



## My Exchange Evaluation

### Basic Information

<b>Host University</b>	Heidelberg University, Germany
<b>Semester &amp; Year of Exchange</b>	European Winter Semester, September 2023 – March 2024
<b>Otago degree(s)</b>	Bachelor of Arts
<b>Major(s)</b>	Geography & Science Communication

### Academics/ course load

Which papers did you take whilst on exchange?

<b>Course title</b>	<b>Language</b>	<b>Otago equivalent</b>
Mobilities: Home, travel, and the making of urban space (4 ECTS)	English	300-level GEOG
Socioenvironmental Change in Ibero-America: Historical Developments, Spatial Implications, and Politeconomic Contexts in Latin America (5-8 ECTS)	English	300-level GEOG
Jewish-Arab relations in Mandatory Palestine (2-6 ECTS)	English	300-level HIST
General German Language Course, CEFR Level A1 (8 ECTS)	English	100-level LANG
ISZ A.2.1 B Course (German Level B2) (4 ECTS)	English	200-level LANG

Total Otago credits gained:  54 points  72 points  108 points  24 ECTS = 54 points

Any comments about these papers?

The 2 GEOG and 1 HIST paper I took were great! Very different experience to Otago papers. These papers are all considered 'seminar papers'. Seminar papers are usually more 'advanced', have less contact hours per week, have no exam. Seminar papers are assessed by active participation in

weekly classes, usually a presentation to the class of the weekly readings/topic, and a 'big' 'term paper' which is like a mini thesis which is usually due 4-8 weeks after the final class.

For me, the first 90% of the semester was really chill. Each class occurred once a week, for 1.5 hours. Reading load was similar to Otago but in Heidelberg you ACTUALLY HAVE TO do the readings because the 'seminar' format of classes means that it is discussion based. The professor does not lecture, but rather poses questions directly to students and then mediates discussion whilst moving through a simple PowerPoint slide they have created.

It's also worth noting that seminar class sizes are quite small. For example, my HIST paper had a class size of 9, whilst the 2 GEOG papers were between 10-20 and varied depending on weekly attendance. That being said, due to their only being 1 class per week, attendance is pretty important. There's no fixed limit to how many classes you can miss, but the professors do take attendance and most of the important information about classes is not made available online, so it's important to be present (unless you make friends in the class who can tell you what you missed ;).

Classes were really fun and engaging compared to some of the Otago papers I've had which were more lecture based and more passive. It is expected that you actively participate and speak your mind in class (which German students are very good at doing), and if you've been quiet for a while the professor will direct the discussion to you. For me this was quite scary to begin with, especially because my classes were filled mostly with masters students, but by the end of my semester my public speaking and communication skills greatly improved, as well as my general confidence. German (and European) university culture really encourages healthy debate and so lots of people freely speak their mind, which I think is quite different to Otago where most of us suffer from 'tall-poppy-syndrome'.

Overall, your course-load will be VERY chill compared to Otago. Excluding my German language classes, I have 4.5 hours of class TOTAL per week, all of which was finished by 2pm on a Tuesday. So I essentially had a 5 day weekend. But keep in mind your workload REALLY ramps up at the end of the semester where (if you only took seminar papers like myself) you'll have 3x 5000 word 'term papers' to write before you fly home/go travelling.

## Accommodation

*What accommodation did you stay in? What were the pros and cons of your accommodation?*

I stayed in the 'Im Neuenheimer Feld' (INF) student residences provided by 'Studierendenwerk' (the OUSA equivalent in Heidelberg). Anything offered by 'Studierendenwerk' is the most affordable accommodation available in Heidelberg. If you get the opportunity to stay in one of their rooms, TAKE IT. I paid 320 Euro per month, other students who rented privately were paying closer to 500 Euro on the low-end.

The accommodation varies A LOT. 'Studierendenwerk' residences are located all over the city and you get randomly placed without being able to express preference. Some are very old original buildings in the Altstadt (old town), some are new (like mine in INF), and some are located relatively far away from Uni campus in Rohrbach. But this really isn't an issue with how good local public transport is in Heidelberg and the fact that you'll likely ride your bike 95% of the time.

The quality of the accommodation was in most ways better than in Dunedin. German residential regulations are very strict about mould and moisture retention, so you won't have to worry about that at all! Rooms are similarly sized to rooms in halls of residence in Otago, and I personally shared my bathroom and kitchen with 1 other person. The rooms come equipped with a bed, desk, chair and wardrobe, but aside from that they are VERY EMPTY. The first 2 weeks of my time in Heidelberg consisted of 100's of trips on my bike between the shops and my apartment carry everything from pillows, to lamps, to pots, to plants.

No matter where you stay in Heidelberg, know with 99% certainty you won't have your own washer or dryer. My residence had a laundry room which had about 20 washers and 10 dryers, which sounds like a lot... except it was shared between 1000+ residents. But unlike Otago halls of residences, people are pretty good at retrieving their washing on time.

## Money matters

*Please detail your basic costs, e.g. accommodation, flights, visa, food, insurance*

Heidelberg is a great place for splurges and penny-pinchers alike. If I wanted to I could have kept my weekly expenses under 100 Euro per week. But when you're in Europe and on exchange you tend to be more focussed on having a good time. What I mean to say is that you can live quite comfortably for very little in Heidelberg as basic good (groceries, cosmetics, uni-subsidised cafeterias) are very cheap (compared to other European cities).

But here's the important details: I paid 335 euro per week for rent; 300 euro total for statutory German health insurance (which is compulsory. I went with AOK, definitely recommend); 120 euros per week on food (40% uni-subsidised cafeteria, 40% home cooking, 20% eating out); every month I paid 49 Euro for the 'Deutschland' ticket which gives you access to ALL local public transport across Germany and access on all regional trains (highly recommend purchasing, can do so through VRN app or DB app).

Everyone's in a different financial position so I don't want to apply my experience to others, but I would reiterate that Heidelberg and Germany can adapt to a whole range of budgets. If you ignore that fact that you're in the middle of Europe, you can live for the same if not less than in Dunedin and do it with a slightly higher quality of life.

*What means did you use to access your finances? What would you recommend? (Credit card, Cash passport, foreign bank account, etc.)*

For 99% of expenses, I used a 'wise' card. Cannot recommend this highly enough! Maybe there will be something new on offer at the time you're reading this, but I've travelled extensively for the past 5 years and tried several 'exchange platforms' with different cards and not only is 'wise' the cheapest, but also the easiest to use.

That being said, when you first move to Germany, I would recommend opening an account with Sparkasse. It's the main bank and you can get a fee free account for a 3 euro sign-up. Crucially, with this card you will have a German **IBAN**. Unless you want to be paying for all your membership/monthly fixed expenses like insurance, rent, gym membership, etc in cash, then you will love having an IBAN. It sounds crazy but you can't use your European IBAN with the wise card, nor can you use a regular debit card to pay for these things. It took me 2 months to be smart enough to get my Sparkasse account and IBAN. Up until that point I was stressed every week making appointments with various insurance brokers, Studierendenswerk rep's and gym staff to pay my rent in person, which is a very labour-intensive process. Do yourself a favour and get your German IBAN ASAP.

## Visas & Insurance

*Did you have to apply for a visa? What was the process?*

No visa required for entering Germany. However, you are required to apply for a 'residency permit' within the first month of arriving. The residency permit is a physical sticker they put in your passport saying you're a 'temporary' German citizen up until the date of expiry. This is especially important to have if you plan to travel outside of the EU during your exchange.

For me, I applied for my residency permit when I first arrived in September of 2023, I'm currently writing this on February 7<sup>th</sup>, 2024 and still have not received my permit. I've come to learn that this is the norm for exchange students as we are considered 'low-priorities' for issuing residency permits. That, and the fact that the German bureaucratic system operates at snail-like speeds for everything (except for your radio payments... if you come here you'll understand) means that I (and potentially you) will not officially receive the residency permit until we've actually FINISHED the exchange. Lol.

*Did your host university have a mandatory insurance?*

Yes. You must take out 'statutory health insurance' to even be able to complete the Heidelberg uni application process. I chose AOK as they are kind of like the ASB of insurance companies here in Germany. They have competitive pricing, but most importantly they have really great (and fast) communication with people who speak English! I would highly recommend. [Sarah.Kneis@bw.aok.de](mailto:Sarah.Kneis@bw.aok.de) was my contact at AOK and was very helpful.

## Extra-curricular/Social Activities

*What organised activities were available to students? What extra-curricular activities would you recommend to future exchange students?*

The university has an extensive sports and extra-curricular program.... but it's really hard to understand the system for applying and the bureaucracy that goes along with it. I personally did not participate in any of the offering from the uni simply due to the fact that the system for applying was so confusing, especially considering the applications opened and closed within the first 2 weeks of my semester.... So I was focused on other things.

You'll also have access to the Erasmus Student Network (ESN) who offer lots of discounted/subsidised organised trips around Germany and Europe as well as weekly events in Heidelberg. Be sure to find an Erasmus student in your first few days in Heidelberg and ask to be added to the ESN Whatsapp group. It took me a few weeks to even know this was a thing.

I personally didn't go on any of the ESN trips as I prefer independent travel. But if you're happy catching early trains/planes with 40 others rowdy European students and having a jam-packed sightseeing schedule, then go for it! For example, they offered a 4 day trip to Berlin for 140 Euro total, and a 3 day trip to Luxembourg for 90 Euro, all costs covered for both trips. At the start of the semester ESN hand out brochures with an overview of all the trips they're offering over the next few months. You have to go to their office (currently Seminarstraße 2) to sign up in person and I heard good reviews from the Erasmus student I met.

*What was the university city like?*

Believe it or not, Heidelberg is THE MOST VISITED destination for foreign and domestic tourists in all of Germany. It's a beautiful city with a gorgeous Altstadt (old city) with a castle, many grand and old cathedrals/churches and several historic sites in the surrounding hills accessed through hiking trails. I loved living here and realised that I was very happy to live here instead of other supposedly more 'appealing' cities like Berlin, London, or Paris. There's so much on offer in Heidelberg and the surrounding regions (which are so easy to access with the German train network), and I loved the fact that I could bike EVERYWHERE I could need to go in the city within 20 mins.

Whilst a similar geographic size to Dunedin, Heidelberg feels MUCH bigger and much more lively. It's 15 mins away from Mannheim, a much larger city, and 1.5 hours from Frankfurt, a much much larger city! So it's very well connected to other parts of Germany. In the summer months, the City is beautiful in the sun and warmth, but in Winter (much like Dunedin) it can get quite depressing. That being said, you'll never be short of exciting things to do or places to go so I wouldn't worry about feeling 'trapped' in Heidelberg.

After living in Heidelberg for 7 months, I would say it's very underrated compared to other European cities on offer through the Otago exchange program. Mostly because those other cities are really cool to visit, but I wouldn't want to live there full-time, whereas Heidelberg is very liveable.

*Any recommendations for things to do, places to visit, places to eat etc.?*

- Nana's cafe/restaurant in the Altstadt, best cakes and cocktails in the city, plus the vibes are immaculate.
- Puro gelato on the Altstadt main street: best gelato in Germany.
- Zeit fur Brot: German chain that makes fresh schneke's. Like a cinnamon roll but in many different flavours and baked fresh daily.
- Zeghaus Mensa: Uni cafeteria in the Altstadt open from 11am – 9pm daily and has amazing buffet at great price for students. Ate here 3-4 times per week and regularly spent less than 5 euros for a BIG plate of fresh, healthy, largely vegetarian food. Also has a bar/café which serves cheap drinks, cocktails and pastries (the pastries suck though, go to Nana's instead, see above)
- SIMONS & BEARNS Café in Bahnstadt: amazing vibes in summer. Sit on the outside deck watching the sunset with amazing drinks, tapas/pastries with funky jazz music overlooking Bahnstadt fields.
- Machmoud's in Altstadt and Bismarckplatz: best late night eats (and open on Sundays). Best falafel in Heidelberg for affordable price

*Any tips for future students?*

- Don't be scared! It can seem really overwhelming when you first arrive (and when you're trying to leave lol) but everything will work out! Worrying about it just means you suffer twice.
- Get your student card (or temporary one) ASAP (like day 1) so you can get food at the Mensa's (uni café's/cafeterias) and use the laundry facilities at your residence, and so you can print stuff (Germany is the land of hard-copies)!
- Get a bike ASAP. Easiest, cheapest (long-term) and fastest way to get around Heidelberg. You might be tempted when you arrive to purchase a SUPER cheap one (sub-100 euro), but I would highly recommend paying a little more for a bike that will actually last you for your entire exchange and be safe. Many of my international friends who arrived at the same time as me ended up going through 3-4 unsafe, broken bikes during their time in Heidelberg, meanwhile I enjoyed my safe, fun to ride one for the whole time. Cost me 300 Euro upfront, rode it for 7 months and sold it for 250 euro. WORTH IT!

## Overall Experience

*Please write one paragraph (or more) about your exchange experience. Please include some photos!*

My exchange experience was really transformative. Like with most of my time at university, most of my learning has been done outside of the classroom. Moving to a new country, learning a foreign language, and navigating the crazy complex system that goes along with it taught me so much and helped me become a lot more confident and competent in life. Heidelberg will always be in my heart as my home for the final semester of my degree, and I hope to return one day to see again how much I've changed as it seems this city is frozen in time.

If you're thinking about coming to Heidelberg but are worried it won't offer you the 'classic' exchange experience, don't worry! Heidelberg has so much to offer and is majorly underrated as an exchange location. If you have any questions, don't hesitate to contact me @benjklipin1@gmail.com

## Photos



My room, kitchen (shared with 1 other), and building in 660 INF.

Great location, 15 min ride to alstadt.

In a student complex with 12 identical buildings. Friendly vibes. Similar to DUD but MUCH CLEANER ;)



Zehnhallen Mensa in Heidelberg.

Main and best Mensa in Heidelberg.

Amazing range of food open from 11-9 every day.

Cheapest food in Germany, most of the time even cheaper than cooking at home.

View of Heidelberg Schloss (castle), Alte Brücke (old bridge), and Altstadt (old city) from the viewing point on Philosophernweg (Philosophers walk).

Beautiful during summer, slightly less beautiful on rainy winter days.



Terraced gardens along Philosophernweg.

Beautiful walk accessed at the base of old bridge.







View from Heidelberg Schloss 'balconies' (enormous grassy balconies with trees and benches). 15 min uphill walk from Altstadt and very nice in summer to have picnic at sunset