

## **Application Process, Preparation and the Study Visa**

My road to South Africa began by the time I submitted my application online. Just a few weeks later I got an invitation for an interview at the FB 07 to personally introduce myself as a suitable candidate for a semester abroad at the University of the Free State and the corresponding full-study DAAD scholarship. The interview had a relaxed atmosphere and all parties joined the conversation, while no questions were left out. Just some days after, I got the approval for my upcoming semester abroad during the winter term of 2019/2020 (July-December). The preparations started about a month later, since a variety of documents are to be taken into account in order to apply for the South African study visa, which needs to be submitted personally at the Embassy of the Republic of South Africa in Berlin. Hereto it is to be noted that the South African Embassy in Berlin indeed has some unfavourable ratings and is known to be extremely strict and sometimes obscure regarding submissions of visa documents. Nevertheless, a complete application including all the needed components paired with a respectful appearance won't pose further difficulties.

## **Arrival, Residence and Orientation**

After about 3-4 weeks I received my study visa and was ready to board my flight from Hamburg via Dubai to Johannesburg, from where we took another short flight to Bloemfontein, the city of roses. We were welcomed at the airport and went straight to a nearby grocery store before we were dropped off at Beyers Naudé (BN), our residence on campus. The residence provides accommodation for 9 people (we were a group of 6 Germans and 3 Dutch people), a common kitchen, washing facilities, two fully equipped bathrooms and a decent size outside area. The rooms are different in size, so that different rental fees apply. All individual rooms are equipped with a single bed, a wardrobe and a rather big desk. Most of the rooms also provide a small fridge to store your purchased groceries in. By the time we were living at BN, two rooms did not have an own fridge for what reason a spare fridge next to the kitchen was being reserved for those people.

The days after arrival, orientation took place, which included the payment of the study fees including accommodation (ca. 2000€), handing over of the personalized UFS card (necessary for access of campus and accommodation), the enrolment of respective courses, access to blackboard (comparable to Bremen's studIP), purchase of necessary books (ask the book dealers next to the book stores, trade and save some money) and access to WiFi as well as the collection of specific study guides. Also, we were introduced to the international office and our study buddies within an organized dinner and we were given information of terms and conditions regarding the momentum insurance, which we had to enter an agreement with in order to fulfil the requirements for the study visa. Especially during the first days in Bloemfontein, our study buddies were a big help and were beyond helpful when we had questions regarding university matters or generally daily life in SA. Thankfully we were given great support throughout the whole orientation process, since it can be quite overwhelming

when things do not work out as explained and generally as a variety of different facilities are to be found on campus. It is to be noted that even after orientation it is possible to switch courses within the first 1-2 weeks, however, one needs to have patience regarding changes to show on blackboard. My finalized schedule included Digital Marketing, Small Business Management, Afrikaans I, and Performance Management, whereby I do not recommend doing the latter as we had a multitude of problems as of non-transparency of grading and unfavourable teaching of the lecturer.

### **Grading System at the UFS**

The grading system at the UFS varies widely from the grading system at the University of Bremen. At the UFS, one collects points during the semester (through tests, individual assignments and/or group assignments) and through an examination at the end of the semester (comparable to the end-term exams in Bremen). More precisely, grades are given as a percentage and not, as we know from Bremen, from 1.0 to 4.0/5.0. Overall, a lot of study work needs to be done during the semester and even on a regular, weekly basis, which, at the same time, reduces the workload for the final examination happening at the end of each term. Regardless of having handed in an assignment or having written an exam or a test, it's common to be getting insights to the corresponding corrective actions of a lecturer. Namely, the respective test or assignment is handed back during the lecture so students are allowed to subsequently claim possible mistakes or missing points. By experience, always carefully review the correction of the lecturer, as general mistakes were made or points have been wrongly added up on a regular basis.

### **Security, Campus Life and Sports**

The UFS campus is not comparable to the Bremen campus. First of all, it is fenced and thus only accessible with a personalized UFS card. Likewise, it is guarded by security staff in order to ensure safety at all times. Although the campus is a really safe place to be, it is advised not to walk around alone when its dark. We never had any issues on campus and felt safe throughout the entirety of our stay. Different rules however apply when leaving the campus. Hereto, recommended cabs (Rooikat Taxi's, GG Taxis, Let It Be A Cab) can be called which are available most of the time. Such are really cheap and cost about R50 for most distances. During the day, we were also walking to a nearby SPAR (approx. 10 minutes from BN) or, from time to time, to Mimosa Mall (approx. 20-25 minutes from BN). Here again, we never faced sketchy situations. Quite the contrary applies when it gets dark, as it is definitely not safe to walk around off campus. Follow the rules, don't be naïve and call yourself and friends a reliable cab when heading to the movies or a night out. Hereto, Mystic Boer is probably the most common place to meet on a Friday or Saturday night. It is definitely not a safe area to be walking around at night also so be sure to 1. never party alone, 2. have your way back home planned out and 3.

keep your phone safe at all times (approx. 5 phones were stolen from friends local and international during the entirety of our stay).

Considering life on campus, the size of the Bloem campus is to be noted. Namely, it is huge (you can easily go for a 10k run if you would like to) and it offers all the fundamentals you could need. Next to a small grocery store, a kiosk, printing facilities, ATM's, book stores and a pharmacy, a wide range of food stores (specifically junk food) are to be found by "the bridge". The UFS campus also offers a variety of sporting activities. Next to field hockey, soccer, basketball or cricket, a gym membership can be purchased for different time periods. It is differentiated between a gym membership for the entire day (more expensive) and a cheaper version, which allows you entrance up until 4:30pm. The kovies gym is just a 3-minute walk away from BN and offers both courses and space for free, individual training. Just in case you are not yet satisfied with the countless sporting opportunities, the UFS has got you sorted. Swimmers namely have the possibility to purchase access to the pool located just opposite the kovies gym at Callie Human. Especially during the summer in Bloem it is nice to dip in and cool off from time to time. Speaking about myself, I have not purchased access to the pool but were lucky enough to take a friend's UFS card in order to get in every once in a while.

## **Travel**

Despite some very busy study periods, there was time to travel to some beautiful places within South Africa and beyond its borders. During the semester, we were happy to go to places like Clarens, Kruger Nationalpark, and Roma as well as Semonkong (Lesotho). As I had to finalize two important assignments for my courses in Bremen I was not able to join other Internationals to Durban, which likewise seemed to be worth a visit. Both the trip to Lesotho and the Kruger Nationalpark were planned with almost all internationals (we were about 15 people from Germany, the Netherlands, Austria and France). For all our trips from Bloem, we rented cars at Hertz and were appreciated clients for the most part. If you do want to go to Lesotho with a rental car from South Africa, remember to inform the company since you may face difficulties without a prior consultation. We weren't facing any problems at the South African/Lesotho border and were friendly welcomed to their beautiful country. Kruger Nationalpark also is a must-do in terms of wildlife and experience and was likewise worth a visit. We were lucky enough to see four of the Big 5, while all rhinos (luckily) remained hidden in the vastness of the nationalpark.

After our time in Bloem, most of us were traveling to Capetown, where we spend some time together before friends and family came to visit. For what I think, Capetown is very European and does not represent the real South Africa. Accordingly, I was glad to be living in Bloemfontein with all its bad and pleasant aspects.

## Bottom Line

The DAAD scholarship enabled me to do another semester abroad in the realms of my master program. I am thankful for the opportunity and can happily say that I enjoyed every second of my time in South Africa. Even after having left the UFS, our transcript of records was sent out in a timely manner. Unfortunately, the other Bremen outgoings and I are still expecting a refund from the University since we have paid a little too much by the time we placed the payment of our study fees. Consequently, a bittersweet aftertaste exists since we run after the matter since we left the campus 1 ½ months ago. Hopefully, things get sorted soon so an entirely positive feedback can be drawn.

Nevertheless, I can just encourage you to apply for a semester abroad at the University of the Free State, since I would do so again in a heartbeat. New friendships, great adventures and the most special memories stand out against other experiences abroad that I have made over the past years.

If you have any further questions regarding a semester abroad at the University of the Free State, do not hesitate to contact me via email or instagram, where you can also find some further impressions of my time in Africa:

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