

European Studies Report

Charite Universitätsmedizin

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Introduction

The European Studies Programme at Manchester University was an opportunity to do something other than medicine but alongside it. Learning a language is a completely different process than learning science, and I always liked to have that variety to help me become a well-rounded person. Participation in the European Option also allows one to get away from rainy Manchester and explore the world during the SSC time in 3rd and 4th year (I went to Salzburg and Vienna), and obviously during 4 months of the Erasmus exchange.

The usual rule applies: the more you give, the more you get. If you are a conscientious student and do your German homework, it will be easier for you to find yourself in the German world. If you are show that you are keen and interested, you will be allowed to do many practical things on your placements – probably more than in England, as Germans truly believe that you learn by doing.

I hope you take this opportunity and squeeze it out as much as possible. This report was written in an informative and very honest way to help you do so.

Enjoy Berlin!

Practicalities

Here is a short checklist of things you should take time to think about and/or arrange in advance in order to avoid disappointment/surprise/trouble later.

Below you find more information about each of the bullet points.

Before you leave

- Semestergebühr (semester fee)
- Accommodation
- Tandem partners

When you arrive

- Anmeldung
- Immatrikulation
- Begrüßungsgeld
- Bank account
- Phone

Before you come back

- Paperwork: Transcript of Study (ToS), Certificate of Attendance (CoA), Famulaturbescheinigungen
- Ausmeldung

Other

- Language course
- Approximate costs
- UPSA, UCEX, UCMD

Before you leave

Semestergebühr

This is a 240€ fee that you pay by bank transfer. It is a significant amount and I had been informed at a very short notice that I needed to pay it before the Christmas break. Top tip here: be prepared and save some money in advance. Good news is that it covers the admin fees at Uni and your Semesterticket (public transport ticket valid on all means of transportation).

Finding the flat

Understandably, it is ideal to find a place before you arrive to save you the stress and moving about. With the finals coming up though, it might be difficult, also if you want to view the place first or you are looking to move into a flatshare as people normally ask you to pop round to get to know each other. No need to worry then – you can always stay in a hostel / at friend's place / couchsurf for a couple of nights and look for a flat then. In such case, the key is to line up the viewings before you arrive.

A good website to look for flat shares is <http://www.wg-gesucht.de/>, some of us looked on <https://www.airbnb.de/> although that requires bargaining and seems to work out slightly more expensive.



When it comes to the areas in Berlin, the best ones to look into are: Wedding/Moabit and Neukölln/Kreuzberg-Friedrichshain. The first two are up-and-coming areas full of students, close to two Charite Campuses (Virchow and Mitte) and have an advantage of being relatively cheap. The latter are south of the city, but with Berlin transport links the commute doesn't take more than 45 minutes door-to-door. Flats are reasonably priced, although be careful: the areas around U-Bahn U1 have become very hip in the last few years and places there might be unduly expensive. Other areas worth looking at are Prenzlauer Berg (a more expensive residential district, although there are areas populated by students that offer cheaper flatshares), Charlottenburg and Schöneberg.

I lived in Neukölln with two German flatmates and really liked it for the cultural diversity, a wide choice of delicious affordable food, the proximity of Hasenheide Park and Tempelhofer Feld, and good transport links to the rest of the city.

Tandem partners

Hopefully you have been already assigned a tandem partner – make friends with them! They can provide the insider's tips and advice, which are priceless. My tandem partner actually became my good friend, I hosted her in Manchester and she showed me places in Berlin I would never discover in only 4 months. She also advised me on the choice of placements and finding accommodation. Moreover, regular conversations with her on Skype had improved my language skills, which in turn was extremely helpful in the first couple of hectic and stressful weeks in Germany.

When you arrive

Anmeldung

When you find a place, you should register yourself in Bürgeramt. There are several of them in Berlin and you can either make an appointment, or drop-in and take a ticket (although this might mean you need to wait a while). All you need is your new Berlin address, your ID and the name of the landlord / main tenant. Further information and addresses of Bürgerämter can be found here: <http://www.berlin.de/ba-neukoelln/org/buergeramt/index.html>.

Immatrikulation

That is, registration with the Uni. You will need: an application form which you should receive via e-mail from the Charite and a document confirming your health insurance, both of which you can scan and send in advance via email; the document confirming your Anmeldung and an ID.

Begrüßungsgeld

Every person registering in Germany receives €50 Begrüßungsgeld. You will need to take your Anmeldung to the Charite Erasmus Office, where you will receive a document that you will need to take to the financial office of the Humboldt University, which is on Unter den Linden. Complicated, yes, but €50 makes the effort worth-a-while. Ask about it when you are in the Erasmus Büro sorting out your Immatrikulation so that you don't need to return (the opening times of the Erasmus Büro and the financial office are limited!)

Bank account

It is worth opening a bank account as it is free and works out cheaper to transfer your money once since you won't have to pay the international transaction fees again or pay every time you withdraw money at the ATM. Moreover, you might be asked to fill in various social services forms on placements, where you can put your bank account details and receive 10-20€ as a reward for filling them in!

I opened the account in Deutsche Bank, others used Berliner Bank – but any bank with a free student account should be appropriate for your needs. Remember that you need to make an appointment in advance.

Phone

I bought a German pay-as-you-go number in blau.de, which is one of the most reliable and cheapest on the market. I am sure other networks are equally good. The only ones I would strongly warn against are supermarket brands – they often sell numbers that had already been sold and are very reluctant to refund you!

Before you come back

Ausmeldung

Before you leave Berlin, make an appointment with the Bürgeramt to ausmelden.

Paperwork

Throughout your placements, make sure that apart from the Manchester Educational Supervisors's Forms on MedLea you collect paper Famulaturbescheinigungen for the Charite, which should be sent to you at the beginning of Erasmus. They need to be stamped and signed by someone on your ward – ideally a Chefarzt, but an Oberarzt will do. Upon delivering them to the Charite Erasmus Büro, you will receive two documents: a **Transcript of Study** and a **Certificate of Attendance**. Those are extremely important - you will need to hand in *both* to the International Office in Manchester in order to receive the rest of your Erasmus grant and not be asked to repay the money you had already spent! Remember to make copies of all the above-mentioned documents.

Other

Language course

Our Erasmus takes place during the end of the winter semester in Germany, inter-semester break and the beginning of the summer semester (which is somewhat confusing to the admin staff and German students you meet). Therefore, there were no language courses provided by the Charite at the time I arrived. If you want to

attend a language course, you should look for a one with a private company. There are several language schools in Berlin so no matter where you choose to live or where your placements are, you will always find something not requiring a long commute. I did not enroll on one because of my own disorganization, which I really regret because although I made an enormous progress in terms of listening and speaking skills, I did not learn much vocabulary other than medical and simple daily phrases (so e.g. evening conversations with my flatmates about, say, social issues or history, were significantly hindered by constantly looking up words in a dictionary!).

Costs

Approximate costs are:

Accommodation: €350-400 per month (+deposit).

Groceries: c. €30 per week (difficult to estimate; depends how much you eat out, what foods you buy; overall everything is a little cheaper than in England).

Meal in the hospital canteen: €3-4.

Coffee: €2-3, beer: €2-4 (all depending on where you go).

Pay-as-you go SIM card: €10.

UPSA, UCEX, UCMD

I strongly recommend that you do all of them before you leave. However, if you do not manage, do not worry. Most German doctors speak English (ranging from some to fluent) and will not have trouble understanding the form. You will need to perform one UCMD after your finals anyway, because that is the GMC requirement. Remember to explain clearly what is required and to emphasize that they need to click the link they receive in an e-mail in order to finalise the assessment!

Placements

First impressions

Germans may come across as abrupt-borderline-brusque, unwelcoming and discourteous, but do not let yourself be taken aback or offended – just be your normal English polite self. My and my friends' experience is unequivocal: these are only appearances that do not reflect the true intentions, but the directness, openness and frankness that characterize Germans as a nation. Although somewhat disconcerting at first, it can also be seen in a positive light: Germans will always tell you when they are unhappy or disappointed, or even angry, but equally will they enthusiastically praise your efforts, express approval and encourage you warmly to carry on doing a good job (such an attitude spares you ambiguity and confusion). It is a matter of getting used to a completely different expression of emotions that the

Germans exercise as compared with the English.

Hospital life

Your role falls somewhere between *Famulant* and *Praktisches Jahr Student*. *Famulant* in Germany is a student on a clinical placement in years 3-5. *PJ Student* is a 6th year student, and it equals to the UK Foundation Year 1, the only difference being that PJs retain their student status for another year (which is great for the student discounts), but have the responsibilities of an FY1 for which they are not paid (which I found unfair for the amount of work they do!). Your badge will probably read *Famulant*. Remember though that most people have no idea what your skills and knowledge are, and they usually underestimate your capabilities (it might have had something to do with appearing slightly dumb due to initial troubles with adaptation to the German-language working environment; well, at least in my case). You can play it two ways – which one you choose is entirely up to you. Simply introduce yourself as a *Famulant* if you want it easy (with the risk of being bored with the responsibilities limited to taking bloods), or as a *PJ Student* if you are ready for more challenging jobs (which frequently equals more interesting tasks also). If you don't feel comfortable speaking German, add to your introduction that you are an *Austauschstudent*, you still learn German and you are asking for some patience and understanding (patients loved the latter). Most people are welcoming and impressed that you speak any German anyway, and act supportive and understanding.

Doctors and students in Germany wear casual clothes – but they also put a lab coat on (*der Kittel*). I had one with me, which was useful for the first day of each placement, although it is not obligatory. You will receive a piece of paper which you take to *Wäscherei* (laundry) where you get a labcoat and/or scrubs. You can give the clothing back and receive a new set as many times as you find it necessary, although remember that *Wäscherei* is usually open at random days and times, e.g. 11.30-12.15 Mondays, Wednesdays and Thursdays – check with your ward.

Allgemeinchirurgie in Charite Virchow Klinikum

My first placement was described as *Onkochirurgie*, which turned out to be General Surgery. It was a rather tough first month. The working hours in surgery are long and no allowances were made for me. The working day started at 7am, which in February meant that I woke up and left the house deep in the night. The official *Feierabend* – end of the working day – was at 4.30pm. Not infrequently, however, would I be called into OP to assist at around 2-3pm, which meant that I would not leave the hospital a lot later, sometimes at 6-7pm. The first task was to take many,

many bloods (almost from every patient on the ward, sometimes amounting to 20) and put cannulas in. Then I would normally be asked to assist to various surgeries. *Allgemeinchirurgie* covers a wide range of diseases and operative treatments: from hernia repairs to thyroid lobectomies to bowel resections. Moreover, I also took part in operations done by surgeons from other wards, e.g. liver transplants, paediatric surgeries or skin repair. Some of the surgeries were physically demanding and extremely long, for example removal of the oesophagus with gastric pull-up that took over 6 hours. They were, however, extremely interesting, and with a bit of luck, the doctors would take time to teach you or at least chat in a friendly way over the operating table (challenging – have you ever tried to speak German in an operating theatre with lots of background noise and face masks on?), and let you suture at the end (that had become more and more frequent as the doctors got to know me and my abilities). Inbetween surgeries, there was not much to do on the ward. PJ students wrote *Briefs* – discharge letters containing the whole history and treatment but I was thankfully absolved from that tedious responsibility. There could be an odd drainage to take out or stitches to remove. The ward round with an Oberarzt planned for the afternoon around 4pm did not take place regularly. If it did, it would be a stereotypical surgical ward round: greeting the patient, asking how they felt: well – planning for discharge, unwell – ordering bloods for the following day / considering antibiotics. There was also an outpatient clinic run by the ward once a week, but I could not see patients on my own as most of them came for a post-op check or a date of surgery. Sometimes we would manage to go to an X-ray meeting or PJ-Fortbildung, but even then the first was not overly exciting and the latter was more often cancelled than not.

If you are interested in surgery, you should enjoy this placement, because the surgeries in Charite really are cutting-edge. Some Chef- and Oberärzte are pioneers in their field, so you might also see operations that are not done anywhere else in the world (or in very few places at least, for example in other institutions taking part in the study). However, do consider the drawbacks: long hours, physical demands and low variability of your responsibilities.

Rettungsstelle in Vivantes Auguste Viktoria Klinikum

A&E is very popular among German students, therefore it had not been easy to find a place for me. I was eventually based in Vivantes Auguste Viktoria Krankenhaus (AVK) in Schöneberg, which was a refreshing change of scenery. I was one of a relatively big group of students: 1-2 PJlers and 2-3 Famulants (although PJlers were attached to a neurologist or a surgeon). It felt quite full, so we made a schedule of early (8am - 4.30pm) and late shifts (2pm - 10.30pm). If you get to work at A&E, I definitely recommend to work at least a few late shifts – there is more real emergencies, less patients sent from GPs and more medical work, since the doctors

are not distracted by paperwork. I started work at 8am and finished at 4.30pm sharp, because the day finished with PJ-Fortbildung – teaching for PJ students that I was also welcome to attend (I learnt more about ECG interpretation on this placement and through teaching than I ever had in Manchester! German students are generally spot-on with their ECGs). There was a short hand-over from the night shift and the day started. Mornings could be sluggish sometimes, but the Chefarzt himself (unusual in Germany due to ChA's status) would always try to find something interesting for us, whether it was attending endoscopy, ward round on intensive care or cardiac catheter lab. Around noon, more things were happening, and from 2pm until about 4-5pm was the peak time. All students were allowed to see the patients, take the history and do the examination, and finally write an electronic report (*Brief*), all followed by presenting the case to the doctor on call and discussing management with them. I revised a lot on this placement and felt much more confident about my clinical abilities and judgment. I spent some time with neurologists and surgeons too, which provided an even wider range of experiences (after two weeks on Innere Medizin, ACS and exacerbations of COPD had become somewhat unexciting). An added bonus was food: there was a canteen that served tasty dishes with a student discount (way better than the Mensa in Virchow, and way cheaper – to give you an idea, for a plate of 2 big pieces of fish, potatoes and green peas I would pay €3).

I really enjoyed this placement and I am sure that if you request for it specifically, the Charite Erasmus Büro will be able to sort it out for you.

Neonatologie

Just like A&E, paediatrics is one of the most beloved placements among German students. Therefore, having applied for Kinderheilkunde and expecting to get a rotation on a paediatric ward, I was informed a week before the start that I would be based on neonatology. Clearly, I was unhappy because firstly, I would have not been able to hone the skills and knowledge I felt needed improvement, and secondly, I believed neonatology could not offer much for medical students to do independently.

Although at the beginning it was not easy indeed to find enough tasks for me to do without close supervision, I was positively surprised overall. The team consisted mainly of young doctors, who were keen to explain things to me. The Stationsfachärztin was usually busy with paperwork but was also the most experienced doctor available and she let me do more many practical procedures (e.g. taking blood from a neonate) and write letters (which sounds boring, but was actually a good way to learn about neo and improve my German). I also performed many ultrasound examinations, since every baby needs one of the head and hips when they come in and before discharge, and of the kidneys and the heart when

needed. From time to time, a member of the team would also be called to the delivery room to provide the first examination of the newborn, which I learnt to perform as well. Clearly, I did not use my communication skills much, but I did interview parents to gather relevant information. Although the morning ward rounds were not overly dynamic (a group of people going from one set of notes to another, glancing at babies in cots or incubators quickly), that is where I learnt a lot about neonate nutrition and management of the most common conditions thanks.

Although the placement might seem hardly interesting for a person who does not have special interest in paediatrics or intensive care, it will be a great experience for the one who does. A big advantage of this placement was also punctuality and foreseeability – I never finished later than 4pm.

Pulmonologie mit Schwerpunkt Infektiöse Krankheiten

As I am interested in respiratory medicine and infectious diseases, I organised this placement myself in order to not to leave it to a matter of luck and efficiency of the Erasmus Büro at the Charite. Arranging a placement yourself is surprisingly easy in Germany (despite the stereotype of undue German bureaucracy) – if there is a rotation you would really love to do, I recommend taking care of organisation yourself. It is easy: I simply found the department that I wanted to work at, sent an e-mail to the Chefarzt explaining who I was and why I wanted to gain experience there, and attached my CV (with a photo – they appreciate a good photo on a CV in Germany!). My request was accepted and I just passed the details on the Erasmus Büro at the Charite.

This was a cherry on top of the Berlin cake for me. By the month 4, I had become comfortable speaking German, understood the hospital organization and the working conditions here, therefore I found it easy to adapt to the working environment. Moreover, the doctors were the friendliest team I worked with in Berlin. They were competent and keen to teach, but also relaxed and understanding. I also found them inspiring and interesting, as many of them, despite their young age, had done research (mainly abroad) in the area of infectious diseases or international health. There were many students: two PJlers and two Blockpraktikants (essentially *Famulants*), all very nice. The same friendliness applied to the nursing team.

The ward itself is away from the main buildings on the campus (apparently in case of Ebola virus epidemic outbreak). The usual plan of the day was: taking bloods / cannulas / ABGs (quick and easy with so many students around), ward round (once per week with an Oberarzt, and once per week with a Chefarzt; on other days the doctors attended to their patients separately, which gave them time to teach and discuss treatment options etc. with students), an x-ray meeting at 12.30, followed by lunch and teaching for PJlers (PJ-Fortbildung – organized for all PJlers on Innere

Medizin placements), and usually some more jobs in the afternoon, such as lumbar punctions, drainages, bronchoscopies or admissions.

We often went for lunch together as a team with all doctors, the teaching was versatile and worthwhile, the x-ray meeting was short and useful. Soon I was allowed to admit the patients and write *Briefs* on my own. Sometimes the doctors would go to the lab and perform examinations themselves, e.g. malaria microscopy, which they were happy to show and explain. Moreover, there was an outpatient department just around the corner in the same building where I attended a few HIV and TB clinics.

I would definitely recommend this placement for the variety of cases you see and the number of things you can do!

Post scriptum

4 months in Berlin was not enough – I would have happily stayed longer! As I am a continental girl, I feel there at home. Although the education and the post-grad training are not as well-organized as in England, and you will hear German doctors and students complaining about it, one needs to look at it from a distance: this is, after all, one of the best healthcare systems in the world.

I feel lucky and privileged that I had such an opportunity, but also proud, as it required a lot of systematic work and preparation. I am definitely planning to go back to Germany to complete a part of or the whole specialist training there. Yes, this is how much I loved it there: the city, people, food, work, weather, all those little things that make our daily life.