

Dear readers, as of writing this in late June, I am still midway through my term, so this isn't a complete writeup of my experiences. The German semesters start and end much later than their English counterparts, and so I still have a couple of weeks of lectures, and exams to come. With that out of the way, on with this post...

For the past nearly whole year I've been in Bremen, a city in northern Germany. A mere £20 flight from Stansted, it's a fairly reasonable place to live. I would go as far to say as I like it here. Compared to the cities we have in England, it's pleasantly green with some really lovely places to chill outside, and very navigable through the regular public transport. It's on the smaller side of cities, but in a good way; there's almost everything you could want here without it feeling unfamiliar. You'll often find me chilling next to the Kleine Weser (a river) or near some of the nice park/lake bits in the city centre- it's all really is lovely in summer.

"Culturally", there's so much to do here as a student too. Students at Uni Bremen (as part of the required semester fee) get access to free transport across the entire of Germany as well as free access to the various museums, theaters, and art galleries in the city. While I have not used this as much as I'd have liked, seeing Macbeth in person was a charming afternoon and the Kunsthalle gallery has enough for several enjoyable visits; Friedrich Nerly has done some really striking paintings.

Universität Bremen is fairly small, especially in the maths department. Maths the subject is considered a much more niche subject compared to England, meaning class sizes of around max 30 people. Many aim to become teachers, with the maths for teaching degree here, while others take courses as part of their choices. Plain maths students still exist though, don't worry. Overall this is a change I have enjoyed; the classes felt much more informal, and the exams even more so — with lecturers opting to use a mixture of written assignments and a final spoken test instead of writing and marking a whole exam. This did mean there were fewer people to get to know in the classes here, but like with lectures at Warwick... you often need to work a bit to get to know your peers.

The university culture here is also rather different. It's common for people go to their closest university, and so established friendships are much less dependent on the Uni. For the people here, university isn't their sole occupation. In England, our entire system is orientated the "university experience", to students who are moving away from home for the first time; campuses are constantly filled with things to do and join in with. In Germany, there is typically no society system- instead people find social groups completely independent of the university infrastructure. The flexible nature of degrees here mean part-time jobs here are also much more common, given a degree isn't forced to be exactly 3 years. Instead, a degree can be completed slower over 4 or 5 years, as long as all the courses have been passed by the end (oh how I wish we had that in England). There are sports courses though, and I did partake in a few of those.

In my first semester I did Hip Hop (dance), which I actually really enjoyed. While difficult, everyone was really friendly, and it was a fun couple hours in my week. In my second semester I signed up for Modern Dance and Football. The pacing for modern dance was too fast for me, so that's not something I have stuck with, but football has been good. The registration for sports clubs goes very quickly, and there is a small cost that comes with each... but it's

still rather cheap for students and definitely less than what you'd pay at Warwick (different vibes though; club vs. course).

Now, a couple of things regarding the process of staying in Europe (thanks Brexit...). Firstly, it's a massive pain. Strictly speaking, you don't need a visa before coming to Germany (and the rest of Europe), instead you can arrive, settle in** and then apply for a "Residence Permit". The UK/EU 90 days should be then plenty of time to get this all sorted. In practice, Bremen (and the whole of Germany) has a huge backlog of anything bureaucracy related, which is almost everything. After collecting my documents together, after being uni enrolled, and after registered as a city resident* and then sending everything single PDF off, it took 19 weeks to get in total. If you do the maths, it is impossible to get everything sorted before Christmas. If you would like to visit family... look into getting a visa before coming.

*Note: Even the city registration was hard to figure out, with the solution being city admin offices open hours one morning of the week for non-booked appointments. The online slots were for months later.

**Note2: Finding a flat was hard too, I think I made 50+ WG-Gesucht.de applications, you just have to apply daily and hope for the best; uni accom has an impossibly long waiting list.

Having to stay in Germany over Christmas was hard, but worse was the back and forth trying to get around the systems and find a miracle solution. The unending task of "nagging again" combined with the constant state of unknown, "Will I make it back or not?", made life more than difficult. But, once it had become plainly clear that I had exhausted every option, I could then actually look forward to and make plans for that "new years"-y period. That exhausting time was only short-lived and must have granted me at least 7 adulting XP. In the end, even the Christmas time here turned out to be an unexpected blessing:

One of my friends had recommended me a "Freizeit" (getaway) on the topic of the Trinity run by the Christian group "SMD", that was to be run for a week over the new year. SMD is the German equivalent of the UCCF here in England, I recommend looking into both as well as the Christian Union here at Warwick. With nothing else to do, I signed up. What a highlight! I don't think I had ever listened to and spoken so much German, and not on easy topics too. Everyone there was unbelievably friendly and really tried to involve and understand me, despite the many many German-related mistakes I would make. I made real friends, had fun conversations, learnt so much about God and had much needed reflection time too. It was a dream week, and I frankly wish I could do it again (I might even).

On the topic of pastimes, I picked up bouldering as a new hobby while I've been here. There's a place relatively close to the central station called Linie7 that has a really amazing atmosphere and a large range of well-designed walls. I was going with a new friend from Canada, who gave me plenty of pointers and showed off some crazy climbs. She was only here for 1 semester, but I carried on in the second semester (going more than every). I often bump into other regulars while I'm there, making it surprisingly social. The student membership there is fairly reasonable too, especially compared to England prices. Going 3 times a week, it's something that I have seriously enjoyed while I've been here, and I'll miss it dearly. It's remarkable how quickly you can develop at a sport when you put the time into it, and hopefully I can find somewhere nearly as cool back in England to carry on!

At this point, I should probably touch on church too. I have been going to Hoffnungskirche, a German, Baptist, independent church in the west side of Bremen. While a little far away from where I've been living, I would strongly recommend the church. The sermons (talks) there have always been really well-prepared and explained, and surprisingly understandable (even when I'd first arrived). I must have improved so much language-wise through going every Sunday. Cultural differences did make it a little hard to relate to everyone there, but I was welcomed and well looked after. I am so, so grateful that I had somewhere to help keep my faith grounded in Jesus while I've been away from the usual communities I'm a part of in England.

Part of the reason I choose to go on this year abroad was the angst I was feeling for another year of maths at Warwick. It's intense, and if you are reading this you probably know that. While I have had to spend a decent amount of my time here studying, my attitude towards everything was a little different. The chance to slow down and spend time away from the rat race we call grades, combined with a reduced workload here has been just what I needed. I now feel so much more "okay" with continuing my studies properly again next year, which is a huge success in my books. I even completed 2 knitted jumpers with my extra time :).

My courses in the first semester consisted of: pre-uni German A2; Complex Analysis (function theory), Introduction to Cryptography, Computational Graph Theory (masters, english). Out of those, I would say I found Complex Analysis by far the hardest; weekly assignments and a lot of content made it difficult. Everything else was relatively fine, and I surprisingly enjoyed the process of diving into a paper in Graph Theory and doing a 45-min presentation on its contents, getting to draw lots of pretty diagrams was certainly a plus, though. The German course was far too simple for me, but I did pick up a few things I had somehow missed and ended up making a couple friends through it too.

My second semester courses were (are) Matrix Analysis, Topology, and Geodynamics and Plate Tectonic Principles (2nd yr, english). Matrix Analysis has been really well lectured and the non-mandatory assignments have been a large relief. Plate Tectonics is 50% presentation, 50% written-report on a chosen topic from a list- I have enjoyed the "reading papers and writing about them" process; it's been a nice change. Approachable enough too, given my related studies only included geography GCSE. I am very glad I took secondary teaching last year, otherwise this whole researching and referencing thing would feel very alien. Topology is this semester's Complex Analysis, a lot of content and weekly assignments. While I have somewhat enjoyed doing algebra again, it does get very abstract very quick, and I am rather lost at the moment. Revision should solve that like normal. In general though, the number of available maths courses pales compared to Warwick.

In both semesters, 2/3rds of my courses (more than that w.r.t. CATs/CPs) have been taught completely in German, and some of that does include me running through a problem on the board every few weeks during tutorials. While explaining anything is rather hard, it's fair to say that German hasn't impeded me too much here. Maths is maths, and it's going to be complicated no matter what language it's taught in. Worst part: abbreviations, but you'll get there. Gracefully, it's no problem for my professors to do the spoken exams in English.

My German in general has improved vastly, and I can confidently say that my understanding of stuff is honestly way above what I was expecting. I'm not always perfect, and I will

occasionally miss something and get lost, but 95% of the time I'm good. My speaking and writing are another story, a story that is mainly hindered by Grammar (not speed ;)). I didn't find the time (energy) to sit down and further study German grammar and/or vocab while I've been here. I wish I did, but I didn't. Improvements did transpire, through noticing how people phrase things, but I am going to need to formalise things properly when I'm back in England. To summarise... I would say I was somewhere like a A2/low B1. I would now cautiously say I am a B2, but the levels are hard to match without an appropriate course. If you do a year abroad, make sure to really proactively register for the limited language school places at your uni.

What is more interesting, is how I feel talking in German; it's just fun. I make a tonne of mistakes, but people understand me anyway, and I find myself honestly thinking less about what I'm saying compared to English, for better or worse. Being confrontation or direct is a lot easier for me in German too, I'm guessing based on lower emotional attachment to the words I'm saying (from I've read online), which is intriguing. The coolness factor of being able to say I can speak 2 languages is not something me from 3 years ago could have ever imagined, and to that: I am grateful. Definitely more German learning still to come, and I'm so here for it!

At this point, all that's left to answer is what would I have done differently, and would I recommend a year abroad?

To the first question, really trying to learn more German. While I am happy with the progress I made, I am also simultaneously haunted by the potential improvements I missed out on. Trying a little harder to keep friendships going on my part would have been good too. Need to not be too hard on myself here.

Would I recommend a year abroad? Yes, but think about know what you're getting into and what you'll be coming back to. It will be what you make it, so flying to a different country and living there for a while won't always be the radicle, life-altering experience you might wish it to be; but it is a good basis to give a lot of new things a go without the pressures that come from normal uni or from post-graduation life. Plus, I think learning a new language is something valuable we really miss out in England. I am fortunate in that a lot of my friends at Warwick are staying for a 4th year of some sorts, and that the Christian Union and my church there are both communities of friendly faces to jump right back into. If things might look a bit different for you, that's something to think on.

Anyways, hope you enjoyed my writeup and that the stuff here was interesting and/or useful. Please reach out if you have any questions, or just wanna say hi! I'd be so happy to hear from you! Find me on the internet, try my Warwick email (u5510178@live.warwick.ac.uk) or this one here: foam-hatred-rerun@duck.com. And, best of luck with your studies abroad!