

Report of experience: Imperial College
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Frequent phrases, funny quotes, and impressions:
“Sorry, for any inconvenience.” - “Mind the gap!” -
Cash-out - Top up - “We always queue, even before
knowing what for.” (e.g. at ATMs) - “Major and minor
delays in the tube.” - Food



Introduction

When we pick up the word ERASMUS, many connections appear in our mind. We might think of a name of a famous philosopher, several European countries, cultural and linguistic exchange, gain of experiences and/or self-awareness.

So did I, when friends and I talked about the programme and the possibility to go abroad for half a year during the upcoming winter semester in 2005. After the idea was born, I had to decide quickly for up to three preferred partner universities that are available for my field of study (Molecular Biotechnology). For the Imperial College (IC), you can only apply for the months October to March/April, as this is the time where courses are held. However, the deadline for the ERASMUS scholarship is eight months earlier, i.e. the very beginning of February the same year. So, one has to make up one's mind where and when to go pretty early.

Within the next two months (March-April), I was informed about my placement. However, the demand for places in Sweden (Stockholm, Uppsala) and London (Imperial College) was very high; if there are more applicants for the same universities than places available, there is still the chance to ask the German ERASMUS coordinator for alternative universities with a lower rate of requests.

Still hoping for a place at one of my favourite universities, I also took into consideration going to other ones abroad. After a friend rejected his placement, I could finally fulfil my dream of studying at Imperial College in London.

Preparation (in Germany)

Department and course choice

After I was offered the place at IC, the actual work started. There were a few things to consider and to organize before leaving Germany. At first, I had to agree with the fellow student going to the same university (IC) which department each of us would like to join, as there is just one place available in the Biology and the Biochemistry department, respectively. If you study Molecular Biotechnology (MoBi) and go abroad during the fifth semester, like me, I'd recommend the Biochemistry department, which fulfils the required contents in Heidelberg better. However, I studied in the department of Biology and found enough interesting and useful seminars. Besides joint courses, you can still try to enter courses of the other department by consulting the Biology or Biochemistry Placement Administrator. Furthermore, I used the possibility to join a second year course.

I chose the second year seminar Physical Biochemistry as well as the following third year ones, Cellular Signalling and Neurobiology, Epidemiology, Advanced Topics in Neuroscience Research, and Integrative Systems Biology; the latter I absolved parallel to the second year course.

Credit points and evaluation issues

At the same time, I needed to inform and discuss course contents and time matching criteria with each German professor responsible for the corresponding subject I wanted to absolve at Imperial College. It is recommended to write agreements and also to have a word with the “Studiendekan” about the acceptance agreement. Topics that should be talked about, for example, are how marks or credit points (ECTS) are converted and evaluated in Heidelberg.

Accommodation

Months before giving notice of departure to the local public office, I cancelled my student room in the German hall on time (three months before leaving) and asked the “Studentenwerk” for re-acceptation after the ERASMUS exchange. The application deadline was the beginning of August for student halls in London. Unfortunately, there was no accommodation available for just six months. As my fellow student experienced, you need to announce a nine-month-stay, which regards you as a fulltime student and guarantees a room in a student hall. To avoid time trouble, the best advice in any case may be to inform yourself about other housing opportunities while waiting for an answer of the Accommodation Office. A very friendly and helpful address for private accommodation for students from Imperial College is the Private Housing Office next door. They will provide you with a variety of accommodation offers and important websites. I recommend this option especially for students who prefer a more individual living environment, as student halls are often as expensive as private accommodation (£80-£120 per week) or cost even more when they are catered at specific day times. Another aspect that should be taken into consideration, is that privacy and study conditions in halls might be limited due to shared bedrooms, first-year-students, so-called “freshers” (about 18 years of age), who want to celebrate living apart from their parents for the first time in their lives! ☺

Important “small” things: money, communication, flight, and luggage

For financial issues, I would recommend the DKB (Deutsche Kredit Bank), which allows withdrawing money at any ATM (VISA-supported) without fees, so it is not necessary to open a Bank account in Great Britain. Moreover, transferring money from my German bank account to the NatWest Bank comprised an unnecessary high fee of around ten Euro charged by the UK bank for accepting the incoming money. Another good alternative: if you already have a “Deutsche Bank - (Junges) Konto”, you at least can withdraw at Barclay ATMs for free. Regarding the account opening at DKB for students and other issues I’m happy to give assistance.

To keep in touch, skype is the cheapest and easiest way to communicate. There are also possibilities to be more independent by using calling cards that cost 0.5c - 2c per minute depending on the country the call is addressed to. Another good option for just having one UK mobile is to buy the prepaid card “mobile world”, which has cheap rates to countries all over the world (app. 7p/minute) and cheap prices for calls and short messages within Great Britain.

Regarding the prices of flights, one month before should be fine. Depending the city in Germany you fly from, there are loads of cheap possibilities. The best, I found, was ryanair, using the shuttle services from Heidelberg to the Frankfurt-Hahn Airport and the one from Stansted Airport to Central London.

Going by plane means that you are limited in luggage weight. So, if you don’t want to pay horrendous prices for overloaded bags, it is worth trying to take half of the things you originally wanted to carry and just take what you’ll need immediately. You may fly home anyway for Christmas, which allows an extra stuff- and clothes-picking; furthermore, additional things can be sent on the postal way to your British address later on. However, besides riding the bus and the Tube, you will walk a lot, especially during the first weeks. So, do yourself and your feet a favour and wear comfortable shoes - my favourite: running shoes.

In London at Imperial College

Finding an accommodation and getting around

From here on, my real adventure began! I arrived in the last week of September, had no accommodation in a hall and the introductory week started the first week in October. I highly recommend attending this “Freshers’ Fayre” for your own interest, as all societies and student clubs introduce themselves to all newcomers and you will meet many exchange and regular students - one way to integrate and socialize.

Anyway, time was rare; I slept the first three nights in a youth hostel with my entire luggage. As mentioned before, with a six-months-stay, I couldn’t get a room in a hall. However, I needed a proper accommodation as soon as possible. So, I was happy to find help next to the Accommodation Office in the so-called Private Housing Office. The nice ladies gave fantastic support in finding an affordable and central alternative (from £15/night on) to the youth hostel for the next days. After one week of searching - the lectures have already started - four other guys, mostly exchange students, and I rent a house in Shepherd’s Bush (£90 per week each, excluding bills (water, internet & phone, electricity)). If you don’t have a friend over there who can introduce you to the firstly confusing bus system and the Tube, two weeks would be a reasonable time frame to get familiar with the most important facilities and surroundings in London.

When university starts, student registration takes place; besides time for cueing for about three hours, you may need a pass photo and a UK home address. A few days to a few weeks later you will hopefully receive a so-called “oyster-photocard” that entitles you for 30% discount on public transport. But, as you might receive it just two months after your registration (as all my flatmates), I recommend buying a usual oyster card (monthly or weekly pass), which is the cheapest way to get around within London before having the student discount oyster card.

Imperial College: impressions and facts

Imperial College and ERASMUS

Even if ERASMUS has the touch of not studying and just partying, I have to correct this impression. As Imperial College has a very good reputation in the scientific world, the student requirements are very high. That doesn’t mean that it is impossible to enjoy life besides; in contrast, there are lots of social events offered by various societies. So, if marks are important for you, allow some time for studying and especially for reading (scientific papers etc.) besides exploring London and the UK, sightseeing, socialising and partying.

Facilities and lunch

The campus is gorgeous and facilities, such as the huge library, WLAN on-campus, the computers and the new sports centre have to be pointed out. The Main Dining Hall sometimes is not the best opportunity to eat; additionally, you might want to eat something different from time to time - a nice alternative is the Cafeteria or the Sandwich Shop that is well-known, cheaper, offers more variable food, and is just a few steps around the corner from the College.

Courses, lecturers, teaching, and marks

As mentioned before, the courses you have chosen in advance can be changed even if you realise after two classes that you would prefer another lecture(r). In general, the professors are very ambitious in teaching and successful scientists publishing in high-class journals. I could recommend every course I have mentioned in the preparation part. Second year courses are held in a more regimented way than the smaller third-year ones (20 - 35 students), as they comprise more attendees that will divide in several third-year directions the successive year.

Being interested in the course topic is recommended, as you'll spend four to five weeks studying every class. During this time, you'll focus on several topics from the field in form of three to four course works, which can be lab reports, essays, reviews, news-and-views articles, poster or power point presentations. That means, you are forced, in a good way, to study for the duration of the course and not, as the German system sometimes allows it, saving everything to the end. At that point of time (End of March), you have one month for repeating all third-year courses; second-year exams take place in the mid of February. Basically, the study system demands continuous physical and mental attendance, and daily to weekly revision - you can also use Wednesday afternoons, which are actually reserved for sport activities.

If you prefer not to experience how late penalties (5% per day) can reduce your marks, you better start working early and hand in on time. Another important fact is that for the final exams you have just one chance to achieve a good mark, which is the first one. As the next and last chance absolving the course can just be accomplished with a "D" (passed). But, with normal study effort it should be possible to achieve a "B" or a "C". An "A" affords some extra reading.

Language classes and extracurricular activities

The Humanities Programme offers many interesting courses, for which it is necessary to apply for. I regarded language courses as a useful addition, as you will produce more text works than you may be used to in Germany. This learning-by-doing practice supported by the Academic Writing course and the Cambridge Advanced Exam (CAE) class helped me to improve my language skills in written and colloquial English. The CAE test is in June, and this is how long the course runs. The fee of that course depends on the number of participants (around £60 - £80), but the money is really worth it! I indeed learned a lot in general English (grammar and vocabulary), understanding between the lines and how to write proper scientific English texts - the contribution of the friendly and helpful teachers had a major impact on that, too. Thus, the last Biology/Biochemistry course I attended seemed to be the easiest one, as understanding and communication difficulties have been overcome by frequent and continuous writing and talking to other people regardless where they came from (Germany as well), language courses, and writing experience from course works and listening one from lecture attendance. In Spanish (Level 2) and Russian (Level 1) classes, I also experienced highly motivated teachers.

For further free time activities, I would suggest the ERASMUS society and other social clubs offered at Imperial College (Freshers' Week).

Life style in London

Money, money, money...

It's no secret that London is one of the most expensive cities in Europe. Rents, public transport, food, and the whole life style cost me 850 Euro a month. I paid around 600 Euro for rent including bills and internet connection (from bulldog). The rest was left for public transport, food, travelling (within the UK and home), going out, and (mobile) phone calls.

Work before pleasure ☺ - Fun, party, sightseeing, and the rest

After broadly referring about preparations and duties of studying, here comes the nice part everybody is expecting meanwhile. What do you get out of it?

Well, basically, you'll find out! And that's one of the best ways to look at it, in my opinion. Try not to expect anything specific of your stay! It's personal, different, depending on too many factors of place, people, you, and so on. Why I'm writing that? Some people told me that they were disappointed from their ERASMUS stay "because, e.g. it was not like in the movie 'L'Auberge espagnole'". Just seeking for the special experience(s) is like searching for love - let it find you (quite philosophical☺). Of course, there's a lot of sightseeing to do, spending

weekends in- and outside of London; also take advantage of the huge terrific cultural offer, not to forget the free Science and Natural History Museum next to the College.

However, I had one of the best times of my life at Imperial College and in London, learned a lot about myself, for my life, improved my language skills, made many friends and kept a few real ones, learned to live in a metropolis and in a completely new and unknown environment. I realized the gain of experiences and personal development more obviously during temporary stays visiting my friends, girlfriend and family, and even more after I finally returned.

A few words to my personal experience

One week before going to London, I returned from travelling through Cuba for one month. So, I had no accommodation, as I was not accepted for a hall, and no flight either; moreover, two halls were closed that year for refurbishing reasons. I have to admit that I booked my flight with British Airways (for luggage reasons that were 30kg + hand luggage) just three days in advance before its actual departure (Frequent Flyer points from Qantas).

It was a bit stressful to stay the first three nights in that ten-bed dorm in a hostel with all my luggage (around 40 kilos, including valuable things like my notebook). The first important things I bought for getting around was the oyster card and a city map in form of a book. For housing, finally, I found help at the Private Housing Office the upcoming Monday for a single temporary accommodation for IC-student conditions (£15 per night). Being frustrated, by trying hard to get one of the hall rooms, the nice staff of the Private Housing Office next door supported me with housing offers from landlords. Besides Freshers' Week, I spent one week doing "research" and orientating where I wanted to live and how much I'd like to pay for what. It turned out that it would take much time to have a look at all the flats and houses due to London's extends. Finding an individual accommodation usually was expensive, and I almost met the same people searching for individual accommodation in the office every day. So, I was just to begin hanging out notes that I'm searching for students who want to found a flat share with me. That day, I met an Italian, two Germans and a Kenyan guy in the office. We, all five, looked at three houses and found a very nice landlord and semidetached house in Shepherd's Bush, and we moved in the next day. Most landlords prefer if you stay for a whole (study) year, as it is hard to find somebody for the left two to five months.

Even though, the area is a little bit shabby, we were lucky to live in one of the newer houses. We had a great time meeting and celebrating with friends at ours.

To be honest, integration in English circles of friends was hard, as the "ERASMUS-family" shares many more interests; so, from hanging out together with exchange students, I also learned much about other European countries and cultures besides the British.

Postprocessing of the ERASMUS experience

Maybe you wouldn't think about it in the first place before going, but it's good to know before returning, as you are prepared then. Yes, I felt something like an "ERASMUS-hole" or sudden emptiness after ERASMUS was finished.

It was like a dream; it seemed to be over and, at the same time, it has never taken place. "What have I done the last months? What did my German friends do meanwhile? How went life on in Heidelberg (without me)? What is different now?" and similar questions about changes and perception alteration, I asked myself. Being used to live together with other exchange students for a long time, sharing many parts of our lives and social activities, leaving the UK and London after studying intensively together for the final exams combined with the immediate start of the sixth semester in Heidelberg were major hassle.

Eventually, I'd say, enjoy your individual ERASMUS experience and face the challenges - you can just win! Don't be afraid of anything and relax, there are also helpful people around.

☺ Have a nice time! ☺

Helpful internet links

ERASMUS in the UK

<http://www.erasmus.ac.uk/>

CAE courses and exams

<http://www.cambridgeesol.org/teach/cae/>

<http://www.cambridge-exams.de/> (in Germany)

Imperial College links:

Humanities programme, language courses, etc.

<http://www3.imperial.ac.uk/humanities>

IC Erasmus Society

<http://www.union.ic.ac.uk/osc/erasmus/>

IC Union

<http://www.imperialcollegeunion.org/>

IC South Kensington Campus

http://www.imperial.ac.uk/conferences/index.asp?page_id=2

Accommodation:

Halls at Imperial College

<http://www3.imperial.ac.uk/residences>

Flat/house share & private housing

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

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

<http://www.net-lettings.co.uk/>

<http://www.moveflat.com/cgi-bin/dbr.asp?n=9641>

Hostels in London

<http://www.london-hostels.co.uk/home/default.aspx>

Travel to and in London:

Shuttle service Stansted-London (center)

<http://lowcostcoach.com/>

Flights

<http://www.ryanair.com/site/DE/?culture=DE>

Shuttle service Heidelberg-Frankfurt/Hahn

<http://www.hahn-express.de/>

Transport for London (tube, busses, etc.)

<http://www.tfl.gov.uk/>

Communication within or from the UK:

Via the www

<http://skype.com> (Skype Pro for landline calls all over the globe)

From UK landlines (with calling cards)

<http://planetphonecards.com/> (I used the Story Mobile Saver Phone Card.)

From UK mobiles

www.mobileworld.co.uk/ (cheap European/International rates, e.g. to German landlines: 7p)

www.freshmobile.co.uk/ (cheap calls within the UK and low text rates)

Postal services from the UK

<http://www.parcel2go.com/parceldelivery-uk.aspx?service=euro>