Essay on exchange semester

University of Amsterdam, Netherlands

My name is Aron Pap, I am currently in my 3rd year of studies at the Corvinus University of Budapest. I study Applied Economics (BA) and I went on exchange in my 5th semester, in the fall term (starting in early September). On the following pages, I will write about my experiences and studies in the Netherlands and about Amsterdam in particular.

Getting ready for exchange

After receiving my proof of enrolment for the University of Amsterdam, the administration process kicked out quickly. The Dutch were quite accurate and send a huge amount of information in details. They wanted to know everything in advance, so I already knew all of my subjects, which I would study there, in early June. The application process went smoothly, I did not encounter any problems. However they later reshuffled the date of my exams, so I had to drop one course and take a new one, but they were helpful along the way, there was no problem about it. On the other hand, there was a really important issue, which was actually difficult. Housing in Amsterdam is a big challenge, since the city is already concentrated, the supply of houses is low, whereas the demand for them is enormous. Until June, I tried to find accommodation on the private market, but I did not have luck with it. So I decided to go for the university housing programme for exchange students, which had high administration fees (100 Euros just for the application), but also a higher chance of getting proper housing. There is also a competitive application in that programme, so you have to be quick to get the best deals. The price range was 300-600 Euro per month (depending on the distance from the university and the city centre, whether it is a private room or shared room and on the quality of other facilities available in the building. The Dutch try to match you with a group of flats given your preferences (price, private/shared room etc). So in mid-July I was offered with 10 possible student houses in which I could choose a room. I went for a house which was really close to the university, and I had a private room and shared kitchen/toilettés/showers with 5 other exchange students. Later, It turned out to be a good decision, since the 24 exchange students in the house and our Dutch Residence Assistant formed a real community, which we could rely on throughout the whole semester. It was quite expensive, but I got a Campus Mundi scholarship, which helped a lot financially with my exchange. These were the 2 major issues before the exchange, the other minor things of course include packing your suitcases in a smart way (you definitely need less clothes than you pack, however pack a raincoat for the Netherlands, for sure),
booking your flight etc. One more thing to add here is that in the Netherlands almost everyone speaks perfect English, it was already useful in the pre-phase of my exchange and I felt the ease of this until the very end.

Getting there

I actually went to Amsterdam by car, but I would not recommend it, since it takes 12-15 hours depending on your bravery at the German highways. Flying to Schiphol from Budapest is much more comfortable (there is a direct train from Schiphol to the Amsterdam Central Station, which is basically the city centre). There is also the possibility to fly to Eindhoven and go from there to the Amsterdam Central Station by bus (flying takes approximately 1-1,5 hour and the bus takes 2 hours and it costs 22 Euros for one-way).

Getting started

I arrived for the University kick-off day on 21st of August and I would recommend to go there on that day, since then you can get everything done in 3 hours (Student ID, student cards, the keys for your flat, administration by the local authorities, useful brochures etc). The students who got there later of course also managed to get these things done, but it took there more time.

Then, I had to purchase the most important thing in Amsterdam, my bike. Biking is really the best and fastest way to get around there, no matter how the weather is. There are several markets where you can buy bicycles, even online, but Dutch language knowledge is needed for that or Dutch friends (https://www.marktplaats.nl). Make sure you buy your bike as soon as possible after getting there or even in advance if you have friends in Amsterdam, because it will really make your life easier. However, you can also use the public transport system, which is good as well, and with an OV chipcard (7 Euros for an anonim one) you will get travel discounts everywhere in the Netherlands. I would say that the combination of a bike and an OV chipcard is the perfect solution for your transportation in the Netherlands.

I was also wondering before going there, whether I should learn Dutch or not. As I already mentioned, everyone speaks English, so you do not need it and also, in the written form, it is really similar to German (so if you speak German, you will make sense most of the dutch text that you read). In the spoken form it is a strange combination of German and English, but even if you speak these 2 languages, do not expect to understand any conversation. The university offered some language courses before the semester started, but I do not know many people who actually participated. At UvA, half of the programmes are in English, and in case of students, even Dutch students speak in English with each other sometimes. There was
however another programme for exchange students before the semester started. It was the Introduction week, 4-days of sightseeing, going for activities with other students and having parties. It costed 70 Euros, but it worths it, since you will also have a group of 20 people there and you can stay friends with them for the whole semester. After that week, the university semester starts. I would also recommend to spend as much time as possible with your flatmates before the semester starts, since after that you might have different time schedules.

University

The Dutch university system is a bit different from the Hungarian one, they have 4 eight week long periods and 2 four week periods in one semester (the distribution is 8-8-4-8-8-4). So if you go in the fall semester you have either 2 periods (8-8 weeks, finishing in mid-December) or 3 periods (8-8-4 weeks finishing at the end of January) depending on your personal preferences about timing and subjects. I finished in 2 periods and I had 3-3 subjects in both of them, which would not sound a lot if you compare it to the average amount of subjects students have in 1 semester in Hungary, but it was quite intense. The Dutch students typically take 2 subjects per period. I took the following courses: *Econometrics, Advanced Corporate Finance, Regulation, Money and Banking, Corporate Social Responsibility and Organisational Economics*. I do not want to go into details, just write about the subjects in general. In most cases, you have case studies throughout the period for each subject, you have to form a group and solve it together, write a paper about it and present it at the end to your peers and the teacher. They really try to link the theory to practice in lectures and seminars and link the study material to the case studies (problem based learning). You also have midterm exams and final exams in every period for most of the subjects. These 3 components determine your final grade, which can go from 1 to 10 (5.5 is needed for passing in most cases). The Dutch professors are quite strict, they do not usually give you anything higher than 9, even if you are really good. I would recommend to get into groups with Dutch students, because they know the system better and also you can learn a lot about their culture in this way. For example my Dutch groupmates were always preferring to divide the tasks quickly and do everything online. They were always honest with their opinion regarding one’s work and straight-to-the point. They always wanted to do the tasks strictly according to the problem description and expectations, not leaving any room for subjective reasoning about the grade that we got. Another difference that I noticed that we had to read much more papers there, approximately 200 pages every week. Most of the students do not read it, but these are brand-new research papers in most cases, and professors include these papers in the exams as well.
Traveling

There are a lot of things to see in Amsterdam, I did not even have the time to see everything in 4 months. However, with the bike you can even visit distant parks and castles, beside the canals, churches, beautiful buildings and museums that the city offers. Since the Netherlands is a relatively small country, you can basically see everything there if you travel on every 2nd weekend or so. Besides Amsterdam, I would really recommend to go to Den Haag, Rotterdam, Delft, Utrecht, Groningen, Marken, Volendam, Maastricht (it is a bit far away), Bloemendaal aan Zee (I was at the beach 3 times in August, I did not expect that from an exchange in the Netherlands) and the Frisian Islands. You can go everywhere with train or bus.

Cuisine

As for their gastronomy, the Dutch are not that creative. They say, that fries is actually a Dutch thing and they eat it a lot. They also eat a lot of sandwiches (this is their classic lunch). What I really liked about their cuisine were herring (especially on the beach), bitterballen (meatballs) and Roti (coming from Suriname). Of course their cheese is delicious and they have thousands of different flavours. There is also a Dutch type of cookies called "Stroopwafel" which is really good, I miss it a lot since I got home. You can also learn a lot about the cuisine of the countries where your flatmates are coming from. My advice would be to have as much international nights as possible. Below you can see one of our world-famous Italian Pasta nights.
Weather

They say it will rain a lot. You say okay. But still, you would not expect so much rain. What is more, rain and wind are really good friends in Amsterdam, they often come to the city together. That is the worst. There is no chance that you will not get soaking-wet. As time passes, you accept it, you learn to live with it. All this put aside, there is a website for short-term weather forecast (https://www.buienradar.nl), which is really useful to plan your trips avoiding rainy times and then the raining in Amsterdam is totally manageable and you also learn how to appreciate the sunny days properly. Also, the temperature usually does not drop below 0 Celsius degree even in wintertime (My winter was special, there was a bit snow and the university announced the “Red Code”, and there were no classes on those days).

Culture

The Netherlands, and especially Amsterdam has numerous cultural values. This is why I decided to buy the Museumkaart, which costed 60 Euros and provided access to most of the museums in the Netherlands. I think it worth it, since the big museums in Amsterdam (Rijks, Van Gogh), cost 10 each at least. There are also free classical music concerts in Amsterdam which I really liked. There are also special open days in most of the major cultural institutions, when you can see special exhibitions for free. In the port, you can visit old ships as well and you should definitely go on a boat trip at least once.

All in all, I would really recommend to go on exchange, especially in Amsterdam or in the Netherlands. I feel that I learned a lot, this semester developed my personality, broadened my horizon and improved my skills. I feel lucky, that I got those scholarship opportunities. Moreover I got to know amazing people and I built everlasting friendships. I had unforgettable memories and I enjoyed my time there. I wish everyone could have this opportunity!