

## **2011-2012 Alumni Report University of Heidelberg by Graham MacVannel**

I went to the University of Heidelberg for a yearlong exchange in the final year of my honours specialization in political science at the University of Ottawa. Heidelberg was my first choice and I don't regret it for a second. I began preparing in my second year to go on exchange since I knew that I had certain course requirements that needed to be fulfilled to graduate and that going in your last year can be tricky since you want to make sure that the courses you take abroad are accepted for your degree. Paying attention to the details goes along way when preparing to go on exchange and once your there.

Heidelberg was fantastic in that it was a beautiful university town centered literally in the heart of western europe, where the weather is fairly nice and you can travel almost anywhere rather easily. The city itself was predominantly spared during the war so it really retains that medieval European feel that you might not see in other german cities. It is surrounded by fantastic hills that are beautiful to walk up and play sometimes play host to massive parties on the summits (check out Thingstaette online). It has fairly good night life considering its not a massive town, but Mannheim is never too far away to go shopping, partying and its fairly nice to go to for the day as well.

There is no question that in terms of education, the system will seem a little weird at first but you figure it out relatively quickly. I recommend a lot of communication with your home university concerning how they work credit transfers, since I found in political science faculty it was more common to do "modules" worth 10 ECTS then individual classes worth 6, and also less work since your not writing excessively long essays for each class when you would be writing one per module. The quality is outstanding for political science students, with really good teachers in addition to nice facilities. It's also nice since most exchange students tend to stick to language courses or courses offered in English, however it helps in that you actually make german friends and work with them in class as opposed to other exchange students (you'll be friends with them anyways!). It goes without saying that in actually taking legitimate classes it can be slightly difficult getting accustomed to the seminars given the professional level of german used, however all my professors permitted me to do my essays in English and some even offered me the chance to do my presentations in English too. This may sound a little discouraging if your intentions were to party for eight months straight, but to be completely honest we have two months off after each semester to write essays and do exams so you can easily be super outgoing and still get good grades.

There is no way to say it nicely: university bureaucracy kind of sucks in Germany. If you thought your home university was bad, Heidelberg is probably worse. Don't let it get you down though, if you're insistent on what you need to get done and do it accordingly, you should have nothing to fear. It should also be noted that in comparison to other European countries, most Europeans would take the German university administration over their own any day so bear that in mind!

Heidelberg, to put it simply, is probably up to now one of the greatest experiences of my life. I made a tremendous number of people who helped shape my opinions and opened my eyes to new things that I highly doubt I would have discovered otherwise. I met people from around the world and there is really no way to describe how wonderful it is to wander down the alleys of the Old-city at night with friends or stretching out by the river on a summer's day. The weather was

always nice and with a bicycle you could go essentially go anywhere year round since it rarely went below zero in the winter and when it did it was only for short periods at a time. Ergo, get a bike! (though to be fair the busing system works just fine.)

I chose not to work while on exchange (something I somewhat regret) however I would recommend it for the social aspect of meeting people and the financial benefit of making money. You can get a job working at the university cafe's or bars and its generally a good time. Concerning money, the cost of living is peanuts when living in student housing (dorms for 186 Euros a month!) and Germany generally is probably one of the cheapest places to live in Western Europe. Given that the city is so close to Frankfurt, Mannheim and even France, there is always something to do or places to go on the weekend or even during the week.

When going on exchange, people can sometimes be a little apprehensive about living in a new country with a new language and not knowing anyone, but by the third day you are already meeting people and going out, by the end of the first month you'll probably already have planned a variety of trips and adventures. Now imagine that for a whole year!

What I believe sets Heidelberg apart from other cities is a combination of the beauty of the city, the quality of the university and its location. Germany itself is a wonderful place to go on exchange, but as far as I'm concerned studying at the university of Heidelberg made it all the better.

