

Reflection & Evaluation of Erasmus + at the Hafencity Universität Hamburg, Germany, winter - and summersemester 2014 - 2015

Hamburg

Hamburg is the second largest city of Germany, with 3 million inhabitants and hosts one of the largest harbors in the world. This harbor gives the city its distinct feel, and as the University is located near the harbor area, you'll be confronted with it a lot. The size of the city combined with the harbor creates a very lively city with a lot of different districts with their own distinctive atmosphere. From an urbanistic point of view, German cities are interesting case studies, because of the urban and planning processes taking place in these, which differ quite a lot from Belgian.

Housing

Housing is a big problem in Hamburg. Because its population is very large and still growing, there is a housing shortage in Hamburg. This drives up the rental prices and makes it quite hard for (foreign) students to find affordable and central rooms. Another threshold in finding a place, especially for foreign students, is how rooms are appointed to renters. In Hamburg one (or several) person(s) is (are) the 'Headrenter(s)' of the apartment and this(these) person(s) rent(s) out the other rooms. Therefore people have to go 'soliciting' for the room and present themselves to the other renter(s). If you then get along and they like you, they can choose to give you the room.

So the easiest way to find a room on the private market is if you know somebody who's renting out a room or who knows somebody renting out an available room. Maybe somebody who did an Erasmus in Hamburg before or a friend of them living there.

If you start looking on your own, a good start are the websites <http://www.wg-gesucht.de> and <http://www.wghamburg.net>. Also the Facebook pages 'WG & Wohnung Hamburg gesucht', 'WG-Zimmer gesucht in HAMBURG', 'WG & Wohnung Hamburg',... are good leads. But be prepared to email a lot of people and not getting a lot of response. It is also recommended to visit Hamburg some months before going on Erasmus, so you can search for a room in advance. Else you most likely will have to stay in a hostel or Airbnb for a while upon arrival.

Besides that, the HCU has a good functioning International Office, which provides dormrooms, reserved for Erasmus students. You can also contact Studierendenswerk Hamburg, an organization offering social services to students living in Hamburg, in search of a room.

Costs

Cost for living, such as food and drinks, eating out, going out,... are less expensive as in Belgium, but keep in mind that housing costs are more expensive.

An important cost to take into account is the semester ticket you have to buy at the beginning of each semester. In Germany they do not charge anything to enroll in university, but in order to enroll you need to pay the semester ticket. This costs around €270 each semester and you have to buy it.

When you arrive early in Hamburg for Erasmus, for example for a language course, also take into account you can only use the ticket from the exact beginning date of each semester. So before that you need to buy a dayticket each day, which is around €7. You can also buy weektickets at Hauptbahnhof, which are cheaper of course.

Educational System

The educational system in Germany differs from the Belgian one, as they focus more on group - and project work. You are less quoted via regular written exams, but instead you are quoted on the projectwork you develop throughout the semester via corrections and end presentations. Written exams are also possible, but less common.

Winter - and Summersemester

Another difference with the Belgian system is the timeline of the semesters. The Wintersemester in Germany starts the first of October and runs until the end of March and the Summersemester starts the first of April and runs until the end of September. It is possible to come or leave earlier or later, but then you need to keep in mind that it is possible that you have to work on or finish project back at home, as you agree on with your professors and your group members. It is also quite common that end presentation or hand-in dates are even later than the end of the semester, for example in the beginning of April for the Wintersemester.

HafenCity Universität Hamburg

The HafenCity Universität of Hamburg is fairly newly founded university, and actually it is the bringing together of several different departments, being Architektur, Stadtplanung, Civil and Architectural Engineering, Geomatics, REAP, Urban Design and Kultur der Metropol, that were previously spread across the city. Now it is located in the new district of HafenCity, and it is really good accessible, as it has its own U Bahnstation.

With approximately 2.200 students it's also a quite small university. It has between 70 and 100 Erasmus students each year. This and a compact building helps so everybody knows each other more or less.

The relationship with the professors are quite open, but still formal.

The standard of teaching at HCU is good and they have some well known professors, therefore the university has a good reputation in Germany.

International Office

The HCU has a well-functioning International Office, which helps international students with a broad range of services. They help students with housing, German courses, administrative problems, ... And they also offer a lot of extra services as the Welcome Week, International Dinners, Guided Tours, ...

German Courses

I strongly recommend to follow a German Course when you are abroad. First of all it is a good practice to increase your knowledge of German language, vocabulary and grammar and secondly it is a good opportunity to meet people.

There are several possibilities to follow German Courses. The HCU offers a German Course, in cooperation with the Volkshochschule. In this they offer a two – week intensive course, which is at the beginning of the semester, and of very good quality. During the semester itself they also offer a German course, which is once a week. This one is also good, but in both cases it is better to be in a higher level than you actually are, because you will pick up really fast.

Next to this, you can also go to the Volkshochschule itself to inscribe in a German Course. They offer it at different times compared to the HCU and you are also surrounded by practices German speakers. These courses cost between €80 and €120, depending on your level of German.

These are good quality courses, but if you want the best German courses there are, you need to go to the Goëthe Institute. Here they offer high quality courses and these are also mostly taught by very good teacher and followed by people who are practised German speakers. The disadvantage is that these are quite costly at around €500 per semester.

The best thing to learn the language, is to talk it a lot. Therefore there's also something called a language tandem. Via this, you can find somebody wanting to meet to speak your language and in return you speak another one, in this case German. This can be found via the Facebook page 'Language Tandem Hamburg.

Courses

The grading system in Germany is quite different. The grade from 1 to 6, 1.0 and 1.3 being the best grade, 1.7, 2.0 and 2.3 being good, 2.7, 3.3 and 3.3 satisfactory, 3.7 and 4.0 being sufficient and 5.0 being fail.

A lot of courses are in German, but a lot of teacher don't mind speaking and hearing English, but as a lot of it is project work, discussions and presentations of German students tend to be in German.

Theorie und Kultivierung des urbanes Landschaft (5 ECTS)

This course approaches landscape from a holistic point of view. The theoretic lessons alternate with more practical lessons in which you present and discuss your group project. This group project comprises of a landscape project which you first research on using artistic tools and later onward make a specific design for. There is also an excursion fitted into the planning.

Urban Territories 1(UT1, 5 ECTS)

Again in this course you learn how to use different theories and methods for doing spatial research. The main theories used are 'Grounded Theory' and the 'Actor Network Theory'. You also learn a lot of methods for doing research in which they focus a lot on interviewing and observing.

These methods and theories are then used in a group project, in which you research on a specific site in Hamburg. For this site you then steadily refine this research throughout the course.

Urban Design Project 3 (UDP3, 10 ECTS)

In the Urban Design Project you research on a specific theme – related topic in groups. Firstly orienting in the existing literature and research on this theme, you develop an own specific research question, which you then further investigate on, using the methods and theories learned in Urban Territories 1.

This gives you the opportunity to research on different topics ranging from purely spatial topics to sociological questions. This results in a publication in which you document your research and findings.

ArtLAB#5 (Q – Study) (5 ECTS)

A nother different approach to teaching can be found in the Q- studies. Q – Studies contain a large offer of courses which have a broad range of interests and do not necessarily have to fit into a rigid study scheme, necessary for obtaining a specific degree. In this it offers some very interesting topics, of which German students have to choose a specific amount during their studies, and if you find one which associates with a course of your home university, it is worth taking up this course.

In this philosophy, ArtLAB offers you the opportunity to learn about artistic methods to do scientific research and it lets you develop your own research question and research concerning urban topics, which results in an artistic intervention.

MMT6,7,8

These are the preparatory courses for the thesis. In this you develop a specific research question and you start your literature research.

Master's Thesis

The Master's Thesis at the HCU is quite broad in method and content. First of all, the research and writing of the thesis itself takes 3 months, in this you have to develop your research question further, further refine it, finish your research as well as deliver a publication. The topics are broad and the promotors you can choose are from a diverse pool.

What is quite different for the thesis and the preparational courses, compared to the VUB, is the approach to the research and the methodology of working.

The research and content of the thesis is more comparable with Urban Studies, in which you research and study urban process more than you intend to make up a spatial design for a certain area or project. This gives you a lot of freedom, but it is asks some capabilities to adjust to this way of working and researching, as it also does in UT1 and UDP3.

The methodology of teaching is different, as in you do all your research in a confined period of time, you need to work fast and have quite a lot of corrections and presentations in that time. It is quite stressfull, especially when you haven't fully grasped the methodology of doing research, which takes more or less a year, as heard from fellow German students.

Nonetheless it is a valuable approach to doing urban research and a great addition for an urbanist and spatial planner.

Scholarship

It is also possible to get additional scholarships from Germany or the HCU. If you want, you can check this on this page; <https://www.hcu-hamburg.de/io/finanzierung/> When you want to do your Master's Thesis at the HCU, you can get an extra scholarship as an exchange student, the Möhrle Preis.