



UNIVERSITY OF WATERLOO  
Faculty of Engineering

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So you're thinking about going on exchange?

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## **Introduction**

Whether you've decided to go on exchange or are simply thinking about it, this guide should give you some insight. Hopefully this guide will convince you that going on exchange will be a worthwhile experience, if you haven't decided that you're going for sure.

The thought of going abroad to a place where you do not know the culture, language, or anyone to get you started can be intimidating at first. However, it definitely does not have to be this way, with some guessing and planning ahead. All you really need is the curiosity and courage to get started and the rest of the resources are already there to help you. You may ask what resources? Well, I plan to explain some of these aids that are available to you in this guide. Throughout this guide, many things will be mentioned such as train or insurance companies. Links to these and other resources are at the end of the guide.

## **Where to go?**

Although most of my guide will be relevant to an exchange to TUBS (Technische Universität Braunschweig/Technical University of Brunswick), the same ideas can generally be applied to any exchange.

First of all, you will have to decide where you want to go? Often, an urge to go on exchange can originate from an interest to go to a certain continent or country. In other occasions, this interest can stem from a curiosity to go elsewhere and explore the world. The latter was in fact the case for me. I had always known that I wanted to travel and explore the world. When I saw the flyers for the exchange program to Germany in first year, I went to the information session and was immediately convinced. What better place than a place that would allow me to learn a new language, take courses I would not be able to take at UW and pay a fraction of the UW costs for tuition? It was perfect.

The Engineering Exchange department has a list of established exchange programs with numerous schools around the world. You can choose from this enormous list or if you

really want to go to a particular school that isn't on the list, you most likely can but I'll talk more about that later. Once you have chosen a country or school, contact the faculty coordinator in charge of the particular exchange. Let them know that you're interested and they will be sure to give you more information. It's always a good idea to touch base early with the exchange coordinator before you dive deep into planning to go to the particular school. This is because certain exchanges may be older or haven't had students participate in a period of time. Getting an update of the program's operational status from the coordinator should be one of the first things you do. Alternatively, there is also an exchange library in the First Year Undergraduate Office that houses documents such as course calendars and reports like this one written by students who have participated in exchanges. This is also a valuable resource for researching different schools and programs.

Now, I mentioned earlier that it is possible to go to schools that may not be on the Engineering Exchange list of established programs. If you really have your heart set on a particular school, it is possible as long as you put in the work. If you put in the time to research the school you want to attend and find out the procedure for an exchange or international student to attend school, you can possibly go to this school via a Letter of Permission form. What you must understand is that it is all up to you and how much work you want to put into it. The most important thing about going on exchange is that it is all up to you to plan everything. Once you have everything organized and planned, all you need is approval from your home department and the Engineering Exchange Coordinator.

One other thing that I forgot to mention earlier is the different types of exchanges in terms of tuition. There are generally two main types. There are the exchanges where you pay the host fees which means you pay what a student there may pay. The other type of exchange is the type where you pay the home fees which means you would pay regular UW tuition. When I mentioned earlier the exchange that I chose (TUBS in Germany), it was of the host type. This meant that I paid the same amount of tuition as a regular

German student, which was very little compared to regular UW fees. This may be something to keep in mind when deciding on location.

### ***Preparation***

#### **Academic Planning**

So let's say that you now have a place in mind to go and have consulted with the particular coordinator looking after the exchange. Everything is going according to plan and now you have to figure out what you need to do to get yourself there.

On the UW side of things, you will need to fill in an application to go on exchange. This application is extremely important because you must figure out for yourself which courses you will take while going on exchange and how that will affect you when you return. Here are a couple of things to keep in mind when doing this.

1. It is up to you and you alone to ensure that you will have all the courses and work terms required for your graduation.
2. If you are doing a stream switch or reversing the order of some school and/or work terms, you may also need to fill out a "Plan Modification Form".
3. An advantage of going to a school where many other students have gone previously before you is that there will be lists of courses which they took for which they did or did not obtain credit. This will make it easier for you when you are deciding which courses to take when you are abroad.
4. The plan you make is simply a *proposed* plan to ensure that you have thought about what you will do when you go abroad and what you will do on your return. Things can change and most likely will when you are at the school abroad.
5. Make sure you will be able to satisfy all your CSE (complimentary studies elective) or options requirements if you are doing an option or specialization.
6. As a personal recommendation, try to take courses that may not be offered at UW. Your going on exchange gives you a unique chance to do this so make use of it. Just make sure that you still satisfy all other requirements for graduation or that the course can count towards these requirements.

7. Referring to the above point, if you take a course that does not have a specific UW equivalent, try to make sure that it is of significant difficulty or technicality and it may be counted as a TE (technical elective) or CSE.
8. Finally, if you are planning to pursue post graduate studies such as graduate school or medical school, etc., find out what those requirements are and the implications of you going on exchange. For example, on most academic exchanges, courses you pass abroad will transfer back to UW simply as credits and will not have grades. In this case, it would be important to find out if the marks you obtain abroad can still be considered.

On the other side of things, there is often also an application for the school that you will be visiting. This is usually fairly straightforward. The host schools assume that UW will do our own screening and send them good students.

### **Travel Planning**

While you are in the process of making your academic plan, you should also be figuring out requirements to go to the host country. That is, will you need a student visa? If you do, there are usually a number of things you will need in order to obtain a visa. These include but are not limited to:

1. A doctor's note saying that you are in good health.
2. A letter from UW saying that you are in fact officially participating in an exchange program sanctioned by UW. As a hint, your exchange coordinator will usually do this for you if you ask nicely. The registrar will also do this but at a cost.
3. Some countries may need the proof of a return plan ticket to make sure you're not planning to stay there indefinitely.
4. Proof of finances. This usually means you need your bank to write a letter saying that you have a certain amount of money so that you will be able to support yourself while you are abroad. Different countries may have different requirements such as \$500-1000 for every month that you are abroad.

5. Proof of medical insurance. The insurance from UW may only cover you up to a certain amount of time and may only be eligible in North America. If you have coverage from your parents, make sure that it will be eligible for the entire time that you are abroad. If not, you may need a third party insurer.

Make sure you find out and apply for the visa well in advance because it may take some time to get it. Also, one of the requirements of participating on an Engineering Exchange at UW is that you travel as a Canadian citizen so if you don't have a Canadian passport, get one right away! Before you go, you may also need to put things on hold, such as cell phone plans, internet, etc. As an Ontario resident, you will also need to notify the Ministry of Health if you are leaving the country for more than a certain time. Non-Ontario residents probably have something similar. Make sure to look this up.

If you are returning from your exchange to start a work term, make sure you have notified CECS that you will be going on exchange. They may be able to help you out with obtaining employment while you are away. Usually this means waiting until the continuous phase of the co-op process and filing out an inventory or skills form. As a personal recommendation, if you are legally able to work in the country of your exchange, do it! Ask your professors and you will be surprised of how willing they will be to help provide some recommendations. Alternatively, you could also look online and apply to many companies through their hiring websites.

## **Language**

This should be a no-brainer but if you are going to a country where the native language is not English, make sure you take some language courses! Even if the language of teaching is English, you should take a course in the native language so that you can meet local people and get to know their culture better. This is where planning ahead can be very important. If you have an idea early on in university that you want to go on exchange and know where you want to go, start taking language courses as soon as you can either as CSEs or courses on work terms. Many local colleges offer language courses at night that you can take while on work terms. For German exchanges, you can also take courses at the Goethe Institute which is a well-known private language school that is

available in most large cities. Many schools also offer intensive programs through their international departments. These are usually programs that are anywhere from a week to a month long but are offered intensively. That is, you attend a language and/or culture class everyday of the week. I highly recommend a course of this nature because you can usually pick up the language much quicker, meet many other students like you, and often these courses also include some cultural aspect that teaches you about the local culture. The intensive language course I took at Braunschweig also took us to nearby cities such as Hamburg and Berlin to experience the culture firsthand! I didn't just stop there either. I also took an intensive language course in Southern Germany in the city of Mannheim. This was probably the best thing that I did because I was able to study there for a month and travel to many locations in the South of Germany such as Munich for Oktoberfest!

### **Flights/Packing**

From my personal experience, these are just a couple of quick words about packing. Pack as light as you can. Remember that in the worst case, you can buy what you need while you are there. If you are planning to look for a job while you are abroad, make sure to pack appropriate clothing. Recently, many international airlines have lowered their allowable luggage weights from 32 to 25kg. Most major airlines allow up to two pieces that are 25kg each. If you are flying with a discount airline, this limit may even be less so keep that in mind when you buy your plane ticket. Although you may save money up front for a cheaper flight, you will have to pay to bring an extra piece of luggage or send things by mail.

If you're planning on travelling or backpacking while you are abroad, get a nice backpack that you can use as a piece of luggage. If you go this route, make sure to ask for a big plastic bag for your backpack when you check it in. Most airlines offer this and it helps to prevent the straps on your backpack from being stuck or torn off on conveyors at the airport. Some travel backpacks offer a feature that hides these straps away. Speaking of flights, be sure to shop around for the best option. If you are travelling to Europe, it may sometimes be cheaper to fly to a high traffic airport such as London, England and then fly with a cheap inter-Europe airline to your final destination.

## **Housing Abroad**

Assuming that you have figured out your housing plans before your departure, when you get there, all you will need to do is move in. If you are going to Braunschweig to attend TUBS, you will be given a chance to choose one of the student residences as your place of stay. The housing website outlines the different residences and will have pictures of each. Speaking on behalf of many UW students that have been to Braunschweig and me, *Michaelishof* is definitely the nicest of the residences available. It is in an old vintage house and includes single rooms on a floor with a shared kitchen or apartment style residences. Be sure to apply early for this one though because it is the most popular. Even German students have to go on a waiting list for a year or so to stay here! Luckily, the international office at TUBS has a couple of rooms that are reserved for international students.

It is also possible to stay in a house or apartment with other students similar to what most students do in Waterloo. However, this may be more difficult to arrange before you get to Germany. Another possibility is to do this in your second study term. As long as you give enough notice prior to moving out, the student residences will not have a problem.

## **School and Academics**

When you attend your classes, make sure to introduce yourself to the Professors. If they know who you are and that you are an exchange student, asking for favours will be much easier in the future. What kind of favours? In the summer term, the exam period in Germany usually isn't until September. This is usually a problem for Waterloo students who need to return back to Canada to start their next fall school or work term. In this case, you will need to request for an earlier exam. Most professors are very willing to do this for you but it will definitely help to let them know in advance. In most cases, professors will arrange for an earlier oral exam or if there are enough students requiring an early exam, perhaps even an early written exam. Speaking of oral exams, do not be



surprised that many of the exams in Germany are of this form. Especially for smaller class sizes, oral exams are common.

Try to stay on top of your classes. For most courses, the language of teaching will be German so make sure you understand the lectures. Because there are no tests or assignments during the term, the tendency is to put off studying until the exam period at the end of the terms. However, remember that cramming is whole different story when it's in a foreign language! If you do find yourself having trouble with the language, something that you can do (and I have done this) is to ask the professor to recommend some textbooks in English. Most of them will have a list of literature that they recommend so usually this is not a problem.

Try to meet some people in your classes and possibly study with them. If you start studying regularly with some German students, you will find that things will go much faster and you will also learn the language much quicker.

Don't forget to continue to take language classes at the Sprachenzentrum (Centre for Languages). They usually charge small fee for these classes but they are well worth it. Some classes have even transferred back to UW as German credits for those of you that are interested in doing a German minor. It can and has been done!

### **School life**

Study hard but also don't forget to play hard! TUBS offers an exhaustive list of clubs and sports. Most are free but some may charge a small fee for materials or equipment. Joining a team can be a great way to meet people and travel. I joined the Ultimate Frisbee team and travelled with the team to play Ultimate on the beach on the west coast of France. Another student on exchange joined the sailing club and obtained his license to sail. There is something for every taste and everyone.

Try to participate in some events with the International Office. They always try to run a multitude of events so that students can meet each other. They also organize a Peer Student program. I participated in this and my peer student helped me get started in

Braunschweig by helping me move, getting a bank account, etc. She also introduced me to her friends!

### **Transportation/Travelling**

As a student of TUBS, the fees that you pay will give you a transit pass that allows you to use all of the local buses and trams in the city of Braunschweig. It will also include a Niedersachsen (Lower Saxony) ticket that allows you to travel on the DB (Deutsche Bahn/German Train) in the entire province of Lower Saxony. Although, you are only allowed to take the regional (slowest) trains for free, this becomes very important as I will talk about later.

There are many cities around Braunschweig that are worth a visit. Braunschweig is pretty central in Northern Germany and therefore provides a good starting point.

Here are a few:

Hameln/Hamelin: This city is the origin of the famous story, “The Pied Piper of Hamelin”. In many months of the year, you can catch a free local re-enactment of the popular children’s tale.

Goslar: An interesting town that used to thrive on mining. You can even visit and take tours of the mine.

Bad Harzburg: Town of the tallest mountain in the area, Brocken; you can hike to the top or take an old steam train ride.

Bremen: Home of the famous Beck’s Brewery, you can tour the brewery and possibly sample some of one of the best-known German beers.

Hamburg: The famous city that still has one of the largest ports in the world, Hamburg is also famous for its party and red light district. You can party all night long and then go to the famous fish market in the morning.



Source: <http://www.international.niedersachsen.de/img/uebersichtskarte.jpg>

There are many other little-known cities around Braunschweig that are all worth a visit. The greatest advantage of the cities mentioned above? They can all be accessed free of charge with your semester transit ticket. What can be a better deal?!

Other cities that are must sees in the north of Germany are:

Berlin: The capital city of Germany, this city has so much art and culture that it would take many months to see it all. I especially liked it for the remains of the Berlin Wall.

Dresden: A treasure chest city for the art-lover as it has some of the world's best museums and galleries.

Cologne: Home of the famous Cologne Cathedral, it is also the fourth largest city in Germany after Berlin, Hamburg, and Munich.

Munich: Although this city is not in northern Germany, it also deserves a mention as it is also the home of the world's largest and first Oktoberfest that happens annually.

There are also many other cities in the south of Germany that are amazing places to go which includes, Mannheim, Heidelberg, Stuttgart, Frankfurt, etc. If you like to travel, make sure you look them up!

Now that I've talked about the different places you can go, I should talk a little bit about how you can get there. If you are travelling within Germany, the train is probably the most convenient and the mode of choice. However, be sure to book your tickets early. The earlier you book, the cheaper it is, as long as it is a return ticket. There are also such things as BahnCards which give you either 25%, 50% or 100% discounts, depending the one you have. Unless there is a promotion and you can get a discount on these cards, my personal opinion is that they are not worth it because of the amount of you pay up front to get the card. As long as you book in advance, you can still get enormous discounts. If you are staying in Germany for the full year of study in Braunschweig, you will also be eligible to buy an Interail ticket which allows unlimited train travel in different zones of Europe for a fixed amount. This ticket is definitely worth it but only available to people staying in Europe for more than a certain time (I believe it is six months.)

If you are travelling with a couple of people, it may also be worthwhile to rent a car. Additionally, you will get the experience of driving on the German Autobahn! If you plan to do this, make sure to get an international driver's license before you go at any CAA. Also, if you have a VISA card that provides rental insurance coverage, make sure to use it on the car rental. When I did this, we saved almost half of the cost!

The cheapest way to travel around Europe outside of Germany will probably be to fly. There are many discount airlines that operate within Europe. Especially in the fall and winter months, flights from Braunschweig to Stockholm, Sweden or Naples, Italy can be had for EUR 40 return! Many airlines fly out of cities near Braunschweig such as HLX out of Hannover as the closest one.

One other method of travel that I used was carpooling. There are a couple of different carpool websites where people who post rides offered or wanted. This can also be a relatively cheap way to travel within Germany.

### **After your exchange**

When you come back from a year of enlightenment, your exchange experience has definitely not come to an end. In fact, it is only the beginning. From your year abroad, I can almost guarantee that it has only given you a thirst to travel more and see more of the world.

While you are still at UW, please help to promote your exchange program or even Engineering Exchanges to younger students. Often, younger generations of engineering students do not hear about the wealth of experiences that can be gained by going on exchange. It is our job to inform people of the opportunities and to motivate people by telling of our personal experiences.

There are always students on exchange from other countries at UW so you can be as involved as much or as little as you want. I met some students in Braunschweig while studying there who later came to UW the next year. We hung out a couple of times and then ended up travelling to the Canadian West together.

One of the most valuable things from going abroad I have learned is that there are also many treasures in my own home that I have not yet explored. This has motivated me to travel and see more of my home country.

I sincerely hope that you will go on exchange. I can personally say that going abroad was the best thing that I have done in my life so far. It has given me an outlook on life and culture in the world like nothing else. I plan to do more travelling and pursue my career abroad as I want to see more of the world. I hope this guide has given you a small taste of that mentality.

## **Resources**

As I have promised, here are a couple of websites to the things I have mentioned earlier:

### **School-related**

Engineering Exchange at UW

<http://www.eng.uwaterloo.ca/~exchange/index.htm>

The International Office at TUBS

<http://www.tu-braunschweig.de/international>

Mechanical Engineering website with course descriptions

<http://www.fmb.tu-bs.de/>

### **Life in Braunschweig**

Housing in Braunschweig (Studentenwerk Braunschweig)

<http://rzv097.rz.tu-bs.de/braunschweig/wohnen.php?spracheNeu=GB>

or from their main site:

<http://rzv097.rz.tu-bs.de/>

International Office Peer Student Program

<http://www.tu-braunschweig.de/international/exchange/peer>

Local Braunschweig transportation

<http://www.braunschweiger-verkehrs-ag.de/index.php>

### **Health**

Ontario Ministry of Health

<http://www.health.gov.on.ca/index.html>

Travel Underwriters (health insurance)

<http://www.health.gov.on.ca/index.html>

### **Language programs abroad and at home**

Sprachenzentrum at TUBS (Centre for Foreign Languages)

<http://www.sz.tu-bs.de/en/>

German program at the University of Mannheim

<http://www.summacum.com/index.php?id=9&L=1>

Goethe Institut

<http://www.goethe.de/enindex.htm>

## **Travelling Resources (Getting there/around)**

Flight Centre

<http://www.flightcenter.ca/>

Die Deutsche Bahn (German train system)

<http://www.bahn.de>

Interrail

<http://www.interrail.net/>

HLX (German discount airline that flies out of Hannover)

<http://www.hlx.com/de/>

Other airlines

<http://www.ryanair.com/>

<http://www.easyjet.com/>

<http://www.airberlin.de>

Carpools

<http://www.mitfahrgelegenheit.de/>

<http://www.mitfahrgelegenheit.de/>