

Jahresstipendien des Freistaates Bayern für Graduierte aus mittel-, ost- und südosteuropäischen Staaten

ERFAHRUNGSBERICHT ÜBER DIE STUDIENERFAHRUNGEN IN BAYERN Report on study experiences in Bavaria

The life changing decision

I would like to share my story about how I got a lifetime opportunity to study at one of the best technical universities in the world with you. As a tech enthusiast, I have finished my bachelor's degree in Informatics at the Czech Technical University in Prague in summer 2018. My main study focus has always been artificial intelligence and data analysis in general. Unfortunately, as this topic is relatively new, there are just a few universities in Europe offering an advanced master's artificial intelligence program. That was a call for a change for me, a moment when I decided to pursue my master's degree abroad.

Thankfully, I have soon found out that a perfect master's program suiting all of my expectations is offered just a few hundred kilometers away – at the Technical University of Munich. After some more research about the study program, I have decided to put all my effort into getting accepted to the University. However, parallel to the excitement, the thoughts about how Munich's life can be super expensive came to my head. I was not sure if I would be able to study thoroughly while working for several hours a week to pay for the living expenses. I was fortunate enough to be awarded the one-year scholarship from the Bayerisch-Tschechische Hochschulagentur, which allowed me to focus entirely on my studies in Bavaria and get the most from the University's offerings.

Getting applied to TUM and finding an accommodation

The application process at the Technical University of Munich was a bit different in comparison with applications to Czech universities. Moreover, the application forms and the registration system were designed to handle an enormous number of applicants from places all over the world. As a consequence, the whole procedure sometimes felt a bit impersonal and a bit too complicated. On the other hand, everything worked as it should in the end; the student service desk call operators were helpful, and I have received my Letter of application in the middle of summer.

Each applicant from abroad (or just coming from a different university) had to provide their bachelor studies' curriculum, description of its modules and its comparison to a bachelor program at the TUM. Having a closely matching bachelor's curriculum was essential to get a sufficient amount of points out of which the final decision would be made. More points were obtained for good previous grades, motivational letter, engaging out-of-curricular activities, and lastly, for a well written scientific essay. For those who are not one hundred percent sure what a "scientific essay" is – it is something between a scientific paper and an essay, meaning you should give some ideas of your own, but they all should be based on facts and, of course, should be cited as well.

As soon as I got the Letter of acceptance from TUM, I started searching for an accommodation in Munich. I already knew that searching for a room or even an apartment in such a city can be challenging and stressful. What I did not know at that time was that the high monthly rates would not be the only problem. I was just blown away by how many people were interested in a single apartment advert! Consequently, the owners usually did not even bother to reply (neither positively nor negatively). Besides, as it is pretty much impossible to get a room from the official student union in Munich (Studentenwerk) as a first semester Master student, I tried to contact these private student dorms. However, to this day I still have not received any response from them (more than one year later).

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I started searching for the apartment by the end of July. Fortunately for me, I could hop on a train in Prague and get to Munich in a couple of hours to see the flat and meet the owner, which protected me against most so-called scam apartment adverts. Always see your apartment before you pay anything! If you cannot drive to Munich every time you find an appealing apartment, book a short term accommodation in Munich for 14 days and start searching locally – it will be so worth it in the end! Anyway, I came to see a couple of apartments, some close to the University, some as far as one and a half hour by U-Bahn. Some owners wanted me (along with a bail) to show them sufficient proof of income of mine or of my parents' – which was a bit problematic in my case (certificate of the scholarship was not satisfying for most of them).

In the end, I was fortunate to find the apartment of my needs. I replied to a two minute old (!) advert on the Internet from a girl who went for a study year abroad and did not want to pay for her apartment by the time she was gone, so she agreed with the house owner to sub-rent it to me. It was such a good offer! The apartment was located in a beautiful neighborhood near the city center, and I got it all for myself, including my tiny kitchen and a mini bathroom. The best thing was that the price was meager for Munich, even compared to much smaller rooms in shared flats on the city's outskirts. Moreover, the girl I got the apartment from helped me a lot with all the paperwork associated with moving to Bavaria.

By the end of September, I have finally moved to Munich. I had to register myself at the KVR, get my German bank account, and so on. I have pretty quickly assimilated myself and fell in love with life in Munich. Thanks to student evenings and other activities organized by the Student union, I promptly created new connections and started new friendships.

In the end, I have soon concluded that although housing and services are expensive in Munich, groceries and goods, in general, are comparable in price with the ones in the Czech republic. Moreover, there is a much wider variety of healthy, bio, vegetarian, and vegan options in Bavaria than in most countries I have been to. These groceries are usually even cheaper than what I am used to in Czechia! On the other hand, the public transport in Munich is pretty expensive, although I was allowed to ride it for a discounted price as a student. A surprise to me was when I found out that many of my friends cycle around Munich not because they want to stay fit and save the planet but because public transport is too expensive for them! The local and long-distance trains are also costly, but if you know when you are going and book the ticket in advance, their price can get reasonable. If you are into biking, bring your city bike with you to Munich or use Munich's transport company's shared bikes.

Free time activities and social life in Munich

I have been amazed by how various are the activities that Munich has to offer! You can find anything from swimming classes to meditations in the middle of the city park. I have been mostly interested in solo sports offers. Thanks to the ZHS Munich organization, a student can get really cheap access to the Olympic Park's sports facilities and access to many guided classes. For as low as 15 euro per semester, one can go about 3 to 4 times a week to the swimming pool where the Olympics took place!

The huge and beautiful city park called Englischer Garten (next to which I live) along with the Olympic Park provides a perfect place for long morning runs, yoga sessions, any group sports activities, or just an excellent place for you and your friends to have a good Bavarian beer!

At this point, I would like to thank Bayhost and BTHA for organizing the weekend seminar for the scholarship holders in Augsburg at the end of November 2019. Not only this weekend seminar was a great opportunity to meet other scholarship holders, exchange opinions on various topics during the meetings, a chance to discover about the history of the beautiful city of Augsburg, but also it was a lot of

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fun, and many of the student colleagues I have met there became my good friends. I would recommend everyone to take part in this seminar!

Studying at the Technical university of Munich

If I had to express my feelings about the studies at the TUM in a few words, it would be “freedom of choice”. There are only two compulsory modules in my study program – the rest of the modules can be chosen from a vast catalog of various courses. A student has to achieve a certain amount of credits in each of the module categories. However, each category contains many exciting courses so I do not feel any pressure being told what exactly should I spend my time on.

The quality of all the courses I have attended until now has been superb. The study materials have been made so that although they have covered complex topics, they have never been confusing. If you had not been familiar with some of the underlying theorems, it has been easy to follow the materials anyway and fill in missing knowledge afterward. The importance of such good materials has become even more apparent with the unfortunate rise of the covid-19 situation.

I am still amazed by the level of expertise of the lecturers. It has been even more fascinating for me to realize how many “game-changing” scientific papers in my study field came from TUM’s professors and students. The tutors have always been helpful and very understanding of the situation that not all the students have equal foundations of the topic. Consequently, even if I missed some underlying theory, I could come to an in-depth understanding of the matter pretty quickly. Furthermore, most of the courses have been based on one or two well-written books, which helped with the self-studying part of the student’s life a lot.

Another thing that makes the TUM exceptional in my eyes is the University campus itself. I have always felt welcomed there and have been able to find support, a place to study in quiet, tons of study materials, and, of course, great food for an excellent price. As a consequence, I spent most of my workdays there at the campus in Garching and usually stayed until about midnight working with my friends on University projects. I have been amazed by the concept of the “StudiTUM” building, a place to study alone or co-study with friends, hang with them, or even prepare meals together. This building offers 24/7 free access for the students and is equipped with quiet study rooms, group study rooms with whiteboards and big presentation screens, and many kitchens. One could live in that building!

When the covid-19 epidemic situation came at the beginning of 2020, I was just after my exams from the winter semester, and I was getting ready for the upcoming summer semester. Due to the situation, the University decided to hold most of the lectures, tutorials, and even exams online. As I have heard, some study programs have had some meetings on-site under special hygienic conditions, but that has not applied to courses in my study program as it is natural to hold computer science courses online. In my opinion, TUM has managed this situation perfectly. Lectures have probably been even better since I have been able to stop the class at any moment and search for things I was not quite sure about. The tutorials have been very productive since the tutors could split the students into virtual rooms of a few students to work together on a virtual whiteboard. The exams have been very similar to the “normal” on-site ones testing rather the student’s understanding of the topic than just pursuing students to memorize facts. If you have been able to get hands-on some iPad or similar tablet with pen input, there has been no difference what so ever between the original on-campus exam and the virtual one for you.

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At the beginning of a long journey

When I look back now, I see my bachelor studies in Informatics as a very general preparation for whatever would come next. For the first time, I have concentrated entirely on machine learning and data engineering at TUM. The amount of new things I have learned during the past year at the University has been just fascinating. After the year, I feel like I have made an enormous step towards a deep mathematical understanding of machine learning. However, with every step I have made towards a better understanding, I have found various other paths that are yet for me to understand. As far as I can tell now, studying machine learning is an ongoing process, and I will have to be open to whole new ideas that come up literally every week to stay upfront in this field. I am enjoying what I study a lot, and I see my future in this field. I am so honored to be a TUM student. The University can apparently give me the best foundations in my area out of all universities in the EU.

Living in Bavaria, where I have always felt warmly welcomed, has also been an outstanding contribution to my life. I have been able to experience a different society, meet exciting people from all over the world, and finally, practice my German. I think I have been able to blend it and enjoy the “Bavarian vibe”.

After I finish my master’s studies at the TUM, I would like to stay in Bavaria for some more time to take advantage of the fact that a lot of interesting commercial research in my study field is being done in companies in Bavaria. Working for such a company would be a great opportunity to see the theory applied to concrete solutions and a personal challenge for me to improve myself in the area again. In the long run, I see myself hopefully building my own start-up in machine learning.

As I am coming to the end of this report, I want to, again, emphasize how important and life-changing for me has been that I have been able to start my master’s studies at the Technical University of Munich. I probably would not be able to move my life to Bavaria without help from Bayhost/BTHA. Furthermore, I would like to thank all the people involved in the agency for making such a friendly environment during the e-mail exchange and during the great weekend seminar in Augsburg. Thank you.