet with the Coordinator

Currently, the Braunschweig coordinator of the exchange program is Professor Krull. I recommend getting in touch with him as soon as you can after arrival. He can put you in contact with exchange alumni who are in the area and also help you figure out what you should be doing. He has overseen countless exchanges and will not likely be surprised by any questions you ask him.

Know a Little German

It is possible to successfully complete the Braunschweig exchange year with no prior knowledge of German. I would strongly recommend against it, but it has been done before. That being said, if you are going to come here a few weeks before your language course, then you need to know enough German to survive. In the international summer course and in the university, a lot of people speak at least some English. This is not true for the city in general. Day to day life will prove very difficult without a minimal level of German knowledge.

I arrived in Braunschweig having completed GER101 and GER102 at UW followed by A2.1 and A2.2 at the Goethe Institute. I found that I had more than enough to survive. I would recommend GER102 as the minimum threshold for attempting to come to Germany a few weeks before the language course begins.

2.2 Notable Locations

Grocery Stores

The most important thing to be able to do during your first few days is eat. There are no grocery store chains common to Canada and Germany, so here is a non-exhaustive list of grocery store chains in Braunschweig: Penny Markt, Lidl, Rewe, Netto, Aldi. You can use Google maps to find whichever is nearest to your residence.

IKEA

Once you have food, being able to eat it in a civilized way is the next step. To get to the IKEA, take the M1 streetcar in the direction 'Wenden'. Get off at the stop Rusterweg. Head left from the direction you were traveling in on the streetcar, and go under the overpass. You should be able to see it ahead of you. If you can handle it, I recommend asking the driver. You should also search "IKEA Braunschweig" in Google to get a better idea of where you are going.

Tourism Center

In case you need a pocket map of the city, go to the tourism center and say "Stadtplan bitte" and they will give you one for free. They can also help you with any of the above items as they will have someone who can speak English excellently. This should probably be one of your first stops.

2.3 Benefits

There are plenty of benefits in coming to Braunschweig a few weeks early. Here is a non-exhaustive list of some of these benefits and some of the things that previous students have done with this time.

- a) You can get used to the differences between German and Canadian grocery stores.

- b) You can properly unpack and equip your room for a year of living long before classes begin.
- c) You can get an early start on getting used to real German.
- d) You can get used to the layout of the city and become comfortable with important locations.
- e) You have 2 to 3 weeks; if your finances permit it and you are comfortable with it, you could do a lot of traveling in that time.

3.0 Important Things That You Don't Know

This chapter is a list of things that I either wasn't aware of and wish I had known or had learned by chance just before it was too late. This chapter may be long, but it is both financially and experientially valuable to you if you read it all. If you read all of it and haven't gained a single thing, contact me and I'll buy you dinner.

3.1 The German Academic System Is Weirdly Flexible

This is the only point that I already knew before departure, but I think it is important to make sure that everyone is aware of it in full. For all courses except labs, you are not required to register for them. Instead, you register for exams which are worth 100% of your course grade. Exam registration happens towards the end of the term and is critically important, so make sure that you mark it on your calendar and do not miss it.

The fact that lectures are completely decoupled from exams and that course grades are entirely based on the final exam grade leads to some interesting results. Since there is no marked work during the term other than what you should do to keep up in class, you have an extreme amount of extra time and flexibility. This time can be used for adventure, or if you have time in between important lectures, an extra class. If you see a lecture that you like, but have no intent of writing the exam, then you can attend it. Alternatively, if you take a course and towards the exam registration period realize that you will not pass it, you can choose to not sign up for the final. Also, you can spend the first two weeks of term going to different lectures to find what works for you without having to fill out a single form. Or, you could take extra classes all term and only choose to write the exams you expect to perform best in. During my first semester I attended lectures for a class I had already completed at UW simply because I found it was a good way to improve my German comprehension. In short, the system is flexible and you can do what you like with it.

3.2 Your Bank Really Does Matter

Not all banks are the same in terms of what they offer, especially when it comes to international experiences. Take the time to compare the transaction fees and currency conversion fees to determine how to save the most money. Multiple wire transfers can add up quickly. If you are using an ATM that charges a 5% fee to transfer over a year's worth of money, that 5% might be worth the day or two it would take to change banks. I could have saved myself at least \$150 by doing so, and I transferred my funds in the cheapest manner that my bank had available.

3.3 A Minor in German Is Easily Reachable

As an exchange student, German language courses at TUBS are free during the semester. These courses are 90 minutes per week and focus on different aspects of the language. I found these courses to not be very demanding at all and they greatly helped improve my linguistic progress over the course of my year. Since they are extras, you can put as much effort into them as you feel necessary when considering other courses and interests in your schedule. For each of these courses that you end up completing, the German department at UW will grant you an equivalent GER course. For the intensive summer course, you can receive 2 UW courses.

A minor in German requires 10 courses, of which 5 must be completed at UW. If you take the intensive language course, which everyone should, and do 3 of the 90 minute per week courses over the course of your time in Germany, you will get credit for 5 GER courses at UW. Since you should have already taken GER101 and GER102 this should leave you three courses away from the minor. If you want to get the International Studies in Engineering (ISE) option (see the next section), these 3 additional courses can be taken from the list of culture courses offered within the German minor, allowing you to also pick up the ISE option by only writing the required report.

Whether or not the minor interests you, I highly recommend taking advantage of these language courses while you are at TUBS. Taking German language courses while immersed in it is a phenomenal opportunity to learn the language, and you don't even have to pay extra for it. The language center doesn't restrict you to taking German courses either. You could learn another language if you wished.

3.4 Get the ISE Option for Free

If you plan out your CSE's and exchange properly, you may be able to get the option in International Studies in Engineering (ISE) without taking any additional courses outside of what you would do as part of your exchange anyways. To obtain the ISE option, you must spend at least 2 terms abroad over the course of your undergraduate career, complete 6 courses from the ISE list and write a report. 3 of these 6 courses can be language courses. If you take GER 101, GER 102, and the intensive language course, then you have 3 of the language courses covered, leaving you with only 3 other courses to complete. There are 2 courses on the ISE list than can be used towards your List A CSE requirement which you need to do anyways. This leaves 2 more courses to be completed, of which there are many courses common to both the ISE list and the List C CSE course list. Since you must complete 2 List C CSE's independent of any exchange, you can take your List C CSE's towards the option, leaving you with no further ISE courses required. All that remains is to write a report.

3.5 You Can Get OSAP

This is only useful for Ontario residents, but I was able to apply for and receive OSAP funding for my exchange year. This is not easy because you are paying tuition in Braunschweig and as such all required official signatures need to come from people not at all familiar with OSAP. While the actual registrar's office at this university will not be

particularly helpful with respect to signing forms for you, certain people in the international office may be willing to sign them for you. It will require many phone calls, and a lot of international mail, but I recommend it. Simply call OSAP and explain the situation, and they will provide an explanation as to what you need to do. As part of my aid I received a non-repayable grant worth \$2600, which I would say is worth the time and effort.

While this is possible, it is also somewhat delicate. Imagine being asked to sign some sort of document pertaining to a loan from a foreign country. It is understandable that some people may not react well to it. I recommend first talking to whoever the Incoming Exchange Officer is (Adam Lipski and Zane Bieza at the time of writing), and explaining what OSAP is, and what you need from them. The incoming exchange officers are students and are much more aware of the realities of the life of an exchange student and are more likely to help you with your paperwork. If my documentation is still on file, that might make your process even easier. Just mention that Michael Smart has done it before and ask them if they still have it on file. Although this will be quite a hassle, if you end up getting an extra \$2600 for it, then I would think it is worth it.

Since your OSAP application is entirely dependent on the Incoming Exchange Officer's willingness and ability to help you, it is **extremely risky** for you to be at all dependent on receiving this funding. This should be extra money to help things run more smoothly.

3.6 Round Trip Flights Cost Less

A round trip flight typically costs less than a single one way flight. I did not know this before flying to Germany, and so on the way back I ended up buying a cheaper round trip ticket and never used the return flight. The second semester's exam season can be completed for the end of August in order to return to Waterloo for the fall term. Speak to your Incoming Exchange Student Officer about how to deal with exams that are after your planned departure. They will tell you how to fix it. You should be able to book your return for the end of August without any problems.

3.7 Your Marks on Exchange *May* Actually Matter

This point is **exceptionally** important if you are considering graduate studies. While Waterloo may only look at your overall average for graduate studies, other institutions will likely request you to include all transcripts with your application package. In this case, they would want to see the original transcripts from TUBS. Therefore, your marks on exchange may matter. The whole “your marks don’t matter because everything is pass/fail” thing only applies to you getting credits towards your undergraduate degree. Given that most classes are in German and that exchange students tend to have significant handicaps due to a lack of language proficiency, lack of knowledge with the German academic system, etc., it may be important to keep this in mind. If you are extremely intent on going to MIT for grad studies or something like that, this may be important. More often than not however, the long term value of the exchange experience is greater than the long term cost of a temporary drop in grades.

Also, students typically aim to receive funding for grad school from NSERC or OGS. The rules for these programs are updated every year, but your exchange grades may be used in these applications. If they are used, then your exchange grades will be competing against the grades of academically minded people who didn’t go on exchange and hence didn’t have as much of a handicap. For this reason, it is possible that going on exchange and receiving funding from these organizations **may** (depending on the rules they select for the application year) almost be mutually exclusive. In that case, if you really require these, exchange might not be the best idea and you should watch your grades while you are there. I personally think however, that exchange is much more valuable than the funding they provide.

3.8 You Aren’t There Just to Study

Except in cases where the previous point is important, you should remember why you are going on exchange, or rather why you should be going on exchange. You may be taking

classes, but that should not be the focus of your exchange. The true value in an exchange lies in the opportunity to experience another culture, explore another country, and grow as a person through a significant amount of adventure. The extremely rich opportunity lies outside of the classroom, so don't spend your time cooped up in your room studying. If your primary focus is your classes, you are missing the point of the experience. That being said, you should try to pass everything.

3.9 Different Exchange Programs Are Different

Relating again to the work and life balance, it is important to be aware that the UW exchange is different from **some** other exchange programs at TUBS, in that almost all of the classes you take count towards your UW degree. These terms are also counted as full-time study terms, and so you must complete the equivalent of 5 UW courses per term in order for you to not get into trouble with UW's faculty of engineering.

There are other exchange programs at TUBS where this is not necessarily the case. There are several other international partner exchanges where students take classes, but many do not have significant consequences if credits are not obtained. There are also many students from the ERASMUS program, a European exchange student network. In ERASMUS, there can be very few penalties for not obtaining credits during your exchange. The consequence is that much (but not all!) of the exchange student community will have a more carefree attitude towards school and enjoy more copious amounts of social activity and BEvERages than you will have seen at UW. Since many of these people are likely to form the basis of your social circle, try to remember that while you are all exchange students, your academic exchange programs may be different. You will be completing full-time studies, while many other exchange students are not. Following the lead of other exchange students in terms of the work-life balance can be disastrous if you are not aware of this.

While this may seem to be contradictory to the previous section, I am hoping to help you towards striking a balance. While life on exchange tends to focus less on academics than life at UW, you should avoid the other extreme that some of your peers will pursue.

You must complete the equivalent of 5 UW courses to avoid significant problems. Others might be able to do the same without completing a single course.

3.10 If and Only If You Worry About Grades

If you want to both get into a prestigious graduate school and enjoy an exchange, there is one last bit of academic *magic* that you can enjoy, but make sure you check with the TUBS international office before you do this. Bureaucratically, TUBS is very fractured and you need to bring your individual faculty transcripts and course certificates to the international office for your courses to be accumulated into your transcript. If for whatever reason you were to forget to give them one, then that course would never make it on to your transcript and thus it would be as though you never took it (except of course for the knowledge you gained). This would be a major problem if you needed that course to reach your total of 5 courses per term. If for whatever reason you took extra courses (such as the language courses I recommended in section 3.3, or because you are enjoying the benefits of section 3.1), then you could still have your total of 5 courses per term in spite of the lost course. Alternatively, the TUBS international office may simply ask you which courses you want them to put on your transcript. In that case you would be free to pick whatever you want based on what you want UW to see and give you credit for.

Obviously this is not recommended in general, and should only be used during the second semester of exchange (if at all) after you are accustomed to the German academic system and know what you are getting into. If you can handle doing a bunch of courses and want to mitigate the effect of any bad results, you may have the flexibility to do so. I am very intent on pursuing graduate studies and was a little distraught when I learned halfway through my exchange experience that my exchange grades may actually matter. Since I was doing a sufficient number of language courses on the side, I was left with this option as a backup plan. If you are not dead-set on going into graduate studies, it would obviously be ridiculous to do this.

3.11 Health Insurance

While on exchange to Braunschweig, you may need to purchase health insurance. OHIP does provide some coverage while abroad, but they will not pay more than the equivalent cost in Ontario. Since German law requires you to have full health coverage, you will need to purchase a full health plan. Information about this will/should be included in the welcome email and welcome package that TUBS emails and ships to you after you have been admitted.

If you are covered under your parent's insurance plan, you might be sufficiently covered. Some plans do provide complete coverage, even when you are abroad. Be sure to verify this before hand with your insurance company. You can contact the international office a TUBS to determine what kind of proof of coverage you will need to provide to comply with German law.

3.12 What Seems to Be the Problem, Officer?

While on exchange to Braunschweig, you may want to remember that you are representing not only UW but Canada or whichever nation you call home. If not for your homeland's interest, then you should stay on the right side of the law for your own interest. This may actually be easier said than done. Germany's laws are different from Canada's and it is not uncommon for exchange students to get into trouble for doing things that they didn't know were illegal.

There are a few examples for this. The most likely one to be encountered by exchange students is the law regarding piracy. Anti-piracy laws are actually enforced in Germany and so pirating in any blatant fashion can be met with consequences. A few years ago, an American exchange student went to TUBS and torrented movies as he typically would at home. The police showed up at his door, took his computer, deleted all of his pirated content, and installed a content monitor program before returning his computer. He also has now has a minor criminal record in Germany.

A guide outlining all of the legal differences would be too difficult to compile, so instead follow the advice that you should typically follow even at home. If you think it might be illegal, check first. If you think something would be hurtful, offensive, damaging, or otherwise negative in its impact, you should probably avoid it.

3.13 Cell Phones

Most of Europe's mobile phone networks do not operate in the same frequency bands as their North American counterpart's. As such, you should check beforehand that any phone you intend to bring with you is both unlocked and functions with Europe's frequencies. Otherwise, you will likely be buying one there. You will want a phone that uses a SIM card, as that is what is common in Europe. You can in fact go to most grocery stores and buy a SIM card there for a nice pay as you go plan that easily hooks into your German bank account online. Local students will easily be able to guide you in this.

4.0 Travel

I felt that tidbits of knowledge pertaining to travel merited their own chapter so this chapter contains information pertaining to travel in Europe. Travelling in Europe is vastly different from travel in Canada. Some of this information is documented in other reports, but there are several points that are not addressed, and so travel will be discussed here.

4.1 Accommodations

There are several options available for accommodations while traveling. Most likely, you will use hostels. I used www.hostelworld.com for most of my bookings. Be sure to read reviews for any accommodations you are considering. If you have more resources that you wish to spend on accommodations, then hotels are an option, in which case they are not different from those in Canada.

There is another less common option that has been gaining popularity throughout Europe in the last few years, called couchsurfing (www.couchsurfing.com). The idea for this is to have locals provide their couches as cheap or free accommodations to travelers in order to foster cultural exchange for both parties. While many of my European friends swear by it, I have never tried it. If you like the idea, you can try it at your own risk.

4.2 Planes

There are a number of airlines in Europe that provide extremely cheap flights such as RyanAir or TUifly. These low-cost carriers provide low cost flights, but make their real profits by charging significant amount for anything above the bare minimum. If you can survive with nothing more than your 1 piece of carry-on luggage, these carriers can allow you to get a round trip to Sweden for 20 Euros.

One thing to bear in mind with these low-cost carriers is that they rarely fly into major airports. They usually service airports that are somewhat removed from the advertised location and may require additional transportation to get to your desired

destination. Even with the extra costs of this additional transportation, these carriers may often be the cheapest way of reaching your destination. A more exhaustive list of Europe's low-cost carriers can be found here: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_low-cost_airlines#Europe

4.3 Trains

Train travel in Europe is much more expansive and popular than it is in Canada. There are two main options for saving money on train travel. The first is the Bahnkarte sold by Deutsche Bahn (the German national railway company – their version of VIA Rail) which gives you a % discount on all travel products sold by Deutsche Bahn. They come in different categories, Bahnkarte25, Bahnkarte50, etc. where the number corresponds to the % discount on their travel products. This can be an excellent deal, but only if you use it enough for the savings to exceed the cost of the card. Unfortunately, this card is only useful for travel sold by the Deutsche Bahn and so will be useless for international travel. It is also important to know that the Deutsche Bahn automatically renews you Bahnkarte and you will have to pay. I have heard some comical stories of German creditors trying to hunt down former exchange students.

The next option is the EURail pass (<http://www.eurail.com>). These can be bought for unlimited travel (on most trains) in a selected number of countries over a selected number of days. For example, you could buy a three country pass for 3 countries, say France, Germany, and Austria, and select it to be valid for 5 days within a 2 month window. In this case, you would start your journey (consuming one day of travel on your ticket) and go to any destination in these 3 countries from anywhere in these 3 countries. You could then stay there a week and move on to another destination, using up another day. You may use a travel day at any time within the selected time window; they do not have to be adjacent days. There are many other EURail products that may also suit your purposes. For long breaks, such as the Christmas break, the EURail pass may be the best option for transportation.

4.4 Automobiles

Besides the obvious car rental, there is another option for travel in Germany that is not available in North America. There's an organized hitchhiking system that even has its own word 'mitfahr' (loosely translates as ride-along). Many people have no problem sharing a seat in their vehicle with another traveler so long as they pay their share of the costs. As with couchsurfing, this is at your own risk, but I have actually used this option for several trips and found it worked out very well. This can be the cheapest option available. There are many websites, such as <http://www.mitfahrgelegenheit.de/> where people post their route and the number of seats available. You can create a profile and contact them if they are on your route. I think that if you are comfortable with it, then it is definitely worth considering.

5.0 Conclusion

It is my hope that in reading this report, you have learned something worthwhile. I also hope that you are considering going to Braunschweig early. While this opportunity has some obstacles, I think that is simply too valuable to ignore. The extra time to practice my German skills allowed me to just score one level higher on the summer course entrance test, allowing me to enter the middle level and progress faster. I hope that you also find the opportunity to be worthwhile. My exchange was one of the best experiences of my life, and I hope you enjoy it as well. Bis spatter und mach's gut!