

Auslandsstudienaufenthalt 2014/ 2015

Preparation and Prearrangements

As soon as I had decided to spend a year abroad after completing my Bachelor's degree, I started to attend office hours and to collect information about the matter online. As I am a student of English, I mainly talked to Ms Freede. She provided me with a list of universities in English speaking countries that I could apply to. I was already expecting that I would have to organize my stay abroad privately because I am a recipient of BAföG. Students of English are expected to spend some time in an English speaking country during their degree. Thus, the application process for a space within the Erasmus programme tends to be quite competitive. Moreover, students receiving BAföG can apply for additional funding via BAföG in order to finance their stay abroad. Thus, they are not as likely to receive an Erasmus space as students who have no other option to finance their stay abroad but a scholarship.

I was very lucky to receive the Erasmus scholarship in order to spend an academic year at Maynooth University. A friend informed me about the remaining Erasmus-space which was offered by the department of music. Even though I do not study music, I thought it was worth a try and went to see the Erasmus coordinator to find out more about the offer. I learned that I could apply anyhow, as there did not seem to be any other interested applicants studying music. I was more than happy, especially because my chances to receive a space in the Erasmus programme seemed to be so small in the beginning of the application process. A few weeks later I received the official acceptance letter of the International office of Maynooth University. Ever since I had developed a particular interest in languages, I dreamt of living abroad for some time. Finally, this dream was about to come true!

Luckily, the friend who had informed me about the remaining space got accepted, too. Thus, we started our search for an accommodation together. As we had learnt from reports of former international students, it is very difficult to find accommodation in Maynooth. To be on the safe side, we started searching immediately after receiving the official letter of acceptance. We joined several groups on facebook that were concerned with procuring student apartments. Moreover, we started writing e-Mails to landlords that published their addresses on an official list of the International Office of Maynooth University. We received several responds and could choose from a few offers. In the end, it was down to two possible landlords and we decided to go with the one that had sent us very nice pictures in advance. Even though the house was not directly in town, we decided to take it because it seemed to be in very good condition and was one of the few offers with separate bedrooms.

Getting There

My friend and I booked our flight tickets with Ryanair. This airline offers very cheap flights between Bremen and Dublin. Fortunately, our landlady offered to pick us up from the airport in Dublin so we were spared the hassle of organising a ride to Maynooth. Anyhow, getting to Maynooth from Dublin airport turned out to be pretty easy with the public transport system as well: The Airporthopper is a bus company serving the route between Maynooth and Terminal 2 at Dublin Airport. Buses operate seven days a week and tickets can easily be booked and paid in advance via <http://airporthopper.ie/>. If the times do not suit at all, it is always possible to get a taxi. This is the most expensive option though. A ride from Dublin airport to the centre of Maynooth is usually around 50 €.

Accommodation

It is actually pretty hard to find convenient accommodation in Maynooth. The amount of students nearly equals the amount of permanent residents and the housing offers provided by the university can hardly cover the demand. As Irish people tend to buy houses instead of renting them, it gets even more difficult to find temporary accommodation because there is little to no market for this sector. Hence, the few available apartments are often rented out for horrendous prices. From my experience, it is almost impossible to find a room in Maynooth for less than 400 € a month. It is possible, though, to find cheaper offers in some of the surrounding villages like Leixlip, Celbridge or Kilcock. Still, transportation expenses in order to get to the university usually exceed the savings in rent. It is very important to consider the different types of accommodation that are common in Maynooth. For me, they turned out to be very different from what I was used to in Germany. It is either possible to rent a room in a house shared with the property owner(s) (usually a family) or to share a house or sometimes an apartment with other students or professionals. More detailed information on those different types of accommodation is provided here:

<https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/accommodation/accommodation-private-sector/incoming-first-year-get-you-started/types-accommodation-private-sector#SelfCatering>.

My general impression was that shared flats as we know them in Germany do not really exist. Even Irish students mainly regard their housing in the university town as temporary and do not really invest in a stable facility. Most local students I met during my stay in Maynooth went to stay with their parents and families whenever they could. As a consequence, student accommodations are very often regarded as mainly purposive but not as an actual place to live and develop. Quite a few places I got to see during my stay were in very bad condition (black mould, constant humidity, rundown interior, neglected households - to name but a few).

Another aspect I would like to address is the heating situation during wintertime. In my place the heating was controlled by the property owners (who I lived with) only. This means that I had no right to regulate the heating without asking for permission. The general heating times were two to three hours in the mornings and two to three hours in the evenings (usually starting around 5 pm). During the day, the heating was switched off completely. Quite disturbing was the fact that my landlords were using a big stove in their living room during the winter months while my flatmates and I were not supposed to stay in that room. The living room was connected to the kitchen but the latter was not meant to be a common room. So my flatmates and I usually left it right after finishing our meals. This was never directly addressed but implicitly indicated. Because of the stove, my landlords' living space was constantly warm while the rooms of my flatmates and me were absolutely freezing cold during the day. Anyhow, the heating situation at my place was still better than at many other places I was told about. Friends of mine lived in places where there was no heating at all because the landlord would not pay the bill in order to refill the oil tank or flatmates refused to take a share in the bill.

Apart from that I would like to talk a bit more about my place in particular. My friend and I moved to a house owned and occupied by a couple between 55 and 65 years old. Their four children were already grown up and had moved out by then. In the beginning, we were impressed by the really nicely renovated house and the very good condition it was in. Compared to other places I viewed during my stay it was definitely above standard while the rent of 100€ per week was still average. The landlords were generally very friendly people and we got along well for quite a while. Some time before Christmas, things started to change. We had the impression that our landlady was taking back concessions she had made in the beginning bit by bit: We were not supposed to use the desks upstairs anymore and she started to put her own things back onto the wardrobe she had initially cleared for us. All of those little changes were never talked about which I regard as a main difficulty during my stay. Even though I do not mean to generalize, I had the impression that leaving things unsaid until they become a big problem and result into an outburst of anger was quite a common experience

among my friends when it comes to landlords and flatmates. When moving into an owner-occupied house it is definitely important to be aware that this is usually not regarded as an equal arrangement! Instead, the tenant is expected to fully adjust to the habits of the owner(s) which can also include the abidance to rules. Those rules included at my place: No cooking after 8 o' clock pm, washing only up to 40° or less, no regulation of the heating. It was very difficult for me to accept those arrangements in the beginning. I am taking care of my own household for four years now and even while living with my parents I did not face any comparable rules. As a consequence, I started to search for an alternative place to stay as soon as I returned to Maynooth after the Christmas break. My friend had left Ireland by then because she was only supposed to stay for the first term. Without my friend and former flatmate, I found it even more difficult to handle the confusing situation of being something in between a tenant with very little rights and a guest who is expected to be thankful for being tolerated. Anyhow, my search was not successful: All the houses I viewed were in such bad conditions or so much more expensive that I decided the lesser evil was to stay at my current place for now. And the decision turned out to be the right one: After a while, I got two new flatmates and their presence made the whole atmosphere at home a lot more relaxed for me. It was very good that the focus was not only on me anymore. It was great to finally live with other students that shared my mind set and that I could talk to and spend time with. As my female flatmate was Brazilian and my male flatmate French, I got the chance to experience a very multicultural living situation during the second term. It was one of the best things that happened to me during my stay and I am confident that our friendship will continue despite the distance.

Studying at the University Abroad

Studying at Maynooth was an amazing experience when it comes to student support services in general. Especially the international office did a great job: The staff was always available either in person or via e-mail and facebook. Usually, they responded to e-mails and messages within two days. Furthermore, they were always willing to help with any possible queries, even if they were not directly related to the university. Great programmes offered by the International Office are the "Buddy-Programme" as well as "Language Tandem Partnerships". I was matched with a lovely Irish "buddy" and met up once a week with another Irish student who wanted to improve her German. Both acquaintances were great experiences and quickly turned into friendship. I highly recommend participating in programmes like this to any international student because it is a great opportunity to get in contact with actual natives. In hindsight, it was easy to get in touch with other internationals (the general spirit was very open minded and welcoming) while it was rather difficult to build up firmer relationships with natives.

When it comes to lectures and seminars in particular, studying in Maynooth was a bit disappointing for me. The main cause was probably that I was unable to attend seminars in English, as the only courses open for internationals in this field were lectures. My personal experience is that it is usually more difficult to successfully engage with taught contents when there is no opportunity to discuss them in a seminar or the like. Apart from that, it is harder to settle into the new academic environment when attending lectures only. My experience is that people are less likely to talk to each other before or after if they are not supposed to talk during the course. Thus, it requires more of an effort to get in touch with other students. Furthermore, English is taught with a strong literary focus in Maynooth. This is also the case at many other Universities in England and Ireland. Thus, courses are restricted to literary and cultural studies while areas as linguistics and didactics are not included. Anyhow, I was aware of these circumstances before applying for the University of Maynooth and I was willing to lower my sights in terms of the choice of modules. Instead, the experience of living in an Anglophone

country and engaging in social life was most important for me. Regarding philosophy, I was more satisfied with the range of modules I could choose from. It was especially convenient that I was entitled to do master courses. Like this, I was able to attend seminars while I was simultaneously making a more significant progress in terms of my degree than in English.

Daily-Life and Free Time

My daily life mainly consisted of studying in the library during the day, meeting friends in the evenings and going out at night. I met up with my buddy quite regularly to have lunch together or do things in the evenings. Every Thursday, I met up with my language tandem partner. We used to meet in varying cafes or outside on the beautiful lawns of the campus. The courses that I could transfer to my home university did not exceed 45 CP for the full year, so I had more time at free disposal than I would have had in Germany. On the one hand, I would have liked to contribute more CPs to my degree in order to keep up the pace. On the other hand, I truly benefitted from the opportunity to take more time while experiencing only little pressure. Like this, I was able to fully enjoy my stay without too much stress due to examinations and the like. Moreover, these circumstances enabled me to take many chances to travel Ireland. I would definitely recommend reducing the amount of studying to any future international student. There are so many things to see, there is so much to explore and you will get many other opportunities to spend time at your desk back in your home country. Get out there and enjoy life! That is definitely how I made the best memories.

Experiences in General

A truly inspiring experience during my year abroad was traveling Ireland and the UK. During the first term I went on a trip to the North of Ireland with lovely friends from Denmark. We got to explore Belfast, the Giant's Causeway and Derry. Furthermore, I travelled the West of Ireland with my boyfriend. We booked an accommodation in Galway and went on daytrips to Connemara and the Burren which are both remarkably beautiful landscapes. In the end of November my flatmate and I made use of the cheap flight offers by Ryanair and went to visit a friend of ours in Dundee. We also spend a wonderful winter day in Edinburgh – It is definitely worth a visit and I would go back anytime!

I decided to spend Christmas with my friends and family in Germany. I arrived back in Maynooth during the first week of January to study for the exams. After they were finished, I had some time left before college was back on and my parents came to visit. With my mom, I stayed in Dublin for a week and we visited rather nearby places such as Howth. We also went to see an exhibition in the Irish Museum of Modern Arts and attended a walking tour through Dublin. When my dad visited, we went hiking from Greystones to Bray and visited the National Gallery and other tourist attractions in Dublin. In May, a friend from Germany stayed over and after the examination period in the beginning of June I went on a trip to London. I travelled with a German and a French friend who I had met during the second semester. We stayed for three nights and had a wonderful time exploring England's capital. Shortly after returning to Ireland I travelled to the North again, this time with my Brazilian friend and flatmate. We stayed in Belfast and thoroughly explored the city and its troubled history. An outstanding experience was the Black Cab tour which I recommend to anyone interested in Ireland's (rather recent) past. We learned a lot about the civil war, its origins and development. It was breath-taking to learn about past events while actually being on site. My last journey before heading back to Germany was with my mom and her husband. We rented a holiday house in Fanore at Ireland's west-coast and travelled the north- and south-west of Ireland. Retrospectively, I can say that I

managed to visit almost every place I had intended to visit at the beginning of my stay and more. I am glad for every single one of those adventures.

The Bottom Line...

Recapitulating the last ten months I have to say that there are definitely many more positive than negative memories and experiences that I am taking back to Germany with me. I would like to address the negative ones first:

The main difficulty for me was the housing situation. It was very hard for me to leave things unsaid in order to avoid angry reactions. Still, I started to ignore things that made me feel uncomfortable because I learned that bringing up any issues mainly lead to irritated reactions. I felt that my landlady and I had very different understandings of a house-share (I did not expect that I would have to obey any rules made up by her and to be regarded as a guest most of the time even though I was paying for my living space). I am used to discussing any issues with the people involved. Unfortunately, a factual and mature talk with my landlady in which both persons were considered equal never took place. I think it is very important to be aware that flat- or house-shares in Maynooth are very different from what we know in Germany. I recommend to be open for those different ways of dealing with property and tenants while one should definitely defend ones rights (there is a booklet about tenants' rights in Ireland available at the International office).

The experience of settling into a new country and growing from a stranger to an important part within a new community made me so much stronger than I was before. I am returning with the belief that there are friends to be found no matter where you are in this world. My initial fear of being alone in a foreign place vanished and gave way to the perception that we are all connected in some sort of way. I am glad and thankful that I have been given the chance to stay in a country where most people have a very warm and welcoming attitude towards foreigners. It was a pleasure to be part of a culture at the centre of many legends and with an amazing musical tradition. My stay in Ireland has increased my awareness of my own habits and conventions, some of them probably "stereotypically German". Being confronted with approaches to everyday situations (e.g. greeting people, making appointments, perceptions of rudeness/ politeness) from all over the world made me reconsider my own cultural understandings. This exchange and self-reflection was enriching in every way and increased my confidence, curiosity and the wish to see the world. Furthermore, my stay abroad reassured me that learning about languages and cultures is something that makes me very happy and that I would like to continue doing. Thus, I learned more about myself and what I want to do with my life.

Having returned to Germany, I have to say that living abroad made me see my home country with different eyes, too: I am much more aware of the considerable differences between living standards even within Europe. I try not to take for granted any economical wealth and the rather high standards of living we enjoy in Germany. Moreover, I believe that we can only live in this world in a happy and peaceful way if we think outside the box and take into account that people from other countries do things differently and that there are good sides and bad sides to either way.

