

# MY STUDENT EXCHANGE EXPERIENCE

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The opportunity to participate in the Erasmus+ international exchange programme at the University of Hradec Králové during the Summer Semester 2021 has contributed immensely towards my academic, social and professional development goals. The student exchange programme commenced between February to June 2021. I received a scholarship of over 4000 euro, which catered for my travel and living expenses.

Having been nominated by the Department of History and the International Programmes Office (IPO) of the University of Ghana, the journey to the Czech Republic and the studies at the UHK seemed promising.

At the UHK, Ms. Věra Kouřimová was my coordinator. I was well informed by her concerning the visa application process, the Erasmus scholarship, and other pertinent information during a pre-departure orientation. The European Students Network (ESN) provided me with what to expect during and after my trip to the Czech Republic. Similarly, Ms. Baku of IPO provided us with (I was among the two students selected by my home University to partake in the exchange program. My colleague is called Asante Parker) a similar orientation.



It was my first international travel experience; I was less petrified, though. But I was more careful about the dos and don'ts of international travel and immigration-related requirements. Moreso, the Covid-19 pandemic with its attendant travel restrictions proved to be worrisome. Before departure, two Covid tests were required; one PCR test (valid for 72 hours) and a rapid antigen test to be taken 2 hours before check-in. This condition was really a headache for me, but I succeeded in all. My first flight experience was with KLM airline, and it took place on February 5, 2021 (from the Kotoka International Airport in Accra through transit to Schiphol Airport, Amsterdam, and then to Prague, Czech Republic. Upon arrival at the Czech airport, my buddy, Mr. Nikola Johanovic, was there and ready to take us to our dormitory for quarantine at Palachova in the city of Hradec Králové (100 km away from the capital city, Prague).

### **Academic**

The Summer Semester was carried out virtually due to the Covid-19 pandemic. I took seven courses that were carefully chosen from the following departments of the Philosophical Faculty: Department of Political Science, Institute of History, Institute of Social Work, and Language Center. Face-to-face interaction with lecturers and fellow students in the classroom setting was not permissible, but the e-learning platforms (STAG, Moodle, and Microsoft Teams) were very helpful because they enabled me to have a full grasp on applications I knew little about. My lecturers were very engaging, and Professors Jiří Hutečka and Spyridon T. are my favorites. UHK exams are friendly and intellectually engaging.

### **Dormitory**

The UHK Palach Dormitory was where I resided. The dormitory has an excellent supply of electricity, water, and internet connectivity. I was opportune to share a flat with two Ethiopians and a Venezuelan. Its kitchen was equipped with a fridge, stove, and a few utensils. Aside from the lack of a reading room and the noise caused by the reconstruction project, the dormitory is well suited for students.

**Socially**, I had a wonderful time interacting with colleagues and different cultures while observing Covid-19 regulations. Between February and April, Covid-19 related regulations restricted outdoor games and travels. I, however, found it worthwhile taking a walk in the nearby forest and park closest to the university's dormitory (Palachova 1129/17 500 12). However, as the Covid situation got better with restrictions lifted, I could visit bars for some good Czech beer. Kozel and Apple-Cider were my favorites. I attend a few birthday parties as well. Also, I visited the Museum of Eastern Bohemia in Hradec Kralove; I was intrigued by its magnificent architectural design and splendid antiquated yet precious holdings. It is one of my memorable encounters.

### **Challenges**

Covid-19 dilemma and the language barrier are the two main challenges I encountered. Whereas the pandemic restricted movement and interaction, the language barrier impeded communication, especially when shopping both online and offline. Nonetheless, my Czech Language class taught me a few vocabulary and basic communication skills,



which enabled me to communicate with Czechs who could not speak and understand the English language. In fact, *dobrý den, mluvíte anglicky?* became my introductory sentence whenever I needed to speak to a Czech. In the case where the person did not speak English, we looked at each other in dismay, and the next expression that followed was a smile on the face, indicating how diverse the world is.

## The Czech People and the City of Hradec Králové:

The Czech Republic is quite a conservative nation, but its people can be very friendly. My personal encounter with Czechs in the city of Hradec Králové was fairly good. In the city transport (bus and train), streets, hospital, supermarkets, and other social places, the black-skinned foreigner became an object of attraction. Similarly, the same could be said in Africa; in my home country, Ghana, most people are fascinated at seeing 'white people' (especially in the rural areas) and are ever ready to accord him or her the most preferred hospitality you could think of. In my personal opinion, the incidence of racism is less profound in Hradec. This social enabling environment makes living and studying in the Czech Republic one of my most preferred destinations. Hradec Králové is a vibrant and well-developed city; its business centers, transportation, housing, health, and educational facilities are just fine.



With my Ghanaian colleague, Parker Asante.



In the woods for a walk.

## Benefits

Cognitively, I was tuned to a recycling mode upon my entry and experiences in the Czech Republic. The Erasmus student mobility programme has indeed changed my life both in the realms of academic, professional, and in my worldview. In the context of academics, I had the opportunity to read new courses and learn new presentation skills. This, in effect, contributes significantly towards my career goals and employment opportunities. The Schengen visa and the international travel experience to the Czech Republic enhance my chance to be granted a visa in the future from other embassies in my next travels. My exposure to different people and cultures has shaped my worldview and social interactions.

## Recommendation

As part of my contribution to the UHK and the Czech Republic in general, I propose the following initiative for consideration.

- Proposed Activity - Coin Collection

I am moved by the intuition to leave a mark/legacy everywhere I visit. During my mobility at the University of Hradec Králové, I have developed the initiative of collecting coins from fellow students of different nationalities. Numismatic refers to the collection and scientific study of coins (currency). This initiative dubbed "Drop That Coin" aims to leave a mark and create the memory of the students who participated in the Erasmus+ Mobility programme. It would thus complement other activities done to create memory and record keeping. Also, the exercise seeks to inquire about and offer knowledge about the various inscriptions on



A visit to my Coordinator, Ms. Věra Kouřimová, at the International Office of the UK. Here I am with my Ethiopian roommates.

these coins. At the end, when the initiative is well developed, it may be institutionalized and replicated in other countries offering Erasmus programmes. My coordinator, Ms. Věra Kouřimová, has shown interest in this initiative and awaits that I formally bring it to her notice for onward submission to the University authorities for consideration. I believe this is a grand opportunity in making history by collecting and keeping coins (currency) from the entire world through the Erasmus+ mobility study programme. The coins, when over-collected, could be donated to the National Museum for safekeeping and tourism. In the next century, or millennia perhaps, it would aid scientific research whilst serve as a store of value, store of memory, store of exchange, and among others.



- Proposed Research - Managing Erasmus+ Mobility Student at UHK Dormitory

Through personal experience and observation, I have imagined how authorities at UHK's dormitory at Palachova engage coordinated efforts at providing the needs and resolving challenges that emerge as students of different nationalities, cultures, attitudes, and expectations are "housed in shared rooms under one roof." It is expected, if this research is carried into, its findings shall bring to light the shared experiences of students, management, and workers. Whilst its lessons educate students and strengthen the managerial techniques employed by the dormitory's management and workers.

- Reading Room in UHK Palach Dormitory

I also recommend that the management of the UHK Palach Dormitory construct a reading room (and a library) to relieve students of the stress and inconveniences associated with studying in the shared bedrooms.



It was party time when the Covid situation got better!

## Conclusion

I have had a wonderful study experience at the University of Hradec Králová under the Erasmus+ mobility programme. The UHK's administrative support, teaching skills of lecturers, and infrastructure are at their best. The city of Hradec Králové and the Czech Republic, in general, provide an enabling environment for study, cultural exchange, and strategic social networking. Though the language barrier is a major challenge against communication, its people are sociable. The Summer Semester of the 2020/2021 Academic Year, amidst the challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic, was engaging and productive.

I wished to have prolonged my study, but the institutional arrangement of my home university did not permit me. Nonetheless, I hope to visit the UHK and the Czech Republic soon. I am very grateful to the European Union, the UHK, and the University of Ghana for promoting and supporting student mobility. At the time of writing this story (Erasmus Story), my study at the UHK had almost ended, and I was preparing to leave for my home country on June 27 with the airline I came with. This is my story!

