

<b>Home Country</b>	<b>Home University</b>	<b>Academic Program at Home Univ.</b>
Canada	University of Toronto	Computer Science
<b>Degree intended at Home Univ.</b>	<b>Exch Period was carried out during</b>	<b>Academic Program at Univ. of Ulm</b>
Honours B.Sc	3rd year of study	Informatik
<b>Exchange Period from</b>	<b>until</b>	<b>Credit Transfer to Home University</b>
September 2005	August 2006	5.0 (60 ECTS)

<b>Publication of your report / email-address – please tick!</b>	<b>yes</b>	<b>no</b>
This report may be printed and made accessible to interested students in the library of the International Office at the Univ. of Ulm	X	
This report may be published on the website of the International Office at the University of Ulm	X	
• anonymized?	X	
Students who received a scholarship through „Landesstiftung“ Baden-Württemberg: This report may be published on the website of the Landesstiftung BW	X	
• anonymized?	X	
The International Office at the University of Ulm may pass my email-address to future exchange students from my home country / home university	X	

### **Exchange Report: University of Ulm (2005/2006)**

Upon deciding to apply to the Ontario-Baden-Wuerttemberg exchange program in second year, I was required to survey the list of participating schools and provide my top three choices. Naturally I listed the University of Ulm for its small size, scientific and engineering focus, and its physical situation. In coming from the University of Toronto, which has three campuses and many tens of thousands of students in the downtown alone, I was eager to experience a smaller university environment. As if going to another country entirely would not have been enough, I wanted to see what life would be like in a town, in a less hurried and urban setting. I wanted to know what it would be like to take courses with fewer students. I figured that if I were to make such a change, I might as well have opted for a complete inversion - something entirely different than what I had previously understood a university to be.

Ulm is extremely well-situated. I arrived in Frankfurt on a British Airways flight from Toronto through London, and from there it was a simple direct train ride to the main station. Frankfurt International Airport has its own train station featuring an array of local and long distance connections. Its accessibility is remarkably good. The theme of excellent

public transit recurred throughout my stay in Germany, and followed through Austria and Switzerland as well. Upon my arrival, I was met by a volunteer student who had been arranged by the International Office to greet incoming students and lead them to their residences. In choosing Ulm over other universities, I took immediate notice of their offer to do this for us as a clear indication of their commitment to helping new students. While not necessary (and not clearly advertised by the other universities I surveyed), it is simply another kind extension. It is something a larger school may omit, not having the resources to accommodate such options.

I think it important to note how remarkably pleased I was with the entire staff of the International Office at the University of Ulm. Everyone was very cordial and helpful, and even those who I had not met before appeared to either know my name a priori, or learned it quickly. In my desire to experience a smaller school, I wished to also get a feel for the varying levels of personality or impersonality present. Though I am a taciturn individual by nature, I do sometimes find a certain comfort and enjoyment in more personalised settings. This is exactly what was provided. In juxtaposition with Ulm, the University of Toronto's International Student Exchange Office is clearly overburdened, understaffed, and simply incapable of maintaining the same level of support for their students. It was clear from the beginning that Ulm's International Office was working hard to make our experience a productive and enjoyable one, while minimising hassles and aiding us in the various initial bureaucratic procedures. I always felt as though should I have a question or require any help, they would be more than willing and able to assist. In the instances that I did need to approach them, this anticipation proved absolutely true. In this, as well as many other occasions, I found my choice of choosing Ulm for its size very well-considered indeed.

Studying in another country can be daunting, especially when it means having to use a foreign language. In applying to the OBW program, I was surprised by how little prior language experience they required. At the time of my application, I was taking a first year beginner's German course. I knew that I would have a second year course completed before leaving, and specified this, but it still struck me as somewhat odd that I could participate with so little knowledge. Two years of university level language study in North America will not typically prepare a student to converse meaningfully and with depth in a foreign tongue. It was also my opinion that exchanges to other countries often required far greater prior abilities. A classmate of mine had far more experience with Spanish than I with German, and yet he was denied a year of study in Spain. Why the lax requirements in Germany?!

As it turns out, studying in German (especially in the sciences) is often not that difficult. Naturally, to listen to a formal lecture is far easier than to decipher idiom in a pub setting. Furthermore, I found that professors were usually very obliging, allowing for exchange students to write tests in English, or do oral examinations in whatever collection of languages they were comfortable speaking. Perhaps the systems are less flexible in other countries. That is something I could certainly imagine, as the rigid and numerous laws and regulations in my home university would certainly preclude such special circumstances. Even if a professor wanted to, it would be unlikely that they could oblige.

What the lack of language preparedness means, however, is that a student will be less fit to interact with the native population. While I found that most native students could speak remarkably good English (in some cases, I am convinced, far better than many at my own university), being at a significant linguistic disadvantage precludes really being able to comfortably participate fully in the host culture and society. I do not mean this to sound negative, only to illustrate the challenges it presents. In the light of this, I found that students typically did one of two things: dove in completely and made a best effort to tear down the linguistic barriers, or engaged in English with their fellow exchange students. The former requires a mixture of bravery, patience, willingness, and an outgoing personality. It is for this reason that I noted most students took to the latter. For many English was a

second language as well, so they benefitted regardless. For a native speaker of a language that seemingly everyone else is capable of accessing, speaking it provides little benefit. Although the experience will be similarly rich for persons of all levels of German language ability, the stronger one's knowledge of the language before arriving, the more they will be able to interact naturally with their surroundings.

I should, as the majority of my trip was spent in an academic setting, state at least a little bit regarding academics in Germany and Ulm in particular. I found, despite the relative smallness of the university, that Ulm had a remarkably large array of computer science courses. The department seemed both reasonably large, but small enough such that professors actually recognised students. One must understand that at the University of Toronto, even upper year lectures can have hundreds of attendees, whereas in Ulm they were typically quite small. Further, so far as I understand it, once a German student completes their second year or studies and passes the *Zwischenprüfung*, all of the upper year courses are at their disposal. This means essentially everything, and all one must do to participate is show up. Comparing this to the bureaucratic ridiculousness that one must undergo to take a graduate course at my home university while still an undergraduate, and it seems almost too easy. I consider the flexibility one has in choosing their studies in Germany to be an exceptional advantage. I should also note that while most students at my home university have a rather poor opinion of teaching assistants, who are often assigned from pools of graduate students to courses they may lack significant expertise in, the assistants of German professors often appeared to be their own graduate students, rather than one simply in the department. This resulted in my having had some truly incredible doctoral students as lecturers and teaching assistants. I think that Ulm benefits considerably from such well-assignedness.

"Knowing what you do now", a hypothetical interlocutor might say, "would you do it all again?". For strictly personal reasons I would have to say no. However, in the event that my significant other and I were not to be an ocean displaced, I would rather emphatically say "yes". Although I failed to return with the level of command in a new language that I had initially desired when I applied about a year and a half prior, the experience of living in a new country and society, of taking courses at another university, of travelling and seeing a different part of the world was, quite simply, absolutely worth it. Before leaving it was suggested to me in literature that often students regard their year abroad as the best of their lives. I do not know if I believe in such assignment, as I should hope that the rest of my existence does not prove a continuous downhill slide, but I regularly look back at my experiences in Germany with great fondness.

Upon returning I found myself comparing life in Germany to that in North America. In many regards I found a variety of different things here wanting. For instance, I miss the public transportation and its ridiculous frequency and regularity. It seems that every other time I take the bus in Toronto, it manages to be early or late with great consequent inconvenience. In Ulm the busses ran most of the day every ten minutes, even in the outlying parts of town, and aside from a single incident, there was never any appreciable lateness. On the same theme, I found the train connections fantastic. This is true of the country in general, but Ulm's location on the route between Munich and Stuttgart opens tremendous opportunity. One can take a highspeed train to Munich in as little as seventy minutes, and from there Salzburg and other gorgeous Austrian and Bavarian destinations lie only a few minutes or hours further. Frankfurt is but two hours in the opposite direction. Lake Constance and Zurich lie a few hours to the south. Ulm's location is fantastic, and being right on the Bavarian border, one can use *Laender* tickets to ride for only a handful of euros in either province. Compare that to North America, where a train from New York to Toronto takes a murderous twelve to sixteen hours, and only runs once a day. Even if there were some equally interesting places to go in Ontario, they would probably be accessible only by car. I most certainly miss the opportunities public transit provided in Germany.

Another aspect of Germany that I find myself missing is the quality of baked goods. While I readily admit a significant lack of appreciation for culinary arts, and would never claim to be overly fond of foods in general, I have to confess that whatever this so-called bread-like substance we consume in North America is, it's most certainly not of the same genus as the bread baked in Germany. What is purchased even in German supermarkets put Canadian and American bakers alike to shame, and that which one acquires from even simple, small, family-owned bakeries is extraordinary. Here's looking at you, Herr Wegerer.

While in Ulm, I was fortunate enough to live in an outlying part of the city called Wiblingen during my second semester. While I spent the first semester in a student residence much closer to the university, it was in the middle of the newly-developed Eselsberg, a largely monotonous continuation of white cubic buildings. Wiblingen, on the other hand, situated between the nexus of the Donau and Iller rivers, was far more rural, with farms, woods, and various paths. It seems clear that the true hearts of any nation lie within the small towns, rather than the major cities. It is in between the urban centres that the majority of people live, and I think that one cannot experience a culture without having introduced themselves to these regions. I have to say that although I met plenty of kind people during my stay and travels, I was most impressed by the quiet, unassuming atmosphere of Wiblingen and its inhabitants.

Upon returning home I had to undergo the process of transferring credits for my courses. Since the exchange office in my home university, as previously mentioned, is rather small in relation to the size of the university, it took a considerable amount of time (though no more than a week or two longer than advertised, and in the end I received full credits) for my ECTS credits earned. The process was painless and straightforward, only requiring a bit of patience. There is much proclaiming of academic risks involved in exchanges, with the home university disclaiming that the student will necessarily get complete transfer credit, but in the majority of cases it seems that there is little issue in practice. I was not, and would not again, be terribly concerned with this process.

Studying abroad can be expensive, especially for those who are able to live at home and commute to school. Unlike many of my fellow exchange students from other nations, my home university required that I pay full tuition despite a year-long absence. I was especially fortunate in that the OBW program paid for the first month of my residence in Ulm, during which our intensive languages courses took place, and I was offered a significant scholarship from the Landesstiftung Baden-Wuerttemberg as well. This kindness and generosity from both organisations alleviated a great deal of the financial burdens that I would have otherwise encountered. I am profoundly thankful to both organisations for their support.