

Final Report: Student Exchange at Hebrew University Jerusalem

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“Shifting Renewable Energy Targets”

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The University Alliance for sustainability is focused around the issue of sustainability as a comprehensive topic for collaborating between its partner Universities. As a Masters student at Freie University, Berlin in Environmental Policy and Planning, I was part of a student exchange that brought me to the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in Israel starting in May 2016. Given my field of interest in renewable energy policy, I was assigned to Prof. Itay Fishhendler in the Department of Geography. Prof Fishhendler’s research interests extends to environmental conflict resolution; natural resources management and governance and decision making under conditions of political and environmental uncertainties. I collaborated with Prof. Fishhendler on the research topic of “shifting renewable energy targets”, research that would help shape my own Master’s thesis at Freie Universität in Berlin. I had a terrific time working with him, and could not have asked for a better mentor and supervisor during my stay.

I benefitted from my stay at the Hebrew University in many ways: Prof Fishhendler was a really hands-on supervisor who spent much time consulting with me. The work with him was very intensive and demanding, which was a bit surprising at first. However, I believe that I learned a lot through the experience, something which I attribute to the fact that we closely worked together, met frequently, and I received much expert guidance from him. I also benefitted from discussing my research with the other local and international research students (mostly PhD’s) supervised by Prof Fishhendler. We all sat in a working room together, and frequently went for lunch together. It was very interesting and enriching to discuss my ideas with other students who came from diverse backgrounds and countries, but all focused their research around environmental and sustainability issues in some capacity or other. At the University itself, I enjoyed utilizing their excellent research facilities and libraries, and it was interesting to see how some aspects of the academic research process are

performed differently in Jerusalem as compared to Berlin which I am familiar with. It took me a while to get to know how everything works and operates, both on campus and in the city, as I did not speak Hebrew and signs and such are usually not in English. Mostly, people were very helpful and friendly and I never felt ashamed or intimidated to ask for help or directions. On a whole, Jerusalem is drastically different from Berlin, and all the new experiences (both on and off campus) made for an incredible, fascinating experience that I will always remember and be grateful for.

Aspects of my research stay that I found challenging yet interesting was the fact that everything shuts down during Shabbat in Jerusalem, from Friday late afternoon until Saturday evening late. This was sometimes very frustrating, as not even public transport would run during this time, and my campus residence was relatively far from the city center. When public transport ran, it was often unreliable, but coming from South Africa, I was not thrown off too much by the many ways in which

this operate differently in Israel than they do in Berlin. I found almost everyone I met both on campus and throughout the country to be extremely open, accommodating, communicative, helpful, inviting, and energized. I was lucky enough to meet many new friends, as well as to travel throughout Israel as well as to three Palestinian cities (Hebron, Bethlehem, and Ramallah). This was one of the highlights of my stay, as learning about the Israel-Palestine conflict was fascinating. It is also part of the reason I chose to come to Israel to study: since I have never been able to fully comprehend the complex nature of the political situation in the region. Although I learned so much during my stay in Israel and my visits to Palestine, reading books, speaking to locals on both sides, watching documentaries, etc., I probably left at the end of my stay with more questions and confusion than when I had first arrived, although I do see this as a positive aspect. I am eager to learn more and will forever now feel closely connected to the region, and eternally interested in the developments here. Outside of serious Jerusalem and Palestine, I took several weekend trips to Tel Aviv, the liberal oases with amazing beaches, laid-back lifestyle and numerous cafes close to the beach side. How Jerusalem and Tel Aviv could be only 45mins apart yet feel like two universes (also with very different weather), totally blew my mind. Both were culturally rich, but in very different ways: while almost all the men in Jerusalem don a kippah or some religious garment, almost none of the men in central Tel Aviv do. This is just one example.

While at the Hebrew University, I partook in a week-long summer school course on the European Renewable energy market. While the guest lecturer was from Germany and the topic somewhat familiar, the fact that the class consisted only of Israeli students made the experience extremely interesting. Unlike my experience in Germany, Israeli students are very vocal in class, sharing their experiences and opinions openly, and contributing with Israeli examples of the topics discussed. This was very interesting. I was also invited to join and sit in on several other guest lectures in English from visiting groups of professors, and joined some related functions and met other visiting Professors and research scholars this way, accompanied them on a historic tour, etc. I further learned that the Hebrew University is deeply concerned with issues of sustainability on campus, with architecture of new buildings, recycling, etc. I also learned of Israel's new renewable energy endeavors such as the large solar park built in the Negev desert.

Unfortunately I was not able to join many other local lectures at the University as everything is in Hebrew, although I did take the opportunity by learning some Hebrew from my flatmate Moshe. He also took me on tours of the ultra-orthodox areas of the city which was incredible. Being exposed to a whole new world that is Israel and Palestine really widened my horizons, both concerning sustainability issues, but also much broader. It has impacted my idea of personal future goals in that I have realized I would like to have a global impact and focus in my career, surrounding issues of renewable energy and sustainability. I realized that on the one hand the world is such an incredibly diverse place, but on the other it is still so much the same. Looking at this through the lens of a university or through the topic of sustainability highlights this realization. In terms of sustainability issues, Israel obviously has many obstacles that are different than Germany (a poorer country, drought and harsh climate, a civil society less interested in environmental stewardship), but it also compliments Germany and my native South Africa and have opened my eyes to innovative new ideas surrounding the topic and my academic focus on environmental policy. A tour of the Knesset (Parliament) was also fascinating, and helped highlight the similarities and differences between Israel and other places I am familiar with. I am most grateful for the experience and would recommend it to anyone!