

## CASE STUDY: EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING THROUGH STUDENT EXCHANGE PROGRAM

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### **Introduction**

The exchange program enables students to travel from their home countries to a partner university in the German-African University project. Students from the University of Nairobi in Kenya and University of Cape Coast in Ghana travel to the Hochschule Bonn-Rhein-Sieg University of Applied Sciences and stay for three months attending classes and participating in academic activities together with German students. Similarly, students from Hochschule Bonn-Rhein-Sieg, University of Applied Sciences, travel to either West or East Africa and are hosted for three months by universities participating in the project. The program enables Kenyan students to accustom themselves to the German way of life and student-centered learning and disciplines. The program integrates fieldwork into the learning activities making education both a skill-imparting and fun process. The hosting university takes full responsibility of the visiting African students with the support of the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD). Generally, the idea is to expose students to different academic cultures, social cultures, and economic systems in order for them to have an open mind and see the possibilities that otherwise would not seem possible – especially in Sub-Saharan Africa. The exposure helps students spread the influence back home by enlightening fellow students about cultural differences and the opportunities therein.

### **Social Life in Germany**

First and foremost, the social systems in Germany are excellent. I can barely recall a day where I had to go to a social office to either get my residence registration done or even apply for insurance when I had to wait longer than five minutes. Everything is done on appointment and if you are late, too bad because you then have to book a new appointment. Time management is key in Germany, every second counts. Unlike in the Kenyan culture, where time has a contextual meaning, time management in Germany is strict to the second. My personal encounter with the time consciousness culture shock was on arrival at Frankfurt train station where my Kenyan colleague and myself had to take a train to Bonn City. Our train ticket had a specific time which was 09:38. In our Kenyan perspective, we could not understand why the train departure time is not given a common time like 09:45. We believed there was no way that the train would leave at 09:38 and we expected it to leave at least ten minutes after the stated time as is the common practice of our bus transport system back in Kenya. It came as a shock on us when the train pulled out at exactly 09:38 and left us at the platform. We had to wait for the next train. The second culture shock was the discipline of road users, both motorists and pedestrians. I could not understand why pedestrians did not cross the road even when it was clear. Traffic lights were obeyed to the letter. An exact opposite to Kenya where traffic lights most often have little meaning for pedestrians. I

concluded that Germans are either very disciplined or that traffic offences incur hefty penalties.

Nonetheless, discipline overrides the fear of fines or detrimental legal consequences. For instance, buying of train tickets is automated and tickets are rarely inspected in the train, yet everybody pays. Not once did I see a German get into a train without buying a ticket, even children. Indeed, such a system would be abused in Kenya as people would try to enjoy train rides without paying for it. Germans always follow the rules, and if they are given an option on whether or not to follow the rules, they still choose to follow the rules.

On the flip-side, Germans are less social and take time to build trust with strangers. It might take a full semester before a German stranger walks over to say hello to you. I used to think they were shy. Even amongst themselves, everyone prefers to have their own space and you are not necessarily friends because you are in the same assignment group; they certainly know how to draw the line. Nevertheless, once you get to make friends with a few, you understand that they are very polite and genuine people who will say everything as it is. It is easy to have a smooth stay in Germany, provided one learns the systems and strictly follows the rules.

Christmas celebration is a practice enjoyed in Germany and the decorations begin as early as the end of November with Christmas markets taking over most streets in most towns. Celebrations involve people gathering up to as late as midnight drinking alcoholic beverages and buying Christmas gifts from the vendors from all over the world. I was lucky to find a Kenyan vendor who sold Kenyan beaded necklaces and paintings which rendered an amazing depiction of our Kenyan culture. Getting used to the German food took me a while, but once you learn how to eat those German sausages you are good to go; they are available everywhere and anytime.

Sunday is a day of worship in several African countries including Kenya. Consequently, businesses close to allow people go to church and other places of worship. Thereafter, some businesses open later in the afternoon after religious rituals. In Germany however, not a single shop is open on a Sunday, but not necessarily because people are attending church. The majority of people does not attend church or places of worship but uses Sunday to rest and recharge. Therefore, all shopping from groceries to clothing is done on Saturdays and this means all shops are always flocked on Saturdays.

It is very important also to understand the language for an easy stay in Germany. All people from young to old speak German and only a few are willing to converse in English, and you can see the satisfaction and the relief on their face when a foreigner speaks and understands their language. Bus tickets, the names of the groceries, and city maps are all in German. Therefore, having a basic understanding of the German language is very vital.

**Academic Life at Hochschule Bonn-Rhein-Sieg, University of Applied Sciences**

Teaching methods at Hochschule Bonn-Rhein-Sieg, University of Applied Sciences, have notable differences to and a few similarities with the University of Nairobi. Whereas at the University of Nairobi, all courses students register for during the semester are examined and graded through a 2-hour written exam, some elective courses at Hochschule Bonn-Rhein-Sieg, University of Applied Sciences, are not examinable. In courses without examinations, students are encouraged to come up with solutions during the class sessions. Students engage, search the solutions from textbooks, and then make presentations of their findings. At the end, students earn credits and not grades. This kind of delivery of information helps students to engage not for the sole purpose of passing exams but to learn, and with the close engagement of the lecturer and the student, knowledge and skill are passed in a practical manner. Presentations were valued and attracted more marks in the examination process.

The content taught by the host university in Germany is more practical and less theoretical. This engages students even more and allows them to interact with the real business world. For instance, we conducted market research which was part of our coursework and generated a report to confirm that the information written in books was indeed correct. In my opinion, this is an effective way of learning as compared to the Kenyan system where students read books and listen to lectures and transfer back the information to the lecturer during examinations without learning anything. Effective learning takes place when students are engaged in real-life information gathering and presenting it in class, and later on comparing it to findings in the secondary sources. The students are able learn in the process.

At the German host institution, less attention is paid to written exams but actual learning which took place in group projects and presentations of case studies. The groups would also have consultation days with the professor to discuss the progress and make any corrections before submitting the actual presentations where other students are also given an opportunity to provide feedback on findings and the presentation. I remember that my case study was on Nestle and I had to present the organizational transformation of Nestle, and my group partner and I thought it would be great to offer a bar of Nestle chocolate to every student while presenting the company profile and products offered. We thought this would enable other students to have a vivid picture of the items. However, this strategy was seen as a corrupting gesture in order to attract fair comments and remarks from the students on our presentation. This was another lesson, apart from the academics. The professors do not encourage any form of corruption, and developing such a mindset of fairness, honesty, and assertiveness of speaking their mind to young people will eventually pay off as they join the corporate world, by producing all-round and fit students in all aspects.

### **Conclusion**

Germany was a great experience; it gave me a wide and broad perspective of education and social life including exposure to new learning tools controlled by students themselves, cultures, and technology. It opened my mind to accepting, appreciating, and adopting different cultures. It made me get ideas on how to improve many areas in our country, university, perceptions and also taught me how to leave comfort zones. Germany gave me hope that it is possible to succeed by working hard, being honest, and having systems that work for the people. Germany also helped me appreciate our Kenyan society where even though we may lack in a lot of areas, our warmness cannot be compared to any other.