Exchange at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

- Håvard Thom

In spring of 2015 I had an exchange semester at Vrije Universiteit (VU) in Amsterdam and I want to share my experiences and give some guidance to anyone considering going on exchange.

Why go on exchange?

During my first year at UiT I started to think about studying abroad. I never heard about anyone having a bad exchange experience, so I was very determined that this was something I wanted to do. It was important for me to get out of my comfort zone and broaden my perspective of the world. I wanted to meet new people, learn about different cultures and get new experiences. There are so many positive and very few negative aspects of going on exchange, so I truly recommend it to anyone who has the opportunity. People are often thrown off the idea because they think the application process is a hassle or they are scared of leaving home. Trust me when I say, everyone has this feeling and it disappears quickly when you arrive. Regarding the application process, I thought it was super easy. I just followed the simple instructions given on UiT’s webpages and it was a done deal.

The main criteria when choosing my destination was that I wanted to study in a city with a good exchange environment and the school had to offer courses in English. After considering a lot of places, it came down to Amsterdam in the end. Amsterdam is known for being a very cool city and the VU seemed like a high quality school that was popular in regards to exchange students.

Amsterdam is filled with beautiful canals and narrow houses
Settling in

Getting a place to live was pretty easy through DUWO student housing, since exchange students are prioritised. They have various buildings in and around the city where you can apply for a room. I got a room in Uilenstede which is the campus where most of the VU students live. Uilenstede is a 10 minute bikeride from the school and 30 minutes from the city center. You can also use public transportation which is very good in Amsterdam, but everyone usually bikes to get around. I really recommend living in Uilenstede even though it’s a little outside of the city center, because it is the social hub for students and you have everything you need close by.

The rental price was around 400-600€ a month depending on the type of room you wanted. I chose one of the cheaper options where I had a private bedroom and bathroom but shared a kitchen with 13 other exchange students. It may sound like a big inconvenience, but I actually prefer this over living alone in a studio apartment. When I moved in we were 7 new people and 7 “veterans” that had lived there for a while. We often had dinner parties where everyone made a dish from their country, birthday parties or just relaxed in the kitchen together in the evenings. My floormates quickly became my closest friends over the semester.

“The green building”, my home for 6 months and 1 of 5 buildings with international students in Uilenstede
The Social Life

The VU has a great Erasmus Student Network (ESN) that organize social events for exchange students, including day trips and weekend trips to other cities around Europe. At the start of each semester they host an introduction weekend with parties and activities for the new international students. They also have a buddy system where you can get a dutch buddy to show you around and help you settle in. The best tip I can give here is to join as much as possible, and definitely don’t miss out on the best party of the year: Koningsdag.

Koningsdag celebrates the Dutch King’s birthday with a giant party in the streets and canals of Amsterdam.

Amsterdam is known to be one of the largest hubs for travelling in Europe and I recommend taking advantage of this. If you want to discover other dutch cities it is super easy; just take your bike, hop on a train for 1 hour and you can go wherever you want. Personally I went on day trips to Utrecht, Den Hague and Rotterdam. Travelling internationally is also easy and can be cheap aswell. During my semester I went on weekend trips to Prague, Maastrict, Budapest and Groningen, with both ESN and friends. These are the experiences I remember and cherish the most.

Weekend trip to Prague with ESN
The School

The first thing you need to know about the Dutch school system is how they divide their academic year. Each semester is split into three periods, where two periods last 2 months each and the last period is 1 month. To get 30 ECTS you usually have five courses divided over the periods, with exams at the end of each period. Because of this structure, the courses are more intensive and fast-paced, but in return they have less curriculum and shorter exams.

The VU has a great computer science program which is one of the reasons I wanted to go there. This is apparent in some of the staff that works/worked there (Andrew Tannenbaum and Marteen van Steen). They offer a lot of courses that are similar to the courses in the computer science program at UiT, which is good if you need to replace a compulsory course. During my semester I had three computer science and two elective courses. I noticed that they were quite theoretical (not that much programming), but this is probably different depending on the course. Overall I was very happy with the school and the educational value I got there.

Some general tips regarding course choice: Read the course description and prerequisites carefully before choosing. It is possible to switch up to a certain deadline before each period, after that you’re stuck with what you have. Watch out for overlapping timetables, some courses have obligatory seminars etc.

Don’t miss out!

The best thing about studying abroad is definitely the people you meet. You make friends for life from all around the world. The worst part is when it’s over and you have to leave. Luckily we live in a world where it’s easy to keep in touch with people wherever you are. I was only on exchange for 1 semester and I highly urge others to go for 1 year if possible. Time flies too fast when you’re having fun and I would stay longer if I could after my 6 months in Amsterdam. To anyone having doubts in their head, I’ll finish off with Shia LeBeuf’s famous words “Just do it!”.

If you have any questions don’t hesitate to contact me at: haavardthom91@hotmail.com
Some helpful links

https://uit.no/utdanning/utveksling
https://esnvuamsterdam.nl