

A report about the most compelling activities during my internship at the College of Natural Resources, Lobesa, Bhutan, February to May 2023

In July 2022, I came to the College of Natural Resources (CNR) as an exchange student to explore the Gross National Happiness academically in a module and personally in the real life. As I enjoyed the stay in Bhutan so much, I was lucky to get an extension as an internship at the College in the office of the Dean of Research and Industrial Linkages. The four month between February and May 2023 received funding by the PROMOS programme of the DAAD, German Academic Exchange Service granted by the University of Applied Sciences Nordhausen.

The internship started in the beginning of February before the arrival of the residing students. The Research and Liaison Officer Lobzang Penjor gave me materials about different research methods that I should study. It was very interesting to get more insights than in usual classes.

With the residing students coming back, also two students from the Czech Republic arrived. They had to get picked up at the International Airport in Paro and some office works were necessary. International students, like many other visitors, have to get a medical check-up at the hospital in Thimphu and the student permit card besides other documents forms the immigration office. As I had to go through the same procedures, I accompanied another student. After some shopping and starting conversations about Bhutan and the experience here, we were ready to drive to the college and their room.

As new students, works are not only necessary in Thimphu but also on the campus and the surrounding area itself. Besides these documents, a tour through the campus was given, experiences were shared and also dangers mentioned. As there are wild animals like leopard and rarely tigers outside the campus and rarely venomous snakes inside the campus, people have to be aware and cautious of the dangers. It is not to scare them but to make sure that there will not be any casualties. So far, in the time I was here, there were not any incidences related to wild animals luckily. Coming from Europe by

myself, I also have not expected to be in such an area as we do not usually have to take care of dangerous wild animals.

With the driver of the college, few places and cities around the college got explored: The iconic Punakha Dzong was used as a defensive castle in the olden days and nowadays as religious site and offices for the district administration, the town of Khuruthang which is the biggest city around, and a nunnery with an amazing viewpoint on a hill down the valley and a stunning chorten. Besides from these activities, in the upcoming days, other towns were explored, and necessary items were bought. As the students were interested in the Bhutanese culture and local food, introductions were given.

An organic agriculture student needed help in data collection. Luckily, study area is a research centre close to the college. The soil of measured plots had to be prepared in the greenhouse. Furthermore, seeds had to be collected, counted, and sowed. First watering has been done. As the staff from the research centre can take care of the seeds most of the time, only few times it had to be visited directly by the student.

During special holidays like His Majesty's the Fifth King's birthday and Losar (new year in the Bhutanese lunar calendar), the Czech students got introduced to the real life Gross National Happiness (GNH): Families gather with aunts, uncles, nieces, and grandparents. They play archery, the national sport of Bhutan, or Khuru, a game similar to dart but on a bigger area and more like archery with throwing a giant dart arrow. People share stories, enjoy special and plenty food, drink alcohol if wanted and enjoy karaoke. Towards the evening, traditional music was played, and people started to dance. At first the students were reluctant to join, but after the first dance they were not be able to be stopped. Also, the Bhutanese friends seemed to enjoy dancing or watching. This is part of the real life GNH which cannot easily be described but have to be experienced directly. Therefore, the Czech students were very lucky to experience this in the beginning of their stay.

Furthermore, they were lucky to visit the festivals called Drupchen and Tshechu in the Punakha dzong. These are yearly holidays were mask dances, traditional

dances, and prayers are held. Besides from that, food stalls, lucky draws and other shops are nearby. This is also a part of the GNH, namely the domain “Community vitality”, and luckily days without classes for the students.

In the beginning of March, two German students arrived and planned to stay for this semester as well. Therefore, they got picked up from Paro and had to do the same procedures like the Czech students. For them, the immigration office closed before we could finish the works and we had to spend a night in Thimphu in the house of a friend.

The German students had to get assisted in the beginning in few smaller things. They got the same treatment like the Czech students. It was nice to talk to people in German again, although even with them English was spoken when other people were there as well.

One week, there were few days of conferences and presentations from researchers of different colleges from Bhutan. I got invited to witness it. An informal closing dinner offered another opportunity to talk to the researchers about many things related to academics and life in general.

A group of American students (and one Swiss guy who got always forgotten as everyone referred to them as American students) visited the College for one week. They stay in Bhutan for three months in total and due to some connections they also spend some time on campus and on field trips in the surrounding area. They got a campus tour and interacting with them was very interesting. They had their own view on the strict rules and seemed to be less able to get adapted unlike the other international students. A trip to the nunnery above the college gave them an opportunity to explore mainly the flora and to talk more. A cultural programme including dances and live songs by the Bhutanese students and one song by the American students got organised. At the Tshechu in Paro, we met some of the American students again, partly accidentally, partly planned.

The luck also favoured the German students to witness another Tshechu which are held in all the 20 dzongkhags (districts) at different times. The dances are somewhat similar but different traditional dances take place.

A very remarkable event was the consecration of the new hostels which were built with funding from the Indian government. Bhutan and India hold a long time friendship as Bhutan shares a border in three directions with India and many projects are supported by India. Unlike in German universities where students are not that much engaged, at the college in Lobesa, they have the Council for Education, Transformation, and Advocacy (CETA). It is an organisation elected by the students once in a year and is responsible for many things on campus. CETA organizes all the important events and student-related activities of the college under the guidance of the management including Morning Assembly, Important National/International Events/Days, Seminar, Debates, Residence Life Award, and much more. In short, they are the link between management and students. They coordinate students and prepare special events like the consecration. As I knew some members and was interested in their works, I got insights in their works as well assisting them on this particular day especially. From my perspective, the students get lots of responsibility and they fulfil the high expectations. I do not know whether it would be possible with the German students as many do not even show up for the lectures.

In the final year, students have to write a thesis and conduct research. As my seniors from last semester will finish their master's during this semester, they also have to write a dissertation and defend their thesis. I assisted them a little bit in smaller questions, and they showed me their work. For their defence, I will be there as well. They have really interesting topics and worked it out very nicely.

Two German lecturers came to meet project partners from CNR. A Bhutanese lecturer gave them a tour, and I assisted him. He was very worried about how the German visitors are doing because they were fine with everything. When talking to them in German, I was able to verify that everything is fine. I guided them on campus, and we dropped them together at the international airport in Paro after visiting few sights. They were very interested in the Bhutanese culture and my point of view on things, as I stay longer in the country and know it a little bit.

To make it easier for guest like this and other visiting students and researchers, I made a packing list with the most important and suggested items. Before coming to Bhutan, I was little bit clueless about what to bring and what to leave behind. It would have been helpful to have such a list and a little bit information beforehand. Luckily, the office of the Dean of Research and Industrial Linkages support this initiative. I gave it to the other foreigner friends to revise and complete it. Especially students with little to know experience travelling in Asian countries might need such an inspiration. I also collected some information about the campus and Bhutan in general. Another initiative is to give ideas about a consistent PowerPoint presentation layout. As we use few design in the University of Applied Sciences, which should be used by the students, it might be adapted by some or even all students from the College of Natural Resources. But this work is still in progress.

Another master's student had to do some soil and plant analysis. I got the chance of helping him in the laboratory. First, the soil has to be prepared, dried, and weighted for the water content analysis. For pH value analysis, sterilised water has to be added and the measuring equipment has to be used. For another analysis, parts of plants have to be separated and dried. As the plants are contaminated due to the landfill area, precautions have to be made while handling and also for cleaning the used items.

Besides these exciting activities, daily works in the office had to be made, and I also got insights into them. Furthermore, I also had to work on my own Bachelor thesis to finish my studies in this semester.

I can really recommend such an experience as it offers insights in a world that cannot be compared to Germany. Combining working in a country were others come to make vacation seems unfair to them. I was able to explore the country more and get the view of a researchers on things. I look forward to a possible tour before my stay is done. It is planned to collect data from different parts of Bhutan on the value chain of potato and rice.

I am very grateful for the support by the International Office of the University of Applied Sciences Nordhausen and the DAAD for the funding.