

Reflections on My Exchange Term in Stuttgart

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1. Foreword

Firstly, a little bit about me.

I was hesitant to include this, I however realised that it would add much needed context to the rest of the report

I am Richard Visagie, I am 20 years old and a third year mechatronic engineering student. I am very involved in Student Leadership, and I am currently serving on the *Student Representative Council (SRC)*; the highest leadership position a university student can attain. I am a true engineer at heart I guess, and this will be the first time I am venturing into reflective writing.

Each part of this reflection essay will be accompanied by pictures as I have love for photography and believe the visual element always greatly enhances understanding.



Figure 1 Visiting National parliament in Cape Town as part of my SRC duties

2. Introduction:

I had the honour of attending Stuttgart University's winter university program this past January to February. I studied a course in International Business with a focus on the German automotive industry; alongside a course for German language level A2.2. Something vastly removed from my ordinary engineering environments. During my time at Stuttgart University, I stayed with local politicians and visited several neighbouring countries.



Figure 2 My First day of class

3. Personal Reflections:

3.1 Cultural Identity and Language:

I had an extremely warped perception of what Germany and German culture is like. During and after the exchange I spend a lot of time thinking about and reflecting on why my cultural perspectives were so utterly warped. I came the realisation that for me personally much of it came from what I have seen on television. I shall with a doubt take more care in the future to not stereotype people on what I have seen in film and media.

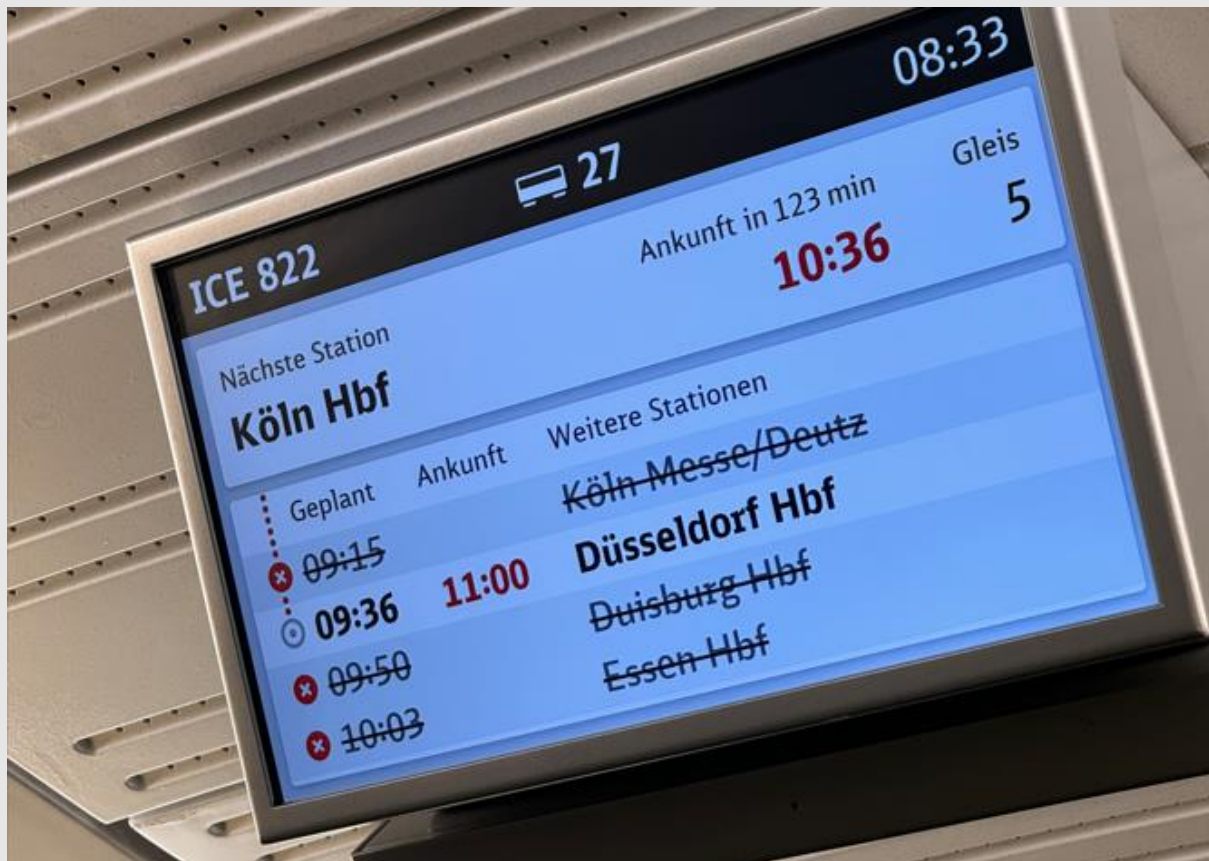


Figure 3 I always believed that the German are extremely punctual people, however the railways clearly don't follow those rules!

Language posed some challenges for me on the exchange,

Since I had a strong base of German before the exchange, I was placed with a host family that could not speak any English. This caused me a lot of struggles at the beginning of the exchange. However, it turned out to be an amazing thing at the end. It forced me to only speak German constantly and my German improved greatly.



Figure 4 Me with my host family

Lastly,

This might seem like a very interesting point to include in this piece of writing, since it is official university writing, but I feel that it was such a significant revelation for me that I should include it.

In South Africa, I quite enjoy going with my friends to clubs and bars once every few months. However, going out socially for the first time in Germany, I got the shock of my life. Drug usage was much more open, and it was extremely easy to buy drugs. Everyone was also much less modestly dressed. The most shocking for me was that the so-called red-light district formed a part of the club/bar area.



Figure 5 A German bar I visited with exchange friends

3.2 Comfort Zone and Adaptation:

Studying a course in International Business and Language forced me quite far out of my ordinary STEM comfort zone. It however made me furthermore realise that life is to a large part an 'mental game'. It you believe that you are able to do something, you most likely will and vice versa. It definitely showed me that I do not have to confine myself to STEM, as I always believed.

An adaption that I found surprisingly difficult was the temperature/climate. In Cape Town we have very stable weather conditions with temperatures usually between 15 degrees Celsius and 25 degrees Celsius. However, in Stuttgart it went as low as -10 degrees Celsius.



Figure 6 The frigid temperatures were definitely out of my comfort zone!

4. Academic Reflections:

4.1 Cross-Cultural Academic Insights:

The academic culture at Stuttgart University compared to what I have experienced in South Africa is vastly different. I experienced this new academic environment as less harsh and cut-throat than what I was used to at my home department of Mechatronic Engineering. It is however difficult to determine whether this is due to it being a different academic discipline, a different country, or a different university.



Figure 7 Stuttgart's Library where I spend much time studying

I also feel like I now truly grasp the main concepts International Business. I used to never think about how goods arrive at my doorstep. I now understand the extremely complex monetary and transportation industry holding up the entirety of the world's economy.



Figure 8 My class visiting Porsche where we learned more about supply chain management

A final insight that arose from Business class,

I always thought that child labour is a thing of the past. It was shocking for me to learn in class that so many of our products are manufactured cheaply using child labour, with many well-known brand names being complicit in it. It was truly appalling to me, and I now believe that both government and individual consumers should do more to combat this.

4.2 Memorable Academic Experiences:

My international Business class had the privilege of visiting several German manufacturing and Governmental institutions. These visits were eye-opening for me. It also helped us as a class grasp the theory we learned in class better.



Figure 9 My class visiting Daimler production

5. Professional Reflections:

5.1 Career Ambitions:

I have always had a keen interest in not only engineering, but also in Business. That was a large part of my decision to study International Business. Before this exchange I was very conflicted whether I would like to study a master in Mechatronic Engineering or Masters in Business and Administration (MBA). Studying a course in International Business made it crystal clear for me that the right path forward for me is an MBA. After feeling conflicted about it for years, realizing it was like feeling a massive weight off my shoulders.

5.2 Engineering internship in Germany

As part of the International Business course I took, we visited several German engineering companies. I was extremely impressed with the engineering prowess I saw compared to what I am used to in South Africa. This made me decided to undertake an engineering internship in Germany. At the time of writing this essay, I have not yet been able to secure an internship in Germany. I do however remain optimistic regarding this.

6. Key Experiences and Reflections:

6.1 Accommodation with Politicians:

Being involved in politics myself in South Africa, staying with politicians gave me a deeper understanding of their dedication and the complexities of dedicating your life to it. It certainly made me question whether it is the correct path for me to go down. They were actively engaged in advocating for issues such as climate change, equal rights, and refugees.



Figure 10 The view from my accommodation

Before the exchange I did not understand the plight of refugees. However, after spending much time with refugees advocacy groups alongside the politicians I stayed with, I now grasp the harsh reality of having no country to call home.



Figure 11 Traditional Afghan food gifted to me by Afghan refugees we visited

6.2 Trip to Poland:

Even before going on exchange, I heard much about Poland in recent years. Hearing so many different perspectives and opinions frustrated me to my core, as I am someone who wants factual straight-line answers (I am a true engineer, I guess). I decided to dedicate the one long weekend (4,5 days) the University gave us to visiting Poland.

I would have taken a German high-speed train to Poland that would have only lasted eleven hours with adequate sleeping facilities. However, unexpectedly, the Deutsch Bahn decided to go on strike shortly before my trip.

This was once again culturally shocking for me, I genuinely thought that going on strike is something not really found in Germany and more a problem we face in South Africa.

I am not someone who is put off easily and I thus decided to find an alternative way to travel to Poland. This resulted me in taking a 27-hour trip to Poland with a mix of

travel by bus ("Flix Bus") and train (in Poland). Let's just say it was an exercise in character building.



Figure 12 The never-ending bus ride to Poland

During this trip I was quite shocked how poor the eastern part of Poland is. I had a preconceived idea that the whole of the European Union is a shiny society with high-speed trains and very developed cities. However, I could not have been more wrong. Poland, especially eastern Poland is not very developed. The fact that Poland was part of the USSR was also still clearly visible, with soviet style concrete apartment buildings seemingly continuing endlessly. The English language is also yet to fully reach the east of Poland. Although almost everything I saw in eastern Poland was old, it was still in remarkable good condition, and it was clear to me that people treat their public spaces/works with a high degree of respect.



Figure 13 A quite ancient looking train, not the shiny bull high-speed train I expected

7. Intercultural Experiences in Class:

Something that particularly stood out for me,

In my South African engineering class, we sometimes compare marks and chat about them, but we are generally very relaxed about it. Who does better is not really a big concern for us.

In my exchange class, there were several students from South Korea. Even though it was merely an exchange course, and our marks were not important at all, the South Korean students were extremely competitive.

I chatted with them about it, and according to them this competitiveness does have a positive side. The South Korean students had an extremely good work ethic compared to the rest of the exchange group. They never went out drinking or partying and were never late for class.

In a weird way it made me very grateful for my university experience. I realised that I should truly appreciate what is given to me at Stellenbosch University and not focus so much on the shortcomings.



Figure 14 Me and other international students enjoying a meal together after class

8. Conclusion:

My exchange to Germany is an experience that quite literally changed the way I view and perceive the world. This is something that I will always be grateful for as looking back I believe this personal growth was much needed.

I would lastly like to extend many thanks to the University of Warwick and specially everyone that worked on the EUTOPIA program. I much enjoyed this program and

learned so much. I wish everyone who's part of the organization team best of wishes for their future endeavours.



Figure 15 All good things must come to an end, I guess?

9. References:

All of the experiences and pictures are also my own, so no references are needed