Personal information

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Period/Time of Exchange: Spring 2017

Practical Advice

Visa
I had to apply for the Austrian Visa D, which is the visa required for students who are neither an EU nor an EFTA citizen. As I am an international student at Cornell, I had to wait till I go back to my home country, Singapore, during winter break to apply for my visa. The documents required for the visa application are listed very clearly on the Austrian Consulate’s website. Visa application has to be submitted in person, so I had to make an appointment at the Visa Application Centre. I felt that everything went pretty straightforward and smoothly. I got my passport back after 3 weeks (but I think this time frame would generally depend on where you’re applying from), and I guess I was lucky that BOKU’s spring semester started only at the end of February, if not it would have been really rushed for me.

Housing
BOKU does not arrange for housing, you’ll have to find housing through either the Oead or Akademikerhilfe. I used Akademikerhilfe just because they had a dorm building near the BOKU Muthgasse campus - which is where most of the Food Science classes are. Basically you sign up on their website, indicate your preferred housing accommodation and your top 3 dorm building preferences. Fortunately, I was offered a room in my first choice. I got a single room, and a shared bathroom and kitchen with another student. There was a fitness room, laundry room, party room and bicycle room in our building. I paid 404 Euros per month.

If you don’t get your top pick, you could try to send the organization an email. They might be able to put you on a waiting list.

Before arriving in Vienna, I had to correspond via email with my housing manager about my date and time of arrival so that he could pass me the keys and give me the necessary documents. An important form is the “Meldezettel” that must be settled within the first 3 days of your residency in Vienna. It has to be signed by your housing agency, and together with your passport, turned into the government office (There are government offices in every district of Vienna). You will then receive a form stating that you are a resident of Vienna. You would need to cancel this a few days before you leave Vienna.

Arrival
Arriving in the Vienna airport and getting to my dorm was pretty easy and straightforward. English is widely spoken and directions are very clearly. Public transport is very straightforward and convenient, and taxis or uber are readily available.

There is a small orientation program for all new students - first year students, international students, and students on the exchange program - that lasts about a week. It wasn’t anything big and busy like that in Cornell, but I thought it was just enough to help you get around the university. They gave us mainly information about where the university buildings are located, and how the library system, BOKUonline and BOKUlearn works. I found the international office extremely helpful as well, and they usually respond to emails very promptly.

There was a buddy program at BOKU and thankfully, I had an extremely helpful buddy and the both of us clicked really well. My buddy gave me tours around the campuses as some of the orientation programs clashed with my German classes. He also clarified additional questions I had about class enrollment and exam registrations, suggested some interesting classes that I should consider taking, showed me around Vienna and recommended a list of activities that I should do in Vienna.
Academics

The University

BOKU has 3 campuses in total - the main Turkenschanz campus in the northwestern part of Vienna, the Muthgasse campus in the north of Vienna, and a research campus in Tulln, which is 30 minutes by train outside of Vienna. All campuses are conveniently located near either bus or train stations.

There are a few libraries and computer labs in each campus; but it was pretty small and I didn’t use it at all. There are also tables and chairs scattered everywhere in the buildings for students to study, have lunch or catch up with each other. There are printer machines scattered around the buildings.

Each campus has its own cafeteria called Mensa, which serves a different lunch menu everyday. They are priced between 3 to 4 Euros. If you go to the Austrian Student Union Organization (ÖH) to get a meal sticker, you’ll be able to get a discount on the meals. Other than the Mensa, many students either bring their own lunch, purchase food from the supermarket or bakeries nearby, or get kebabs from the many Turkish stands nearby. At the main Turkenschanz campus, there is also a bar/café-type place called TUWI. It serves mainly vegetarian meals prepared from organic ingredients grown in the garden just next to it. They also serve BOKU’s very own brewed beer. Basically it’s a great place for students to unwind and hang out in.

The international office is located in a building on its own. I didn’t go to the office at all since it was easy to communicate with the staffs via email. Responses are usually pretty prompt and helpful.

There are several social activities planned by the Erasmus Student Network (ESN), the Erasmus Buddy Network (EBN) and the BOKU international office. The ESN and EBN mainly organize tours around Vienna, such as a brewery tour and a hiking trip, and really affordable trips around Europe. The international office at BOKU organizes weekly gatherings on Tuesday nights at a bar called Polkadot. Other than getting to know other international students, you’ll also be updated with the events going on in Vienna.

Courses

Enrollment of classes occurs through BOKUonline. However, unlike in Cornell, you are allowed to take overlapping classes as attendance is not always required for Lecture classes, but required for Seminars and Excursions. Powerpoint slides for Lecture classes are usually uploaded on another portal called BOKUlearn, so it’s ok to miss a Lecture class if you have other commitments. Also, different classes have different beginning and end dates throughout the semester, and some classes might not even have fixed meeting times, so it is not uncommon that your schedule differs from week to week. There is no limit to the number of classes enrolled, and you can add (provided that there’s space) or drop a class at any time during the semester.

For lecture classes, there’s usually one main, final exam on the last class. Some also had small assignments every now and then. Some lectures would be 2 hours once a week for the entire semester, others would be 3.5 hours twice a week for half the semester, and there was a class I took that was 9am to 4pm for 4 consecutive days. Lecture contents are usually presented on PowerPoint slides, which are all usually uploaded on BOKUlearn. There are usually several dates for you to choose from for the final exam, which I think is definitely beneficial as it allows you to study and schedule your time accordingly. You will have to register for the exam slots.

Seminars are usually project and team-based classes. I didn’t take any seminar classes so I’m not quite sure how the grading system.

Excursion classes are basically field trips that can last from anywhere between a day to a few days. Locations of the field trip could be anywhere from within Vienna, to within Austria, to even outside of Austria. I took a Viticulture and Enology field trip that went to the Friuli region in Italy for 5 days. It was definitely a lot a lot a lot of fun. I thought it was a good way to also meet Austrian students, as well as other exchange students. You also get to travel a little! Excursion classes are usually followed by a report.

I took 10 classes in total, which is about 30 ECTS credits, and 15 Cornell credits. What I really appreciated the most was that I was able to take a variety of courses even outside of my field of study. For example, I took classes concerning rural development, water management, waste management and agriculture science.

Difference between studying at Cornell and at your host university

As mentioned before, it is very common that your schedule differs from week to week since as courses
have different start and end dates, and may or may not have fixed meeting times. I definitely felt that the exams were pretty straightforward and not too difficult. However, since exams are usually on the last few dates of the class, it is probably wise to always be on track with the contents, instead of rushing to study them all towards the end.

I would say some lecturers are more approachable and willing to help than others. There are no set office hours like in Cornell, so it’s up to you to either email them or approach them directly after class. However for emails, while some would reply immediately, others would take weeks to reply.

Life Abroad

Language
I took the intensive German class at the beginning of the semester. It lasted for 2 weeks, for 4 hours Monday-Friday. I felt that taking this intensive class was a great way to meet other exchange students. I also took the German beginners class during the semester itself, which was once a week for 1.5h.

Majority of Austrians speak pretty fluent English and I had no problem at all with their accents. I was definitely able to manage my daily life communicating just in English. Of course there are times were I would love to practice my German with local Austrians, but Austrians themselves love to practice their English with a native English speaker, so we end up just speaking in English most of the time. Generally older people, some taxi or uber drivers, or some employees at the grocery store are not able to converse in English that fluently, so that’s where a little German would come in handy.

Health and Safety
I would say that Vienna is a very safe city. I felt incredibly safe most of the time, even at night. However of course you would just have to use some common sense, such as avoiding unlighted paths at night, keeping your valuables safe by you etc.

Health wise, I definitely think Vienna has great, amazing quality produce. Water and air quality is also amazingly fresh, and there are many great outdoor activities that you can do to get in your exercise.

When applying for an Austrian visa, you must prove that you have medical insurance that covers you while abroad.

Overall exchange experience
My overall exchange experience was extremely, without a doubt, inspiring, enriching and eye-opening. As an international student at Cornell, I wasn’t really afraid of going abroad, settling down in a foreign country, having to adapt to the different culture, and making new friends etc. I’ve been dealing and overcoming these problems ever since freshmen year and I knew that this time round would just be something similar. What I was quite nervous about was that English is not the first language in Austria and I was afraid that that was going to be a huge setback for me. Yet, it turns out that Austrians speak extremely great English, considering that it is their mother tongue, and that helped me out a lot. It also touched me to see them want to practice their English so eagerly. For example, there were many times when on individual basis, the Austrians would insist that we speak in English and I correct them. Even in a group setting, on most occasions, they would switch to English for me, if not, one of them would translate everything for me. I actually felt extremely included, despite certain language barriers, and that was surprising for me as I definitely didn’t expect it be such an easy and smooth process.

I would say that many Austrians and other Europeans that I’ve met while travelling are pretty open-minded, receptive to new ideas and accepting of differences. Most of them genuinely want to strike a conversation beyond small talks, and actually get to know you and your background and how you’re different from them. Hearing all of their stories and perspectives also helped me see things with a much broader mindset. I also realized that Europeans are generally more environmentally friendly, sustainable and resourceful. For example, plastic bags are not given at grocery stores, and composting, organic farming, recycling and waste sorting are big things. It showed a lot about their caring attitude and mindset about the planet, and it thought me to appreciate the small things in life. I thought that as an agriculture and life science major, Vienna and Austria especially, is definitely the perfect location to learn and experience all about it.

Although I’ve been away from home at Cornell for 3 years already, I felt that I’ve already become quite comfortable with Americans, and accustomed to the American lifestyle and culture. Studying abroad in a whole new different environment placed me again
outside my comfort zone. It thought me and reminded me again that I always had to keep an open mind, and that I have to be proactive myself in reaching out to people and when facing problems. I also strived to make the most out of my time in Austria, and in Europe, by travelling and going to events when I can. My semester abroad has definitely been nothing short of amazing.

Additional Tips for future students

Packing
As compared to winter at Cornell, especially the months of January and February, winters in Vienna aren’t THAT bad really. There isn’t much snow, and it’s barely sub-freezing temperatures. It is still windy though. Temperature starts rising by mid-march, and from then till the end of April, it’s spring temperatures, with some cold exceptions however. May and June are essentially summer already. As such, I generally didn’t bring that much winter clothes at all, definitely much less than what I would have in Cornell. I also didn’t bring rain boots nor snow boots. Vienna’s also mostly sunny, with very few cloudy and rainy days, and with the sun’s heat, I found myself wearing lots of spring and summer clothes most of the time - again definitely not something that I would do in the spring semester in Cornell.

I’d definitely recommend bringing an adapter, as the sockets in Europe are different from that in the US. Toiletries and household essentials are pretty easy to get in Vienna so I wouldn’t bother packing it in my luggage. They don’t give out plastic bags at grocery stores, so I’d recommend bringing a grocery bag, although it is easy to just get one in Vienna as well. If you’re into outdoor activities, I’d recommend bringing hiking boots - there are lots of hiking routes in Vienna - swim suits etc.