

Exchange at Imperial College London

My experiences during the summer term 2024 – Michael Gilch



My host family and I on a sunny Sunday afternoon

Preparation Phase

The Application Process

After the nomination from the TUM School of Management in May 2023, I had some time to get an overview over the application process at Imperial, as the main process started in August. When the process kicked off, I received additional details from Imperial College Business School about the application requirements. These arrived via email in an exchange information sheet, along with a step-by-step guide for the online application. It's essential to double-check deadlines on your own and get in touch with the Business School if needed. The information sheet also included a list of modules available for selection and some helpful links about the exchange study at Imperial. In October, we received a more specific guide on how to complete the online application using Imperial's "Imperial Gateway" portal, where we were required to upload supporting documents (like a CV, a proposed study plan, and a letter of nomination). However, in 2023 there was a technical issue in the system of Imperial, preventing exchange students from selecting the summer term 24 as their exchange term. This led to some confusion, as the process could not be completed before the deadline. Thanks to the constant support from Imperial, especially the student life coordinator Travis Mager and his quick responses, I could sort everything out and the process went smoothly once the system was fixed in December. With a little help it was easy to keep an overview over the two main systems, Imperial Gateway and MyImperial for deadlines and document requirements. The final enrolment deadline was in early March 2024 and required finalising the study plan and receiving your Imperial College email.

Visa and Travel

A key point to know as a German citizen is that a visa isn't generally required if your stay is under six months (under the "Visitor Route" – check the British Council website for more details at <https://study-uk.britishcouncil.org/moving-uk/student-visas>). This is why for me the visa topic did not really play a role, since my planned stay was 3 months for the summer term. As a visiting student, I didn't need a visa or any other document. However, if your exchange goes longer, the process can be a bit more daunting, since the UK is no longer part of the EU. If you plan to stay the full six months, you can also count the days you spent outside the UK during the exchange towards the total duration. For example, if you return home for a week, you can add that time to extend your stay to the full six months. When booking flights, I always start with google flights. It's the best option to get to know the routes to and from London and gives you a historical price overview, when flights are cheap or expensive. One further tip is to put London City (all airports) as your destination, to also include routes going to London's smaller airports, like Gatwick or Stansted. These flights are typically cheaper, but you have the downside that travel to the more remote and smaller airports takes longer from London city centre.

The London Housing Market and my Accommodation

Finding accommodation in London proved challenging. The London housing market is notoriously competitive, especially for students and international visitors. Rental prices are high across the city, and it's difficult to secure a place, especially at a reasonable rate. Many students rely on university-affiliated housing or specialized student accommodations, but sadly these are not offered by Imperial College for incoming exchange students. I contacted several student accommodation providers, hoping to find something close to Imperial College, but the offers I received were exceptionally expensive, averaging around £400 per week, far beyond what I had anticipated.

Fortunately, a close friend helped me find a more suitable option. His grandfather lives in Notting Hill, a vibrant and charming area of London right next to Hyde Park, in a house with live-in carers, and they generously offered me a room. This arrangement was not only much more affordable but also brought a unique, home-like experience to my stay in London. I became part of the household, helping with small tasks such as groceries, light cleaning, and other day-to-day activities. It was a warm and welcoming environment, and I quickly felt at home.

Living with my friend's grandfather also gave me a deeper connection to the city and a glimpse into British family life. I got to know my friend's family, joined them for Sunday lunches, and was even part of the celebrations for the grandfather's birthday. This experience gave me a sense of belonging that I hadn't expected, and it turned what could have been a stressful housing situation into one of the highlights of my time in London.

Arriving at Imperial

Arriving at Imperial College was an exciting start to my exchange, though my initial weeks included a small hiccup with the exchange buddy program. Although I was assigned an exchange buddy, I never got a response despite several attempts to reach out via email and Teams, so we never ended up meeting. Thankfully, the family I was staying with had a cousin who also studies at Imperial. They connected us, and she kindly gave me a personal tour of the campus, which was a great introduction to the university.

Imperial College is a beautiful institution, with a city campus in South Kensington that feels somewhat similar to TU Munich. Both are STEM-focused universities with prominent city campuses and strong business schools. Imperial's location is fantastic, nestled near famous cultural landmarks like the Victoria and Albert Museum and the Science Museum. Since my exchange ran from April to July, I mostly biked to campus, which became one of the highlights of my routine. As spring turned to early summer, riding through Hyde Park each morning became a peaceful and energizing start to my day. There was something special about pedalling through the green, sunlit park before classes - a perfect way to settle into life at Imperial.

Studies

Enrolling in the courses

The process for selecting courses was somewhat disorganized but also straight forward. Unlike Imperial students, we didn't have access to the internal course selection system. Instead, we received a list of available courses by email and had to reply with our choices. This worked better than expected thanks to the fast procedure by Imperial. However, one downside was that for the exchange in summer 24, incoming students were only allowed to do 15 ECTS worth of courses during the term. Thankfully, this did not collide with my study plan at TUM, as I only needed 15 ECTS in the summer semester.

Courses

I genuinely enjoyed the courses at Imperial, as they were highly interactive and engaging. Unlike traditional lectures, these classes emphasized a collaborative approach to understanding concepts. Rather than simply presenting the material, the professors would pose questions to the class, guiding us step-by-step toward uncovering the overarching concept together. This approach made the classes feel almost like solving a puzzle as a group, which was both intellectually stimulating and enjoyable. The course design was clearly well thought out, making each session dynamic and hands-on, with a strong focus on real-world applications rather than academic theory. Additionally, the smaller class sizes with typically around 20-30 students were a refreshing change from the larger lecture halls at TUM. This more intimate setting allowed for greater interaction with both professors and classmates, fostering a collaborative learning environment that made the material come to life.

One of the standout courses for me was Advanced Corporate Finance, which aligned perfectly with my passion for finance and capital markets. The class provided deep insights into complex financial strategies, and the interactive discussions brought a real-world perspective that I found invaluable. The other courses were really interesting as well, as they were in the same manner very interactive and hands on.

One thing to note about the examination is that Imperial College seems to mainly do group-based assessments. For every module, we students were randomly assigned into a group. This group would then be the same for the rest of the module and we would need to work together on an assignment as our final deliverable that determined the grade for the whole group. This group-based work was also a nice change from the 1.5h long exams at TUM, though I find the concept has its weaknesses as well. In many groups it was observable, that the enthusiasm and willingness to get a good grade was not homogeneous. This put the students who really wanted to get a good grade in a tough spot, as the work would accumulate for these individuals who then had to carry the whole group. This also happened to me in two instances, making me think that an individual assignment can probably more truthfully reflect the level of knowledge and engagement of a student.

Life During the Exchange

Student Life at Imperial

Imperial College offers a vibrant student life with fantastic facilities and a strong community feel. The library, located right on campus, is a great place for both individual and group study. On the ground floor, there's an open workspace for group projects, while the upper floors provide silent study areas and quieter spaces where light conversation is allowed. I used both extensively for the group assignments and personal study or just reading some books.

When it comes to food, Imperial has various cafés and canteens throughout the campus. While the prices aren't particularly low, students do receive a discount, and bringing your own food is also an option. Most students gather to eat in the senior and junior common rooms, which are large, welcoming spaces for meals and socializing. But there are many other food options on campus, like a Japanese inspired curry and sushi café, a pizza place and many other options. One hidden gem was to grab something for takeout and then go to the rooftop terrace of the physics faculty. This was always a fantastic lunch break option with an amazing view of South Kensington. One other gem at Imperial was the Farmers Market every Tuesday, where 20 food trucks or food stalls would come to Imperial College main court and offer plenty of lunch options from different and international cuisines. Burgers, wraps, rice bowls as well as croissants and coffee, that was the highlight of every Tuesday lunch break!

Student societies are a huge part of life at Imperial, with around 200 options to choose from! Joining a society is a great way to meet students from other courses, develop new skills, and just have fun. There's something for everyone - from academic groups and cultural societies to recreational clubs. I joined the Imperial College Mountaineering Club for the summer term, which is an amazing community for everyone interested in climbing, regardless of skill level. Every Thursday, we would meet in a London climbing center, climb or boulder for 2 hours and then head to a pub afterwards for pizza and drinks. I found really good friends at the ICMC and if I am back in London on a Thursday, I definitely know how my evening will look like!

Exploring the city of London

London is a very big city and quite different from Munich. There is just too much to see and too much to do. As I have many friends who work in London, I was taken on several exploration tours. This is just a quick overview of the things you can do in London:

- Soho pubs and restaurants, amazing place in the evening
- Borough market, fantastic for weekend meetups and a great spot in central London
- The Ned: Fantastic drinks
- Side Hustle Bar: Fantastic drinks, my favourite bar in London
- Dishoom: Indian restaurant chain with really good food
- Flat Iron: Steak house chain with fantastic steaks at a reasonable price
- Museums
 - Victoria and Albert Museum: Must visit
 - Science Museum: Also must visit
 - Tate Modern: Classic with a nice café on top
- Wimbledon: During my exchange, the qualifier week for Wimbledon Tennis Tournament started, which was an amazing day trip. Get the classic Wimbledon strawberries with cream ;)
- Holland Park: One of my favourite parks, very green and quiet
- Hyde Park: Obviously the best place to run in London

If you are into running, I can also highly recommend doing some exploration runs – or as I like to call it: “Sight-running”. One route I can highly recommend is from Hyde Park to Battersea Park, upriver on North Bank passing Westminster and running to Tower Bridge and then back on South Bank, passing London Eye and then to Buckingham Palace and ending in Hyde Park. Best to plan the route on Garmin beforehand and then navigate with your watch or phone. The route has nearly 30k, so its really perfect for some weekend long runs while also getting to know the city.

All in all, the exchange was an amazing experience. The student life was not too stressful and I had the chance to really explore London in the way I liked. Meeting many existing friends that live in London, making many new friends through student societies and also having time on my own to work on personal topics and do tons of sport in the summer in London.

Lastly, on the next pages there are some impressions of my time in London and a glimpse of all the things you can do and see in this vibrant city.

Impressions and Photos



