

# My Experience Studying Abroad at Birmingham City University

## **Preparing to Study Abroad**

As a student of English there was never a real question of me going abroad or not and the Erasmus+ programme seemed just the right way to do it from the start. I hadn't planned a "perfect" time for it though and applied rather spontaneously. I found out I would only study one of my subjects when abroad, so I applied within my second subject, which is music, because I thought it would be interesting to do something I had been doing in German in English and would make it more valuable to me than just taking English classes in England. As far as I know I was the first person taking this specific chance of studying Music Industries at Birmingham City University. I can honestly say all the staff are very open, driven and were easy to communicate with beforehand. I can really recommend their programme for my fellow students of music who aim to look at something other than teaching. My coordinator here in Oldenburg helped me put together the initial Learning Agreement and with theirs and the help of the coordinators at BCU I also got to switch classes after arriving in Birmingham and could choose the module to suit my interests and my academic needs regarding the course of my studies back in Oldenburg.

## **Arriving in Birmingham**

Birmingham has its own airport, it's small, but there are direct flights from Hamburg. However, I went to London first to do some sightseeing and then took a train which took about 90 minutes. Birmingham is mostly an industrial City and while I wouldn't like London as a city to live in, I can recommend a trip for all the sights and museums. I just went there beforehand because I had heard about the weather in England being best in early September. I brought my saxophone with me to be able to practice, if you have similar plan you really need to check with the airline beforehand. In my case with Eurowings I was able to take my instrument into the cabin, but they didn't allow hard cases, so I wrapped it in a lot of bubble wrap inside the bag, on the day none of the security staff or flight attendants took issue.

There were plenty things planned for students for the welcome week. We had to work on a first project in groups which was a good way for me to get to know the City, as it is the second biggest city in the UK and can be confusing if you're new, and there were even prizes to win. The first thing to do during the welcome week is to sign up with a GP – a general practitioner, as in the UK you can't just go to any doctor when you're already sick. You will need to sign up with them, then the National Health Service will send you a letter with your number and you will need to go the GP again and talk about your general health and medical history to complete your registration. You would still need to make an appointment with them in the case of you being sick, however there is a walk-in centre at Boots (which is a big drug store) in the city centre. Overall, the NHS is more complicated and bureaucratically rigid than healthcare in Germany, so I can only encourage you to think about everything beforehand. The University also has a practitioner nurse you can sign up with, but she is only in part-time.



A bus stop in Digbeth with the City Centre in the background

### **Accommodation**

I took the option to stay in the accommodation offered by BCU, so I was right next to the University buildings and only needed two minutes to get to my classes. I think they put most Erasmus and other international students in Block C, which has huge windows that allow you look at the skyline. The building was very new and clean, and the accommodation staff is nice, I can recommend it. I was in a flatshare with five other international students who were really nice, and it was fun to meet people from everywhere around the world. The building also has a workspace for when the library is too crowded and a communal hang-out area. There are also practice rooms, but if you are not studying at the Conservatoire you need to make sure that the staff program your key to open them when you're there. The Campus is generally close to Digbeth, a hipstery neighbourhood good for going out. There is an independent cinema and lots of bars and clubs as well as vintage second-hand shops. In general, Birmingham is a big city, but only the city centre is full of high-rise buildings, the rest is mostly small brick terraced houses like the one the Dursleys live in in the Harry Potter movies. All the University building were modern and new, there are also smaller cafés inside the building and there is a cosy pub run by the student's union. Sometimes the media faculty would organise pizza parties for the international students there, and the pizza is great.

### **Studying at BCU**

Classes started the week after welcome week. At BCU, a module is basically the same as the class itself, although the class times are not normed the way they are in Oldenburg, for example the Popular Music Narratives class was three hours. Classes start at nine am, and contrary to most German universities they don't make use of the academic quarter at all, so make sure to be punctual. The number of students attending a class is comparable to attending a seminar here in Oldenburg, although I had a class on Cultural Theory with only a couple other students which allowed for intense discussions. The actual classes took up very little time in my effective schedule, but there were plenty homework texts to read and keep busy. The classes were mostly overviews concerned with broader subjects, by which I mean broader compared to music seminars at the University of Oldenburg, while we had to choose our own specific topics for the essays. The semester goes until the end of January, although the classes stop a bit before that and you either get lucky with your deadlines (some are in January) or you will have to write your assignments during the semester, which was new for me and very stressful. For some of my classes, there were several smaller assignments, with the first one due in November and the second mid-December and for most I needed to write 3000-3500 words, so they are a bit shorter compared to essay I had to write for my courses in Oldenburg. The marking might seem harsh compared to German marks, I was confused at first but some British friends I made here explained it to me: everything above 70% is already really good, so don't worry.

## **Leisure**

There are many opportunities to have a good time in Birmingham. Field Trip, a group of international students organise trips all around England for other international students, and I went on one of their day-trips to see Stonehenge, which had been on my bucket-list for a long time. It was a pretty rainy day, but it was totally worth it. We also went to Bath for the afternoon on that trip, I didn't expect a lot, but it is a very picturesque town worth visiting. By the way it's not as rainy as Oldenburg, which is amazing as it's still England and before coming I thought the weather would be much worse. I also went to do some sightseeing within Birmingham. There is a science museum right on campus, but I recommend going in the afternoon, because some galleries are more for kids and it's cheaper to go later. Furthermore, there is also Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery which has miscellaneous cool exhibitions and is free. I can also recommend the Museum of the Jewellery Quarter which explains and demonstrates the history of jewellery manufacturing in Birmingham. The Library of Birmingham is also worth a trip, it has a view of the city and a special room dedicated to Shakespeare. I also recently went to the Wildlife Conservation Centre, which is a fairly small zoo. They keep a lot of small monkeys, but also Lynx and Red Pandas. There are multiple feedings each day and the staff are welcoming and like to answer questions. As I went for the first Semester, I had to decide on whether to stay for Christmas or back to Germany to see my family, some people were going, but I decided to stay in Birmingham with some of my flatmates. For Christmas Day I volunteered with Crisis at Christmas, which aims to make Christmas Day nicer for homeless people. I really wanted to try it as a new experience and had very interesting conversations that day.

## **Conclusion**

Overall, I had a very fun and still academically inspiring semester in Birmingham. My closing advice is to brace yourself against all the bureaucracy to come and take it patiently and to

keep your classes in mind even with all the fun things to do. I can also advise you to go on trips outside of town so see a bit more the UK, although, there is always more to see that you can realistically fit into one semester.