

## Exchange Semester Report - Stellenbosch University, South Africa

As part of my Master's degree in Development Economics, I spent my third semester (Winter Semester 25/26) at Stellenbosch University in South Africa. My exchange period lasted from 11 July to 20 December 2025. Overall, I had incredible experience and can recommend Stellenbosch University as an exchange destination although it is academically challenging.

### Preparation and Organisation before Departure

I received my nomination for Stellenbosch University at the end of January. By the end of March, I had to complete the official application at Stellenbosch University and submit a Learning Agreement, which already required a preliminary course selection. This part of the process is a bit of work, as different departments publish course information in different ways and it is not always clear, which courses are offered in which semester. However, the contact person at the International Office in Stellenbosch was very supportive and always willing to help.

To be on the safe side, I initially included more courses than necessary in my Learning Agreement since I was not sure which ones were really offered and the International Office contacts the respective lecturers to confirm whether participation is possible only after handing in the Learning Agreement. During the first week in Stellenbosch, it is still possible to adjust the course selection before final registration. Dropping courses is usually unproblematic, while adding new ones then requires approval from the International Office in Göttingen as well.

I applied for student housing relatively early and received confirmation for a room at Concordia residence at the beginning of May. I also started preparing my visa application, which is quite time-consuming. Required documents included a police clearance certificate, proof of South African health insurance (most exchange students used Momentum, which was easy to get online and rather cheap), signed bank statements for the past three months and a medical certificate. The visa application had to be submitted in person at the South African embassy in Berlin, which does not operate with appointments. I would strongly recommend arriving early, as waiting time was really long when I applied. About three weeks after submitting my documents, I received my passport with the visa via post.

Another important aspect of preparation is planning the semester in Göttingen before departure. I had to leave Göttingen before the end of the summer semester lectures. It is theoretically possible to write exams from Göttingen in Stellenbosch and in the first few weeks I would say it is manageable, but I did not use that opportunity. What I would not recommend is taking major assignments or term papers into the exchange semester. I still had one paper due at the end of August while already dealing with midterms and deadlines in Stellenbosch, which was very stressful. In hindsight, I would advise finishing as much as possible beforehand.

### Arrival and Orientation:

Stellenbosch University offers a free airport pickup service for exchange students, which I used. After arrival, we were taken to the International Office, registered, and received a South African SIM card. Afterwards, we were brought to our residences and introduced to the facilities.

I arrived on a Saturday, and the International Welcome Week started the following Monday. The program includes both organizational sessions (learning platforms, timetables, course registration) and social activities such as campus tours and city rallies. It is also a great opportunity to meet other exchange students. Lectures start the week after, and students can attend courses during the first week before making their final course choices. It is important to note that once registered, it is not possible to simply withdraw from a course without consequences like in Göttingen. Dropping a course late will result in a fail on the transcript.

The university also offers a buddy program, pairing exchange students with local students. Most buddies were really motivated and welcoming and often introduced exchange students to their own friend groups. I would definitely recommend participating in this program.

### Financial Aspects:

My exchange was funded through the ISAP scholarship, which was really generous and provided 2000€ for travel costs and 1200€ per month. The requirements included completing 25 ECTS and participating in a volunteering program. While the scholarship was extremely helpful, it is important to know that the first payment is usually made beginning of the first month of the exchange. This meant that I had to pre-finance my flight and around 60% of the total residence rent. I paid approximately €1,300 for my flights. So just keep that in mind.

Living costs in South Africa are generally lower than in Germany, especially when it comes to eating out. Groceries, however, are not necessarily cheaper in general, particularly dairy products. As a vegetarian, food options were sometimes limited, while meat is relatively cheap. My monthly rent at Concordia Residence was around 540€. Overall, I spent more than initially planned, mainly due to frequent eating out, weekend trips, and traveling. Having some personal savings in addition to the scholarship is therefore advisable.

### Accommodation:

As mentioned above, I lived in the student residence Concordia, which is located on the same grounds as Academia residence. Overall, I felt very safe living there, as access to the residence area is only possible via fingerprint scan or a visitor code. On the grounds, there is a small deli where you can buy snacks, drinks and basic food items, several sports facilities such as a paddle tennis court, a small football field, a volleyball court as well as a study room. This was especially practical when studying in the evenings, as it meant I did not always have to stay on campus late and worry about getting home.

Concordia itself is very simply furnished and doesn't really look homely but it is definitely the easiest option when it comes to finding housing in Stellenbosch. It is safe, well-organized and with a bit of decoration it quickly felt much more comfortable. Both local students and many

international students live there, and I would say that almost all of my close friends lived either in Concordia or Academia. This made it very easy to spend a lot of time together and at times it really felt like being on a big school trip.

One advantage of Concordia is that basic kitchen equipment, bedding, and similar items are already included. Students living in Academia had to buy these things themselves at the beginning of the semester. A downside of Concordia is that it does not have generators, meaning there is no electricity during load shedding. However, during my entire stay there was no actual load shedding, except for one evening without electricity due to a different issue.

The rooms, like many buildings in Stellenbosch, are very poorly insulated. At the beginning of the semester, when it was still winter, it was extremely cold inside. The first thing I bought was a heater, which honestly saved me. I would strongly recommend bringing warm clothes such as sweaters and scarves, as it can get much colder than expected.

Concordia is located about a ten-minute walk from campus and around a twenty-minute walk from the town centre, which made daily life very convenient.

### Academic Experience and Workload

The overall workload should not be underestimated. I wasn't used to assessments being spread throughout the semester with regular assignments, presentations and tests. This required continuous engagements and good time management. There is a recess week in September, which many students plan to use for travel. However, several lecturers treated this week as time for assignments and other tasks. Anyone planning to travel during recess should plan ahead and get everything done beforehand. From what I heard from others and experienced myself, courses from the Agriscience faculty tend to be not as demanding as the ones from the Economics department and I'm glad I had one course from there to balance out my workload. I took the following courses:

#### Health Economics (5 ECTS / 10 South African credits)

Health Economics was structured around one two-hour lecture per week, complemented by several tutorial sessions on a different day. Teaching was shared between three lecturers. Despite having no prior background in health economics, I was able to follow the course well. The content covered demand and supply of healthcare, market failures, health insurance, and health system financing, with a strong focus on the South African healthcare system.

The course was very small, with around ten students, which created an interactive learning environment with plenty of room for discussion. Assessment consisted of a final exam (50%), a written assignment (40%) involving the analysis of an empirical study using basic statistical reasoning and a prepared in-class debate (10%) on adolescent mental health. Overall, the course was well structured and approachable.

#### Advanced Macroeconomic Policy (10 ECTS / 20 South African credits)

This was the most demanding course I took. It is designed for students in the Stellenbosch Master's in Economics and assumes prior macroeconomic training, which I didn't really have. The

course covered advanced macroeconomic policy frameworks, including monetary and fiscal policy, exchange rate regimes, debt sustainability, and policy challenges in emerging economies. Assessment included two partner presentations with written appraisals, a joint essay that had to be presented at a weekend seminar shortly before the exam period and a final written exam. While the workload was consistently high, past exams were provided and the final exam was fair and well aligned with the course content.

#### Environmental Policy (7.5 ECTS / 15 South African credits)

This course focused on environmental and resource economics, including ecosystem services, resource scarcity, property rights, and market failures. Teaching consisted of three 45-minute lectures per week, three in-semester tests, and a final exam. Although the teaching style and slides were sometimes difficult to follow, the continuous assessment helped structure learning and reduced pressure during the final exam period.

#### An Overview of South African History (GEP, 6 ECTS / 12 South African credits)

This course was part of the General Education Programme and exclusively available to exchange students. It provided a broad overview of South African history, from early human history to apartheid and the post-apartheid era. Assessment consisted of two short assignments, one essay, and an online exam where we had 24 hours to write two short essays. The course very interesting and helped me better understand South African society and inequality.

#### Volunteering:

The university offered several volunteering opportunities and participation in one of these projects was also a requirement for the scholarship. During an information meeting, the different projects were introduced, and I decided to volunteer with Songo. The project takes place in a township close to the town and volunteers can choose one of four weekdays, which made it easy to fit volunteering into my weekly schedule. Transport to and from the project site was organized by the university and took around 15 minutes each.

Songo is a program where children come after school and are given the opportunity to ride bicycles and work on their homework and other educational activities. The children range from primary school age up to around 16 years old and the focus is mainly on helping with Maths and English homework. Depending on how many volunteers are present on a given day, it was sometimes possible to sit down with one or two children individually, which made me feel that the support was genuinely helpful.

At the same time, the differences in learning levels among the children were very noticeable, and volunteering could sometimes be challenging. Some children would only work when a volunteer was sitting right next to them, which meant that constant attention was often required. I was also not always fully prepared for the content and sometimes had to think quite hard myself when it came to e.g geometry.

Overall, I still felt that the volunteering work was meaningful. The children were very open, friendly and affectionate and over time it was possible to build relationships with them. Often, there was

also some time before or after the homework sessions to play with the children, which made the experience even more rewarding. Volunteering at Songo gave me a small but important insight into everyday life beyond the university environment and was a valuable part of my exchange experience.

### Leisure and Travel

Stellenbosch is a university town surrounded by incredibly beautiful nature and offers a wide range of leisure activities. The university gym costs around 30€ per month and includes many different classes, swimming pools, and other facilities. It is also possible to register to use the athletics track. In addition, there are University rugby matches and countless student societies, ranging from wine society and photography to scuba diving and many more.

Outdoor activities are especially popular. There are many hiking opportunities around Stellenbosch, as well as wine tastings in the surrounding wine farms. The nearest beach is about 40 minutes away and Cape Town can be reached in around an hour, depending on traffic. Surfing is also easily accessible. Stellenbosch itself has a lively nightlife with bars and clubs, especially at the beginning of the semester before deadlines start to pile up.

Getting around is generally easy. Uber is widely used and relatively inexpensive and some of my friends had rental cars for longer periods, which made weekend trips very convenient. At times, it felt like there were almost too many things to do, especially when university work also required attention on weekends.

We made several trips to Cape Town, both to the city centre and to smaller surrounding neighborhoods, as well as to the West Coast, where we stayed in Airbnbs. When shared among several people and outside peak travel season, accommodation was quite affordable. During the recess week, I flew with a friend to Kruger National Park and explored the park independently with a rental car. There was also an organized group trip linked to a university course, but I personally found it very expensive and preferred traveling independently. Spending four days in the park felt like the right amount of time for me.

Lectures ended at the end of October, followed by the exam period in November. Some students finished their exams already in early November, which gave them a lot of time for traveling. Due to illness, I had to take one exam in early December, which reduced my travel time somewhat. However, this also worked well for me, as I didn't have that much money left. In November, many students received visits from family members, and me and most of my friends stayed in Stellenbosch and just enjoyed life there. In December, we stayed in Cape Town for a few days and then travelled along the Garden Route on the south coast for one week, before I returned to Germany on December 20.

### Safety:

Safety is an important topic in South Africa. It is essential to take the advice given seriously, and safety is also addressed during orientation week. Overall, Stellenbosch feels relatively safe for South Africa, but there are certain areas and streets that should be avoided.

On campus, there is campus security, which can also escort students home if they are on campus late. It is generally not recommended to walk around after dark, especially alone. During the South African winter, it gets dark quite early, around 6 p.m., which initially felt restrictive, but I got used to it over time. Using Uber is very common in Stellenbosch and makes it easy to get around safely, even in the evenings and by myself.

Driving at night on highways is something one should think about carefully. Over time, I felt that I became better at assessing situations and felt more confident judging what felt safe and what did not. During my stay, there were several incidents of stolen phones, mainly due to pickpocketing, especially in Cape Town. However, I did not experience or hear of any armed robberies among exchange students and I never experienced a sketchy situation. There were also cases of car break-ins, so it is important not to leave valuables in the car.

It can feel strange at first that most houses are protected by electric fences and alarm systems, but this quickly becomes normal. For this reason, I personally appreciated living in student residence, as it felt very safe and made it possible to move around on the residence grounds even after dark without concern.

## Conclusion

It is important to note that Stellenbosch and the life there are not representative of South Africa as a whole. As an exchange student, it is easy to stay within a relatively comfortable bubble, especially since many international students were German as well and the different nationalities tended to stick together in general. I noticed myself that it can be tempting to mostly spend time with other exchange students especially since most of us lived together, even though the South African students are generally very open and welcoming. Making an effort to connect with local students is therefore important.

At the same time, it is important not to romanticize the exchange experience. The extreme levels of inequality in South Africa are impossible to ignore and become especially visible when moving beyond the relatively privileged spaces of the university and the town centre. Being confronted with these contrasts was often challenging and sometimes uncomfortable, but it is a big part of this country and should not be ignored.

Despite the high workload and the many overlapping deadlines during the semester, I would still describe this exchange semester as an incredibly positive experience. Now that the stress of the semester has faded, I can honestly say that this exchange semester was one of the best experiences I ever had and I had the time of my life. I learned a great deal academically, gained new perspectives on development and inequality and grew personally through living and studying in a very different context. I would strongly recommend Stellenbosch University to future exchange students.