As a second year International Business student, I had the opportunity to spend the 2018/2019 fall semester (my 3rd semester) at the International School of Management (ISM) in Dortmund in the frame of the Erasmus+ program. With this report I would like to share my experiences and impressions – the good and the bad as well – to help anyone interested in studying at the ISM in the future.

I knew from the beginnings that I wanted to spend a semester abroad during my studies. Finally, I ended up choosing Germany as my destination, because improving my language skills was a priority for me. I researched many universities in the country and picked the Dortmund campus of ISM in the end, as I found the practical approach to teaching and the international orientation of the school very appealing.

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Introduction

Dortmund is located in the province of North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW), in North-West Germany. The city – as the whole of the region – has an industrial past and with its population of approximately 600,000 people, it is the 8th largest city of the country. Dortmund has three universities that include the ISM, the Technical University and the “Fachhochschule”, which is roughly the University of Applied Sciences, so from this it would be safe to say that Dortmund is a student city.

The ISM is a quite prestigious private university. In 2017 in ranked as the best private uni for business studies. Accordingly, the tuition fees for regular students are pretty high, but – thank God and the Erasmus+ program –
Erasmus students are exempt from this. The school operates seven campuses with 3000 students in cities around Germany, including Dortmund, Cologne, Munich, Hamburg, Frankfurt, Stuttgart and, as I’ve been informed from the website, also Berlin starting from 1st September 2019.

From the campuses, the one in Dortmund is the “mother campus” so it is the largest one with around 880 students. It is located on the outskirts of Dortmund, in a so-called Technologiepark. From an international student point of view, I would definitely recommend this campus, because it welcomes the largest number of international students, while I’ve heard from a fellow student studying in Frankfurt that their campus had a total of five internationals.

Structure of the courses

Each campus offers so-called “modules”, which are comprised of four courses. In addition to this, you can choose between a wide range of “tracks” (e.g. finance track, communication track etc). These are specializations, consisting of two courses each. The suggested number of courses is six, which you get by – drumroll – choosing a module and a specialization. If you successfully complete a module and – pay attention now – two of the specialization courses (these two courses DO NOT have to be from the same track, i.e. you can choose one from the finance and one from the communication track), you get an International Business Certificate at the end of your studies. The system is flexible, so you can combine courses from any module or specialization track, if you wish. Although it is pointed out at the course selection stage of the application process that the time of the courses might collide if you mix courses from the modules, in my experience that never happened.

At the ISM, you won’t have a permanent schedule for the whole semester. The schedule changes every week, so you must pay attention to keep track of it. The lecture/seminar division does not apply here, you have to attend all classes.

At the end of the semester there is a ten-day-long exam period. It is possible that you’ll have to take two exams on the same day. If you don’t pass one of your exams, the re-examination period is in mid-March. The ISM does not send exams abroad, so you’ll have to go back to retake the exam.

The city of Dortmund – attractions and things to do

I’m not going to lie, Dortmund is not the most beautiful German city you can imagine. As mentioned in the introduction, it has an industrial past, which is clearly visible, i.e. you won’t find historical buildings or nice little streets downtown. Downtown Dortmund is pretty much one large shopping street, which is always full of people, no matter what time of the day you visit it. Other than that, the city has quite a number of parks. The biggest one is called Westfalenpark, this is where the TV tower is to be found as well (you’ll find that TV towers are must-haves in larger German cities). Others include the Westpark and Rombergpark. I’ve heard from fellow students that there are a lot of events organized in these parks in the spring and summer months and even when there’s nothing planned, people go out and have picnics in the park. As I spent the fall semester in Dortmund, I couldn’t really experience this, but one event that was really nice was called the Lichterfest on the second weekend of September. At the Lichterfest the whole park is covered in candles and there are also fireworks.

Of course, the main events in Dortmund are football games. That is pretty much what the city’s culture revolves around. When I was there, there were games usually twice every week. Game night is clearly indicated by the masses of people on the streets. Be especially prepared when
the home team, BVB Dortmund is playing against its great rivals FC Schalke or Bayern München.

I attended one BVB game in the semester, to which we were given tickets free of charge from the school. I don’t consider myself a football fan, not even remotely, but the atmosphere of the stadium and the sound of almost 80,000 people singing and cheering together was definitely a once-in-a-lifetime experience, so I encourage everyone to grab those tickets! The ISM also organises a stadium tour of the Signal Iduna Stadium, which is also very enjoyable.

From the school-organised programs I would like to mention the trip to the Munich Oktoberfest. The Oktoberfest is the largest cultural (mostly beer) festival in Munich, Bavaria, taking place usually at the beginning of October. I would definitely recommend everyone to take part in it because it was a fantastic experience and the school took care of everything, including securing us a table in one of the tents!

Transportation

When you start the semester at the ISM, you will be obliged to buy a “Semesterticket”. The price is around 190 euros, but it includes all means of transport in whole NRW, so I think it’s a good investment. On weekends and on weekdays after 7 pm, you can even take a passenger with you who travels with you free of charge. Another perk is, that it kind of encourages you to go and explore the region.

About the means of transportation, trains in Germany are extremely expensive and very unreliable. It was not unusual that trains were hours late or even cancelled. Therefore, I don’t recommend taking the train for longer journeys outside the NRW. I mainly used Flixbus, which is slower and also not always reliable but it’s still a fraction of a train ticket’s price. An undoubtable advantage of Dortmund is that it lies close to France and the

*BVB chocolate Santas, Christmas ornaments, baby clothes and pretty much everything*

*The Three Land Point in Aachen*
Benelux states. I visited Brussels, Bruges and Amsterdam and all of them could be reached with a 3-4-hour bus ride.

Accommodation

Unlike in Budapest, the dorms in Dortmund are not operated by universities but by a single authority called “Studierendennwerk”. Dorm buildings are located all over the city and have a wide range of quality as well as price (250-450 €). Some of the buildings are newer or renovated, some are a bit outdated. It is based on pure luck where you will be accommodated: you cannot choose, and the ISM has no influence on the assignment of rooms either. When you’re sent the housing form, you need to be very quick because dorm places for internationals are very limited.

If you don’t get a room in the dorms, don’t worry, the school provides all the assistance you need to find accommodation. I was a dorm student, so I didn’t do much research on this, but from what I’ve heard, a room costs around 250-300€ in the city centre, depending on how many people share a flat. Be very careful with the accommodation websites, because some provide very low-quality service! Always check out the place before you pay!

Language learning

My primary goal during my Erasmus semester was improving my German skills and although I had my courses in English, it still worked out pretty well. To my surprise, not nearly as many people in Germany speak English as you’d expect, so if I needed to get anything done, I had no choice but to speak German.

The ISM organises a three-week long language course starting mid-August, but this I would only recommend if you are an absolute beginner in German and want to gain some knowledge before the semester starts. Otherwise, it is not very effective, since there are only two groups and the levels of people within the groups differ significantly. An advantage of taking part in the course is, however, is getting to know your classmates, before all the others arrive. This smaller number of people allows you to get to know each other better, which is especially useful if you’re the only one from your country, like I was. The people I got to know during the language course ended up being my closest friends during the rest of the semester as well.
Summary

All in all, I spent an enjoyable semester in Dortmund, got to know many amazing people I am still in touch with and learned a lot about other cultures, countries and last but not least about myself. I had my ups and downs as I encountered the difficulties of living in a different country, but I believe I will benefit from all these experiences in the future. I want to encourage everyone to take part in the Erasmus program, I guarantee that you won’t regret it!

If you are interested in applying to the same university and have some questions left after reading this report, feel free to reach out to me via e-mail: reka.szilagyi12@gmail.com.

Good luck!