

6 months with ERASMUS at the Kunsthøgskolen i Oslo, KHiO

by XXX

I had to make the decision to go abroad a good year in advance in December 2017 in order to apply for the HfK place at the Oslo National Academy of the Arts (Kunsthøgskolen i Oslo, KHiO), which I was then granted before the end of the year. I found this period of time to be very appropriate for preparation and for mentally adjusting to it. I also had the opportunity to complete a language course at the University in Bremen and gradually find out more about the local conditions without stress. However, filing the application in Bremen was only a small first step, which was followed by an application to the KHiO in the fall.

I needed a portfolio that I put together from work from the previous semester, as well as a letter of motivation and a letter of recommendation from one of my lecturers. Andrea Rauschenbusch supported me very well in all of this, which meant that I ended up with a comprehensive application and submitted it on time at the beginning of October. Since I had read on the partner university's website that they only accepted 1-2 exchange students per degree programme, I knew that the place was not necessarily secure and was hoping for a quick confirmation so that I could make further arrangements. However, after about four weeks I received an email saying I was on the waiting list without much further explanation. Even though I still didn't have a place, I applied for a room in the student dormitory as the start of the semester was quickly approaching. When I was promised the room, I had to postpone my contract for a while until I finally received confirmation from the university at the beginning of November. In this case, a rejection would have been very annoying, as I had already made arrangements to live in Norway two months later.

Shortly after Christmas I took the ferry to Oslo with my family, who accompanied me for a New Year's Eve holiday, and then moved in at the dorm. As an EU citizen, you don't need many documents, you just have to make an appointment with the police online via the UDI organisation and then register there. It takes a while to make an appointment (in my case four months), but the process is very simple.

The semester at KHiO started on January 7th. I was introduced to the other exchange students and the contact people on site and shown the University. It is in a beautiful building with many nooks and corners and located right in the central Grünerløkka district. The building is also hard to miss due to the sign "THIS IS IT" on the roof. As it hosts many different courses from Graphic Design & Illustration to Jewellery Design to Dance and Theatre, the rooms and workshops are very diverse, but I only had access to those from my course of study. These include, among other things, the extensive library, some classrooms and the media lab, which is very well equipped with Mac computers, printers and cutting tables and which I often used for work. In addition, everyone gets their own table in the work room, which the local students in particular set up personally.

The atmosphere there was always very pleasant and it was easy to exchange ideas with your classmates. However, I didn't use the space much for work, as I mostly did it at home or in the media lab. Both my fellow students and teachers were always quite open, friendly and helpful towards me and I always felt very comfortable at the university. However, I could not really get used to the cafeteria there because the price of 14 NOK (approx. €1.40) per 100 g of food was definitely too expensive for me. Norway is not exactly affordable overall, but even some Norwegians told me that it wasn't appropriate.

The courses at KHiO were very varied and diverse at the Faculty of Graphic Design and Illustration. The professors put a lot of effort into integrating me and the other ERASMUS student from my class and therefore held the majority of the courses in English, which made it very easy to get started. The exception to this was the overall theory course on the topic of “design criticism”. Since the University has no budget for English-language theory and requires the teachers to keep the theory in Norwegian, but also the foreign students have to submit a paper at the end of the course, we were in a difficult situation. We didn't have to show up for the course, but the materials (many of them in English) were available to us online and we then sat down in groups independently and went over them. Writing it at the end wasn't a big problem either because I was already familiar with writing reviews.

The courses generally also often involved independent work, which I tended to take home because it didn't seem to make much sense to me to lug all of my equipment to the University when I could just as easily do assignments from home. On the one hand, this meant that I was able to divide my work fairly well. Since I didn't finish the semester in Bremen because it ran until March, but the semester in Oslo started in January, I still had projects to finish at the HfK and as I only spend 1 or 2 days per week in the KHiO I could also find the time to finish my earlier projects. On the other hand, I somehow missed the social exchange with my Norwegian fellow students and a certain regularity in my daily routine.

There were no exams. As at the HfK, the courses ended with the submission of the projects, and we also created a small exhibition for the final one. I lived for half the year in the student dormitory in Bjerke run by the organisation SiO, which has many other dorms spread across the city. They are relatively easy to find online and the application process is simple and efficient. Foreign students are given priority, which meant I got my room fairly quickly. If I had any further questions, the organisation was always very helpful and provided great customer service.

My room was about 12 square meters, equipped with a bed, table and chair, as well as a shelf, which was probably supposed to be the “closet” from the description (yes, I lived out of my suitcase for half a year after that). However, the spacious windows offered a great view of Oslo, both day and night. I shared the bathroom with one person and the kitchen with 6 people and it really looked that way. Sticky floors and scattered food residues were completely normal. And it would have just been too easy if everyone had stuck to the given cleaning schedule. However, the dishes and cutlery were mostly clean and I also struck up one or two interesting conversations there. Bjerke is not particularly central, but the rent (around €370) was about half of an average student apartment in a more desirable location.

In terms of my free time, I always had a lot of varied activities. Bars are not exactly affordable and often have an age limit of 20 or 23 on weekends, but you can always find student bars with affordable beer and exciting quiz nights. Oslo as a city is also very beautiful. In addition to the classic sightseeing, you can also visit a few galleries and museums and if you don't feel like city life, you don't have to go far. The T-train quickly took me to beautiful hiking routes such as Vettakollen or Lake Lutvann, and Grefsenkollen directly behind my house was always worth a visit. I also joined the Quidditch team Sagene IF (a sport I already knew from Germany), with whom I traveled a lot outside of training and learned to snowboard, for example, and celebrated the national holiday on May 17th in a very traditional way. Towards the end of the semester I had the opportunity to travel a bit more, so I went to Trondheim and went on a multi-day hike along the Lysefjord.

Overall, I can highly recommend Norway and Oslo for a semester abroad. It takes some getting used to higher expenses, long, cold winters and more extreme daylight hours (dark early in winter, very late in summer), but the breathtaking scenery and cultural exchange are well worth it. I also really liked the study program at KHiO and the fact that the locals all speak pretty good English also helped overcome a lot of initial difficulties. I would make the decision to come here again without hesitation and am looking forward to visiting the country again at some point.