

Erasmus Report for travel abroad 2017/18: internship in Cambridge, England

Since the semester abroad is no longer a compulsory part of the course for students in Digital Media, this opportunity is unfortunately rarely used. It now takes at least twice as much courage, strength and time to take the step abroad and plan successfully. But with the lack of obligation to complete a semester abroad also comes freedom. The time frame can be freely designed both for the duration of the stay and for its integration into the curricular process of the study programme. For example, this gave me the chance to only go abroad once all the preparations had been made. This preparation consists of two basic factors: the planning of the stay (where? which institution/company? when? how long?) and the implementation (financing, accommodation, visas, insurance, transport, etc.). The planning should rather reflect the desire of all students to spend part of their studies abroad. The value, advantages and opportunities for this opportunity have an incalculably high value and I would like to recommend this to every student.

It can feel overwhelming if there is the option of not only completing the semester abroad as a guest student at a university, but also working as an intern in one of the many companies to choose from. At this point it helps to start by answering one of the questions about planning your stay (e.g. desired country) and answering the other questions around this decision. Assuming the desired country has certain visa regulations, the length of stay can be clarified by itself, for example. Planning becomes more real in a similar way if you have to stick to the semester times of the target university. This quickly creates a rough idea with the most important questions already answered.

The biggest hurdle is implementation, the organisational effort to translate this rough idea into a concrete project. In my case, financial security was necessary in order to be able to embark on the project with peace of mind. Luckily there is help from the International Office! In addition to patient advice, they will provide every information necessary for implementation. In order to make this as efficient as possible, it helps if many questions about planning your stay can already be answered. What will ultimately be possible and feasible will then become apparent in the conversation. I had already largely determined the target country, the length of stay and the target company and was therefore able to ask very specifically what I would need to make it happen.

With the help I received there, I was able to successfully complete the Erasmus application, answer insurance questions and I also had access to a network of Erasmus alumni and Erasmus contacts in the target country. This network is at least as valuable as the funding itself. Questions about the process and the situation on site, experiences and tips are now just an email away. This can be used, for example, to clarify questions about the semester ticket or to establish contacts for shared apartments in the target region. Financial support through the Erasmus programme is also a solid basis for covering basic costs such as rent or travel costs. The Erasmus grant does not cover everything you need in everyday life, especially since the experience abroad should be enjoyed to the fullest and one should try to cover additional expenses for all kinds of undertakings or tourist activities out of your own pocket. There is rarely a chance to come into such intensive contact with a culture beyond your studies, which is why I recommend taking as much money as possible with you and not sparing any expense for unique opportunities. You can save when you are back in Germany. These extra costs now have to be covered and you can save or earn extra money in some places. As an intern, I made it clear that I needed a subsidy from work. This does not have to be much and should not be an exclusion criterion for choosing an

institution/company. There are numerous scholarships and funding programmes for further financial grants, including through the BAföG office (see International Office).

In addition to the “existential basics” for the semester abroad, there are a few other bureaucratic hurdles that could otherwise throw a spanner into the works: insurance coverage, visa applications, registration certificates in the destination country or, if necessary, de-registration from Germany. These preparations may sound tedious, but they are easy to accomplish if you allow yourself enough time. It's difficult for me to name a period of time for this, in my case it was about three months of preparation time, during which many documents were filled out, forwarded and so on. After all, the planning must be carried out in consultation with the university, the target institution, the relevant authorities and the insurance company.

Another point worth mentioning is the living situation. As we all know, this is not an easy thing to do in university cities and the fact that demand there causes rental prices to skyrocket doesn't help. Cambridge is one of the most expensive cities in the UK, alongside London and Oxford, so where can you stay? Cambridge is like a large academic transfer station: hundreds of students, professors, guest lecturers and of course exchange students from all over the world pass through this city every day, leaving behind a corresponding fluctuation in available rental space and the belongings that are needed for a temporary stay. As a result, there are countless shared apartments, private accommodations and entire blocks of houses for these “guests”. So if you manage to arrive outside of the regular semester schedule, you will increase the chance of getting a good apartment. The start of the semester at the end of September/beginning of October is probably the most difficult time. In England there is the so-called Council tax, a type of residents' tax, which amounts to just under £1,300 a year. If you contact them, a short time later you will receive a letter with the relevant information. The document requests you to pay this tax, but you can easily avoid that by filing a proof of enrolment online.

Before moving abroad, it is also worth issuing a power of attorney to friends or family for any concerns that may arise in Germany. This means there is a contact person on site at all times if documents need to be filled out, picked up or a transfer needs to be made.

As a general period of stay, I recommend scheduling six months (or longer) so that you arrive before the start of the semester and can get your bearings without pressure, find an apartment, get a bike (before everything is sold out) and then experience what the city is like when it awakens from its slumber at the start of the semester and offers a wide range of activities.

The special value of an experience abroad is rarely remembered through particularly exciting course content. Rather, the real value lies in discovering the country and culture and joining a network of people from all over the world who share this curiosity. Many universities have a well-established platform for Erasmus programme students where they can find help and advice. Unfortunately, I have often observed that this also comes with a certain level of comfort that curbs curiosity about the destination country. I therefore recommend being open to other social circles and getting involved, for example, in sports clubs, shared apartments or extracurricular programme items. This applies to personal purposes, but can also be an excellent way to identify new professional prospects. The many new contacts you make will quickly give you access to different professional fields and, based on the origin of the social contacts, you gain deep insights into job opportunities in other countries or cultures. In this respect, Cambridge is probably one of the most exciting locations in the world and this “networking” is by no means frowned upon – in fact, it is actively encouraged and often highlighted as a separate programme item at events.

Looking back, the decision to work in a small and young company was a great advantage in many ways. My internship gave me a comprehensive insight into the start-up culture and I was able to quickly get involved and help shape internal processes. Start-ups all over the world are looking for committed, flexible people who work independently and put the shared vision before the financial outcome. This makes them an ideal target for unsolicited applications and offers great potential for gaining a foothold in a small team in a short period of time.

In addition to the obvious media and creative work, I quickly took on a large part of the public relations and communications work. Through customer contact and active outreach, my English improved significantly, both verbally and in writing, in a very short time, which in turn allowed me to confidently take on further tasks. My greatest successes include setting up an online platform for educational communication between Asia and the United Kingdom and an intensive phase in the summer in which I was able to film a group of students from China on an exchange programme sending them around England for almost two weeks. These two highlights exemplify the diversity of my work during the semester abroad.

In conclusion: I can describe my time in Cambridge as an extremely formative period. Not a day goes by in this city without an interesting lecture or panel, a film premiere or a rowing race taking place (at least during term time). You share the same living space with people from the sciences, politics and culture and the special thing about it is that all of these people are sociable and open. That's why I will particularly remember the social connections that I was able to make. Both my colleagues from the company and many students from the University of Cambridge gave me an unforgettable time there and I would like to thank the International Office of the University of the Arts for their strong support and making this experience possible.