

MY SEMESTER ABROAD AT LEIBNIZ UNIVERSITÄT HANNOVER

I come from the financial capital of India- Mumbai. Growing up, I never really knew what I wanted to do for a living. Although I was interested in different subjects, no subject taught at school really appealed to me from a career perspective. The first time I could pick an elective in my life, I choose the pure sciences over economics, because I was not really accustomed to it as a discipline. When I went to junior college, I dropped the pure science subjects and picked Economics as an elective. For the first time, I could read a subject without getting bored. I was fascinated with the subject and decided to pursue a degree in pure economics for my undergraduate degree. The Symbiosis School of Economics (SSE), is a well-respected institution in India and I was over the moon when I got in. One reason I chose SSE, was because of their global partnerships and the opportunity to take part in a semester abroad- an opportunity not many institutes in India provide. Nonetheless, I did not keep high hopes because I knew that the chances to participate in a semester abroad were extremely slim.

The first year of my degree saw me drawn towards Macroeconomics and interested in Statistics. But, as luck would have it, the Covid-19 pandemic brought life to a halt before I even completed my second semester at SSE. From March to August 2020, I tried my best to cope with online lessons and pursued a number of online courses to deepen my knowledge in finance and macroeconomics. However, I had my eye on the semester exchange program which is offered during the 4th Semester of the degree. I was in near disbelief when I learned of my selection for the prestigious programme after the rigorous selection process. What's more, I got into LUH, my first preference university!

I was in high spirits because Germany was a country I had always wanted to visit. I could not wait to experience the German culture, cuisine and be a part of LUH. Having played football video games from a young age, I was familiar with Hannover 96 and looked forward to going to a local match too. However, I knew there was a lot to be done. Young people in India are relatively sheltered by their parents, but mine encouraged me to go through all the formalities alone. I could write a whole separate report on my experience obtaining the German National VISA itself! Everything was ambiguous because of the Covid-19 pandemic, but thankfully, I got my VISA in mid-March and was thrilled. I travelled to Germany with a classmate of mine, and was fortunate enough to get a room in a shared apartment before I arrived in Hannover. On my way to Frankfurt, I was mesmerised by the breath-taking alps, and I was excited to be in Europe for the first time ever.

Landing in Hannover, the first thing that caught my attention was the cold wind. This was a welcome change from the hot and humid climate of Mumbai. The first month in Hannover was dominated by my mandatory 14-day quarantine period and fulfilling a number of obligations like getting my city registration done, opening a bank account and familiarising myself with my neighbourhood. I even got a chance to put my beginner-level German skills to use at the local supermarket! Witnessing a late snowfall in March was another magical experience that stays in my memory. Being a gourmet, I was captivated by the variety and uniqueness of food in Hannover. I developed a particular fondness for Dönertasche during my time in Hannover and treated myself to it regularly. In fact, I used to sometimes inquire of my flatmates as I thought of my dinner plans out loud: "Dinner or Döner?" They came to learn that an overwhelming majority of the time, I would choose the latter.

My lectures at LUH were very interesting and captivating. The method in which lectures were conducted, were vastly different than in India and I found myself better suited to the German way. I found that students were relatively free to study their areas of interest and was left stunned when I came to learn that one could audit all the courses in April. The never-ending list of subjects one could choose left me with a very unpleasant dilemma because I would have liked to experience many more subjects. In one month, however, I knew that doing too many courses would hamper my grades. The professors who taught the courses I was sitting for were extremely experienced and had a wealth of knowledge. The tutorials were a fun place to interact and share ideas and because lectures were all pre-recorded and online, I looked forward to the live sessions. The tutorials were very enriching because of the diversity in all the classes. Students shared experiences from all their countries and that helped me get a much broader understanding of subjects discussed in the tutorials.

Throughout my time at LUH, the International office was my north star. My time in Hannover would have been so much more difficult and unpleasant, had it not been for the guidance of the International office. From formalities like city registration, to subject counselling for courses, to fun trips for International students to meet others and experience Lower Saxony, the International office stayed with me every step of the way.

My study buddy showed me all the famous places in Hannover and spoke to me about his life as a native German. As we shared our stories, I was stunned by how vastly different both our lives had been. I enjoyed hearing his stories and he helped me feel more at home. My German course at the language learning centre gave me the confidence to practice my German skills in practical settings, and I got to know the locals even better. This was the only course taught live online and so interaction with the Professor and students was possible, making it very interesting. Towards the end of the Semester, I went on numerous trips organised by the International office and made many friends. These trips and social interactions were the perfect way to end my semester exchange program. A memorable experience was being able to go to Hannover 96's first home game at the HDI arena against Hansa Rostock. Although Hannover lost 0-3, it was great to ride the bus and train to the stadium with the locals, sing the songs of the city and interact with fans.

I would recommend other students who come for a Semester exchange to always ask for help when they need it. There are many services that the University offers and the staff are very helpful, so do make sure to find out about all that is on offer. There are services for all students including those to help one emotionally, physically and academically. Further, I recommend going through all the formalities like getting registered with German public health insurance, completing city registration, opening a bank account etc. as early as possible in order to have a hassle-free time in Hannover. I would also recommend learning at least basic German, it will help you have a more enriching experience. I would also encourage students to take the first step. People may be shy to approach you, so approach them and start a conversation. Of course, sometimes this may fail, but sometimes you end up making great friends.

My semester abroad at LUH was one of the most astounding experiences of my life. When I look back on my time spent in Hannover, a smile comes to my face. Spending time at LUH has also given me a better idea of what I would like to do with my future. I was confused about my future before my semester exchange. Now, I am aiming to pursue my MSc. Economics from a German University, and work and live in Germany thereafter.

By Jonathan De Menezes

