

A Student Exchange with a 21st Century Urban Twist

Ulrike Kugler, Nicola Townend

[Download \(PDF - 1267 kb\)](#)

A Student Exchange with a 21st Century Urban Twist

Ulrike Kugler, Goethe-Institut Toronto & Nicola Townend, University of Toronto Schools



On June 22nd, 2017, 20 grade 10 students from the Carl-Schurz-Schule (CSS) in Frankfurt am Main arrived, tired but excited, at Pearson International Airport. They loaded themselves and their suitcases into a yellow school bus ("like those ones in the movies!"), and got their first glimpses of Toronto amongst

the lights and bustle of the Gardiner Expressway on a warm Friday evening. Their host partners and their families were waiting for them at UTS (University of Toronto Schools) in central Toronto, with balloons and cheers. There were hugs, hesitant bits of English and German, and then the suitcases rolled away in every direction to their "homes" for the next 10 days.

Language and cultural exchanges have existed between high-schools in different countries for decades. They are often extremely formative first opportunities to visit a new country, to try out your language skills in authentic situations, to get to know a city as a tourist, but with the convenience and comfort of a welcoming host family and your friends and teachers from home. They provide the vital realization that no matter where in the world you go, people are usually nice, and not all that different to those back home.



This exchange aimed for all of this, but with an additional dimension. Toronto and Frankfurt am Main have been Partner Cities since 1989. The initial impetus to set up this exchange actually came from Frankfurt City Hall's International Partnerships office, where they had identified a high-school level exchange as a great addition to the many other collaborative projects that exist between the two cities on business and higher education levels. The idea took shape thanks to the vision and perseverance of Nicola Townend and Ulrike Kugler in Toronto, and CSS teacher Stefanie Lotz and Eduard Hechler from Frankfurt City Hall. In addition to home stays and tourism, the Toronto and Frankfurt students took part in an experiential challenge designed by Maximum City. Maximum City, founded by Josh Fullan, who is also a teacher at UTS, creates summer and year-round programming for schools exploring various complex issues of big city living, urban design and sustainability. A 5-day program was created for our students called "Welcoming and Sustainable City", allowing them to investigate in what ways Toronto provides the necessary support and services to newcomers to our city, and challenging the students to develop a new service or app, which they believed would ease a newcomer's transition during those difficult first few months.



The Goethe-Institut Toronto helped to facilitate the planning of the first exchange visit between UTS and CSS, including catering a reception for all involved at Toronto City Hall and making the program the subject of their annual Award of Excellence video contest, which reaches thousands of middle- and high-school students across North America. In addition to the inevitable Toronto favourites (the CN Tower, a Blue Jays baseball game) and the "Voyage to the Falls" cruise at Niagara Falls, our visitors were also treated to dim sum and a teaching in the park from UTS' indigenous elder-in-residence, Cat Criger. They were invited to meet with the Vice-Consul at the time, Thomas Nickel, and had a movie night and pizza party at the

Goethe-Institut. As part of the Maximum City program, the students also went out to explore Kensington Market and the Scadding Court Community Centre as well as the Aga Khan Museum and Ismaili Centre. They even had an eye-opening frank discussion with Dawit Demoz, a recent newcomer from Eritrea.

In the true spirit of problem-based learning, the students gathered their new observations and collaborated in groups over a proposed solution, which they pitched to a panel of experts on the final Friday afternoon of the Maximum City program. The CSS students had also been taking pictures and writing blog posts (in English, of course) about their experiences. For them, this program was a new curricular component of their school year, not a summer holiday treat. German schools usually have a "Projekt-Woche" (or at CSS, an Aktionswoche) during their school year, where all regular lessons are set aside for a week dedicated to larger, more complex experiential projects. This visit and project simply served as an optional alternative to the grade 10 Aktionswoche program at CSS.



Next June, a group of UTS students will travel to Frankfurt to stay with students from CSS during their next Aktionswoche. The Maximum City challenge there will be to design creative and financially accessible housing solutions in an arrival city like Frankfurt. Program partners in Frankfurt will include the Open Urban Institute and the Stadt-Museum Lab, and students will go on a bike tour of the greenbelt and visit the famous Ernst May housing complex. For reasons of linguistic accessibility, this program will also be delivered in English, and participation is by no means restricted to students at UTS who are learning German. Those also wishing to exercise their language skills will have ample opportunity to do so with their host partners and families, and while they explore their sister city.



Our admiration and thanks go out to Ulrike Kugler and Uwe Rau at the Goethe Institut Toronto, who commissioned the Award of Excellence video, catered the City Hall reception and are offering financial assistance to students from Toronto so that they can come to Frankfurt in June 2018. At the centre of this blossoming partnership is also Eduard Hechler from the International Partner Cities office of Frankfurt City Hall, who contributed toward the students' flights and covered flights for CSS coordinating teacher Stefanie Lotz and Maximum City's Josh Fullan to make vital planning visits before the first students came. Thanks to Vanna Petropoulos and Councillors Michael Thompson and Joe Cressy from Toronto City Hall for their encouragement,

and for hosting a lovely reception at City Hall. Our gratitude also goes to Vice Consul Thomas Nickel at the Consulate General of the Federal Republic of Germany, who greeted the group at the Consulate and encouraged them to consider a career in international diplomacy. Integral to this exchange program were also Josh Fullan and Eleanor Rae at Maximum City, UTS' Principal, Rosemary Evans and Vice Principal Garth Chalmers. In Frankfurt, we are deeply grateful for the collegiality and innovative thinking of Stefanie Lotz and Davia Ruge at the Carl-Schurz-Schule, and their principal Hans-Ulrich Wyneken. As we gear up for our first visit to Frankfurt, this program feels like a force for integrative thinking and global urban citizenship in an increasingly busy but turbulent world.