

## 5 Years Since Lockdown: My Close Escape From Being Stuck In COVID-19 Germany

**Reading Time: 11 minutes**

I honestly can't believe it's been 5 years since Lockdown this time next week.

I still remember being in Bulgaria at the arse end of 2019, reading an article on the Guardian's news website about some bug that was going around in Wuhan China. I knew where Wuhan was as it was a place where we had a partner university with Birmingham City University, and I had a friend who had gone out there to teach a number of times. (It's also where one of our old Vice Chancellors decided to have an affair with someone who's father was a member of the Chinese Communist Party, leading to him being forced to resign).

I thought little of it until COVID-19, as it was then referred to started to spread. Before long, there was tracking websites, showing the spread as it moved to Europe and North America. Things started to get more worrying week by week, and a lot of Governments, Health Authorities and those who's job is to monitor outbreaks didn't know if this was the next bird flu / swine flu, or something more serious. It would turn out to be the latter, in ways I don't think anyone was prepared for, let alone able to cope with.

### Teaching 2nd Year Students In Semester 2

I taught a second semester module at Birmingham City University called Data and Decision making. It was a practice based module, getting students used to looking at qualitative and quantitative data in a Planning and Real Estate context, drawing upon case studies, primary and secondary research, to address a real world problem. In 2020, the idea was to look at Birmingham's public transport aspirations set out by the West Midlands's glorious mayor in Andy Street, the former boss of John Lewis, and photo-op extraordinaire). A part of this module was to also do a lot of 'on the ground' research, in the form of site visits and field visits, the latter which was due to be a 4 day trip to Germany to look at public transport in North Rhine-Westphalia, looking at Dusseldorf, Cologne and Bonn in particular.

The first part of the module was all about introducing and providing opportunities to look at various data collection and management techniques, again looking at both primary and secondary data, quantitative and qualitative. This was also a module that I was proud of, as I only used PowerPoint slides three times throughout the entire 13 weeks of teaching. The first week to introduce the module and it's concepts, the second to look at how we can visualise data in map form through a mixture of Output Areas, Lower Super Output Areas, and Middle Super Output Areas, then my guide to presenting with impact, as part of the assessment was providing a presentation to sit alongside the report they had to write as a group responding to the challenge set.

By Week 2 of teaching, COVID-19 was enough of a 'thing' that I made a joke about Corona at the start of that week's lecture, something which in hindsight I regret, as like many, I wasn't really fully understanding about how serious the situation was about to get. Ironically, the Tesco at Spring Hill in Birmingham, the closest supermarket to me managed to be even less tasteful one lockdown started, as they decided to put crates of Corona lager right at the store entrance. Anything to make a quick buck, hey Tesco? Regardless, we plodded along, fully expecting to go to Germany on March 23rd, which also happened to be what we called Graduate+ Week at university; a more 'active' version of what most universities would call reading week.

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## **Let's All Go On An International Field Trip!**

As well as running the module, I was responsible for planning, preparing and sorting out almost all aspects of the field trip. I had been to Cologne already a few times, so knew the area, most recently visiting it a year prior with another lecturer who wanted to go Transporting. Literally, not in some random movie sense with the same name. Her Ph.D. is (was) on graffiti, and German trains and trams would often have graffiti / tags on them, meaning she would just sit at a station / track points and take thousands of photos. I had to deal with typical university BS bureaucracy at the time, not least from my Head of School, who had the exact persona and attitude as my Mental Health doctor at Bushey Fields Hospital, who's favourite phrase was 'What you need to understand Wil is....'. The bastard decided once to assign me a special task of monitoring noise levels in the school office three times a day to prove that the office wasn't noisy (It was, just not exactly measurable. Irony when I was teaching a module on data and its effectiveness in different use cases!

As the spread of COVID-19 grew, the Vice Chancellor's office decided to step in, and require more detailed risk assessments to take into account the specific impact of the virus on any international trips. Any international travel that had already not been booked was suspended, and we were required to update our risk assessments weekly if travel had already been booked. We beat the deadline by 4 days, as our office administrator, who is your typical 'exactly 9AM - 5PM' worker, who would seemingly check her job description before doing anything, was pretty useless at doing anything unless authority figures got involved. The only thing I actually needed from her was a signature for a cost-code spend. And that took 2+ weeks.

In terms of risk assessment, we were hovering below medium until about 3 weeks before travel. This was the point when Italy became the first European country to in effect hit a point of lockdown. In the UK, we were slowly getting to the point of Boris Johnson's three point slogans in 'Hands, Face, Space', but there was nothing specifically prohibiting us from travelling. Our travel to and from the airport was the safest method possible, we were looking at Foreign Office advice almost daily, specifically in relation to Germany. The only thing that really had to be taken into account was the fact that some students wanted to see some German Bundesliga football, and we had to politely suggest that this wasn't the best course of action.

## **Then, Shit Started Unravelling...**

First of all, the airline we were due to fly with, Flybe decided to go bankrupt for the second time in 5 years. This meant our flights were cancelled. Thankfully, as we booked everything as a package, we were ATOL protected. Although there were flights to Dusseldorf with Eurowings (At the time three times daily), with short notice, we were told that the only viable option would be for us to fly with British Airways from Heathrow. This affected the risk assessment quite a bit, as Birmingham International Airport, and Heathrow Terminal 5 are very different spaces when it comes to people, interactions and so on. It would also mean a 3+ hour coach trip, which could make the spread of COVID-19 a lot easier if there was just a single person who had contracted the virus, and say not have developed symptoms.

Also, as is often the case with university field trips, students were required to share rooms. We had booked a hostel, and all the rooms would be for BCU students only, but this again impacted the risk

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assessment. It wasn't enough for any massive action, but something that moved us into the amber category, and us having to take some extra precautions to ensure student safety, such as having the option to isolate students if they became symptomatic, and packing a ton of test kits for students to use daily. As someone who prides themselves on being a good project manager, this was part and parcel of the job, as I always say that 90% of pay as a project manager comes from dealing with the potential chaos of the 10% unknowns.

So, we still had a plan in place, students had their guide and instructions ready to go, and it was the Friday before we were due to leave (Early on Monday). Till then, my biggest issue was finding an image of the hostel we were due to stay in as because of German's privacy laws, Google Map Street through is opt in, rather than opt out, and much of Germany just doesn't have any Street View options. Late on Friday afternoon, doing my routine checking of everything, I had noticed an uptake in cases in North Rhine-Westphalia, and whilst it couldn't be pinned down to specific areas, one would assume that this would be in one of the more populated areas, AKA where we would be going to.

One of my colleagues had already started to get cold feet, and was debating not going, but I had someone on standby who could cover. We always booked a spare 'blank' plane ticket, which whilst expensive, meant we could be prepared for any emergency situations, such as a member of staff being ill at the last second and so on. Much safer than booking a last minute flight / trying to change the name on a ticket, which isn't really possible if it's for a completely different person. We had a caucus in my little smoking spot along with the Associate Dean for Student Learning Experience, and we decided to start by polling students. If the majority didn't want to go, we would respect their wishes and call it off. In the same vein, we were worried about the amount of money we would lose, as if we cancelled and there was no Foreign Office advice to stop us going, we would be out of pocket about £20,000, which is basically a waste of student fee money. Students were contacted, and the vast majority were still wanting to go.

There's always a risk of a domino effect here. One student decides not to go, which impacts their course buddies, or someone claims to have read something which spreads like wildfire. Despite being on degrees where research, fact checking and understanding context was not just a part of their overall course structure, but this actual module, you'd be surprised at how you'd have to still pull out the proverbial fire extinguisher. A late night on Friday over, it was off home to get ready myself for a week in Germany.

### **Until It Wasn't.**

On Sunday, I got a call from the same Associate Dean for Student Learning Experience, telling me that the trip had to be cancelled, upon an edict from the Vice Chancellor's office. My job was to then contact all the students to let them know, by calling / then texting, emailing, sending carrier pigeons and so on. I wasn't told the full story by the Associate Dean for Student Learning Experience, but it turns out that the Vice Chancellor had gotten a heads up about what was to come next.

See, Vice Chancellors are people high up in the world of needing to be in the know. Birmingham City University has 31,000ish students, being the second largest in Birmingham, and although there are different university alliances and partnerships, there is also a simple Vice Chancellor network, whom gets important information from Government, sometimes ahead of time. This was particularly

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important, as the following day at 8:30PM, Boris Johnson was able to sound coherent enough to say the following:

From this evening I must give the British people a very simple instruction – you must stay at home.

Because the critical thing we must do is stop the disease spreading between households...

...The people of this country will rise to that challenge.

And we will come through it stronger than ever.

We will beat the coronavirus and we will beat it together.

And therefore I urge you at this moment of national emergency to stay at home, protect our NHS and save lives.

IF we had made it to Heathrow, and gotten onto our plane, we most likely would have been stuck in Germany. Not only was UK airspace / airports immediately restricted, Germany would in effect enter it's own state of lockdown two days later, meaning that getting out of Germany / back to the UK would be incredibly difficult. In theory, it would be possible for us to have immediately gotten a train from Cologne to Paris, to London, then a coach back, but the logistics would have been a nightmare at best. Had we been stuck in Germany, we'd have had to find a way to stay in the hostel, with no real access to food, and then there would be things such as medication for me in particular, and others most likely. Though I always pack an extra couple of insulin pens in particular, and another couple of days supply of medication, this wouldn't have been enough if we were stuck in Germany even for an extra week. Some students would have had parenting issues, and so many other things would have been a factor.

### **Sometimes, You Just Get Lucky**

In many ways, we were lucky. I've dealt with crisis situations in the past, but this would have been one that even I wouldn't have known exactly what to have done, short of trying to perhaps have a coach drive us all the way back to the UK? Because the UK was still a part of the EU at the time, there would have been slightly less burdens, but it wouldn't have been pretty, safe, or in anyway optimal, if even possible. There were some students who were asking if they could take the risk and travel themselves using the tickets we had purchased in a group, but it had to be a hard no. Aside from it messing up completely the travel insurance for having to cancel the trip, we would have been risking students in Mainland Europe, with no way of guaranteeing their safety. In theory, they could have just bought their own ticket and flown out, but aside from being stupidly expensive as a last minute flight, I'm assuming at that point airlines would have been tapped on the proverbial shoulder and told 'stop selling tickets please'.

Ironically, I had to go to Dusseldorf later in the year, for a Porsche Virtual Le Mans event, organised as part of the complete virtualisation of life, including motorsports. I will never forget the fact that on a normal day in an airport such as Birmingham International Airport, there would be a good 3 / 4 pages of departures on the board. When I went, an entire week was covered by one two-page departures board. In fact, had I have missed my flight, the next available opportunity would have been three

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days later; the day I was due to fly back!

As I finish writing this piece, the following track came on my Apple Music playlist. It's a funny track, perhaps Bill Wurtz could have made a darker COVID-19 version to entertain us like everyone else was trying to do; find humour in something which we'd never experienced as a global society before.

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**Peace, Rage And Love xx**