

Erasmus Experience at Ghent University, Belgium

September 2020 – July 2021

Study program

- At the University of Freiburg: M. Sc. Economics (MEP), Faculty of Economics and Behavioral Sciences
- At Ghent University: M. Sc. Economics, Faculty of Economics and Business Administration (FEB)

Preparation

After being selected for Erasmus at UGent, first I had to do some general paperwork – the process was clearly explained in the presentations provided by Erasmus office and went smoothly for me. I had to work both with the Mobility Online platform, and with the platform of Ghent University called OASIS.

My next priority was choosing the courses for my Learning Agreement such that they would match my profile and would later be acknowledged here in Freiburg. Compared to some other universities, it is quite easy to find the courses at UGent that satisfy the requirements of your specific profile. Note that you are allowed to take courses from the whole Exchange program of the Faculty of Economic and Business Administration, and not only from M. Sc. Economics specialization.

Make sure to meet all the deadlines and be aware that you cannot apply for accommodation before you have uploaded all documents on OASIS, including your Learning Agreement! Applying early is very important because there are not enough places in the university dormitories for international students. You will find more about the dormitories in the next section.

Then I informed local authorities and institutions about my departure, bought a train ticket with DB (probably the easiest option to reach Ghent, though one has to do two changes), and left around mid-September as the winter semester in Belgium started on September 15.

Accommodation

Ghent University provided me with a room in one of the university dormitories for international students called Home Göttingen (Campus Kantienberg). The location is very nice as it is close to the city center, there is a large park, a canal, and a popular bar street nearby, and the buildings of the faculty of economics are a 5-minute walk away. The room is quite comfortable, it includes the bathroom, while the kitchen is shared with the rest of the floor. The price is 457 euro.

Be aware, however, that many students did not manage to get a room from UGent and had to search for accommodation themselves, so apply early! Living in the dormitory is very nice because you are surrounded by other international students who are as interested in making friends in a new country and travelling as you probably are.

Everyday life and cost of living

First of all, I have never seen such a beautiful city as Ghent. Architecture, canals, city center – everything is just breathtaking! Even my Belgian friends unanimously claimed that this is the most beautiful city in Belgium.

The size of the city is very comfortable – it is a bit larger than Freiburg. I never used public transport because everything was very close to the dormitory, including even the train station. Bike is definitely enough but even if you do not rent it, most places can be reached on foot. By the way, the cheapest option to rent a bike is De Fietsambassade Gent – I paid only 60 euros for 10 months.

UGent and particularly FEB are very supportive for international students throughout the whole year, but this is especially important at the beginning. You will get a lot of information (and even vouchers for some activities) on what is important to experience in Ghent: boat trips, tasting waffles, fries, and Belgian beer, etc. Many faculties own bars that are run by students themselves, and this is a very nice opportunity to meet your fellow students! For instance, FEB owns a bar called Yucca, and at the beginning of the year they organized a couple of welcome-drink events there that allowed me to meet some of my good friends.

In general, the cost of living in Belgium is higher than in Germany: both accommodation and food were more a bit more expensive, but the difference is not crucial.

There is no need to open a new bank account if one has a German account. Like in Germany, Maestro cards are used in Belgium, while Mastercard or Visa cards are often not accepted.

As for health insurance, my TK insurance was valid in Belgium – just make sure to inform TK in advance that you are leaving. However, it is recommended to register with a local health insurance company Partena to facilitate the process of using your German insurance. This is for free and can be done completely online.

Finally, there are 3 official languages in Belgium – Dutch, French, and German. In Flanders, the main language is Dutch, but if you do not speak Dutch, you will not have any problem because literally everybody speaks English.

Studies

The system is very different from Germany, and one should be prepared for it.

First, there is no clear differentiation between lectures and tutorials, compared to Germany. This means that if there are 4 hours scheduled for a course per week, you will most likely have a 4-hour lecture which means 4 hours of new material (instead of 2 hours like in Freiburg, followed by a 2-hour tutorial which contains no new stuff usually). That is why your general workload will be much larger than here – at least this is the case for the FEB.

Second, most courses imply some permanent evaluation. While in Freiburg we have either an exam, or some course work during the semester in seminars (but then without an exam), in Ghent you will have both of them most of the time, and these course assignments during the semester are quite time-consuming. Therefore, choose your courses wisely! For instance, I took very difficult ones like Big Data, Time Series Analysis, Advanced Econometrics, etc., and they all contained a lot of assignments plus the final exam, so it was quite hard to cope with everything at once. The nice thing about these assignments is that most of them are made in groups, and thus you will have plenty of opportunities to meet your fellow students, establish new connections, and find new friends.

Third, the grading system is very harsh at UGent. The minimum passing grade is 10 out of 20, and 20 is basically a non-existing grade. There are almost no people receiving 19, and very few get 18. So, if you care about your GPA, be prepared that it will most likely drop after your Erasmus.

But, fourth, it is worth it. Because the amount of knowledge and skills that you will get is enormous. These practical assignments during the semester make students apply everything that they learn in class. For example, with my selection of courses, I worked (a lot) in Python, PySpark, R, Stata, Git, and other programming languages and software that can be very useful and applicable when applying for a job later.

Finally, acknowledgement of the courses here in Freiburg went smoothly in my case thanks to the support of Dr. Minter and Andra Volintiru as they were always available during the year to provide feedback on whether a particular course could be recognized in Freiburg or not.

Leisure and travelling tips

Ghent is a vibrant student city with plenty of leisure opportunities! (though, again, there were limited in my case due to the lockdown) There is a well-known festival in July that you should definitely visit if you are going to study in Ghent in summer semester. Also, ESN – Erasmus Student Network – organizes a lot of events for international students: trips, visiting museums, city games, etc. Find their group on Facebook and join them on Telegram to make use of it!

I was not very lucky with the timing for travelling because of the pandemic, but I hope soon the restrictions will not be as severe as before, and then Ghent is a perfect starting point for so many trips! You can go to Paris, to Amsterdam, or to London in 2 hours, Luxembourg is very close as well, and you will always have people – other Erasmus students – to join you in these trips, especially if you live in the dorms.

There are plenty of wonderful Belgian cities to visit – Brussels, Bruges, Antwerp, Dinant, etc. Everything is so close that you can perfectly make one-day trips without staying overnight. Use the offers from SNCB to buy cheaper train tickets (for instance, half-price weekend tickets, or discounts for people under 26).

Summary

It was an amazing experience, and I highly recommend Belgium and specifically Ghent for doing an exchange! However, you must be prepared for a heavy workload and a very demanding educational system. If this does not scare you, then you will receive a wonderful experience of living in such a beautiful city, in a country with rich and attractive culture, you will learn a lot at a top-ranked university, you will have lots of opportunities for travelling being in the heart of Europe, and, most importantly, you will meet a lot of new people, some of whom will become your good friends.