**Partner University:** Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (VU)  
**Location:** Amsterdam, Netherlands  
**Faculty:** Arts and Social Sciences  
**Exchange Term:** February – June 2019

**Planning**

The Incoming Exchange team at the VU kept me well updated on everything I needed to do before my exchange. Starting in September, I received information on housing, academics, and my student visa. For accommodation, I was given 4 different options via DuWo, ranging from a private room with shared bathroom and kitchen to the most expensive option farthest from the university, a private apartment. I lived in the Green Tower at Uilenstede (private room and bathroom) sharing a kitchen with 12 other exchange students, averaging at €400/month. The VU is about 10 minutes away by bike, or 3 tram stops. Uilenstede is located in Amstelveen, a suburb of Amsterdam. There is a gym, various grocery stores (Jumbo and Dirk’s are the cheaper options), and cafes within walking distance.

I was also sent a list with possible courses for exchange students. I had options of upper or lower level courses in humanities, religious studies, or law. After sending back my own list of what I wanted to take, I was sent an enrollment date. The enrollment process is similar to SFU, although you need to enroll separately for the lecture, tutorial, and final exam. The academic year is split up into six periods. I took two courses in period 4 (February-March), two more in period 5 (April-May), and one in period 6, June. Courses in periods 4 and 5 are about 7 weeks long, so the material feels much more condensed compared to the usual 13 weeks of class at SFU. Period six is only 4 weeks in duration. Majority of courses are graded on a paper and a final exam, although some professors require attendance and participation. The format varies—I have had classes with just a 4-hour lecture and classes with a lecture and a tutorial.

**Arrival, Orientation**

Once I arrived at Schiphol Airport, I was met by members of the International Student Network (ISN), who provided transportation to Uilenstede for a small fee. I know that some people took the train to the city and then a tram to the campus by themselves and others arrived a couple days before and just explored Amsterdam, so there are different options. There was a set day to register with the municipality, pick up your keys and a goodie bag. The next day there was a free orientation at the VU with a campus tour, a Dutch lunch, and a scavenger hunt in the city centre. You also have the option of attending a two-day welcome event by ISN which includes events, parties, and meeting all the other exchange students for a fee. I highly recommend attending, as you get to meet other exchange students and see the university for the first time. Overall, all the staff and student volunteers were friendly and helpful, as most of them have gone on exchange to other countries themselves and know what you’re going through.

Similar to Vancouver, weather in Amsterdam can be unpredictable. Within a few minutes, sunshine will change to rain, to hail, then back to sunshine. It is also quite windy in the winter, so warm clothes are a must. In the last month of my exchange, however, the weather went up to 33 degrees. When packing, remember to leave enough room in your suitcase to avoid extra fees when flying back with all your souvenirs!
The vast majority of Amsterdammers and Dutchies in general bike everywhere, so I suggest wearing something you will be comfortable biking in. The biking culture in Amsterdam is unlike anything I’ve experienced before. It may take some time getting used to, but biking in Amsterdam allows you to experience the city in a whole other way. I recommend SwapFiets: it is a monthly bike rental service, with the added benefit of one of their staff swapping or fixing your broken bike if the need arises.

Overall, Amsterdam is not a cheap city. At the same time, it is still possible to enjoy what Amsterdam has to offer. For example, one of my fondest memories was enjoying a free jazz concert in Hermitage Amsterdam’s garden. I highly recommend applying for scholarships that SFU provides to exchange students, as well as expect unexpected expenses that may come up when you’re abroad.

Reflection
Over the five months I spent in Amsterdam, I experienced a new culture and academic environment, made amazing friends, memories, and trips throughout Europe. I learned to depend on myself in unexpected situations and step out of my comfort zone. I met amazing people from all over the world and got to visit new cities. Overall, your exchange experience will depend on what you make of it. I suggest saying “yes” to as many opportunities as you can, trying new things, and being open to new people and experiences. At the same time, don’t hesitate to explore the city and try activities solo!

Miscellaneous

ABN Amro student bank account
- I made an appointment and set up my account the day I arrived, right at Schiphol Airport.

FlixBus
- A cheaper and more eco-friendly option than planes or trains. My very first trip during exchange started with an overnight bus ride to Berlin.

Google Maps or Maps.Me
- A must when you find yourself wandering lost around Amsterdam’s 165 canals.

Museumkaart (€60)
- Allows you to visit hundreds of Dutch museums for free (Stedelijk museum, Holocaust museum, and FOAM were some of my favourites).

Albert Cuyp market
- World-renowned food market with fresh seafood, cheese, street food, and much more. It’s located in de Pijp, a hip area with lots of dining options

Stadshart Amstelveen market
- If living in Amstelveen, I recommend checking out this market that’s on every Friday.

Vondelpark and Oosterpark
- Amsterdam is a very green city, so take advantage of its many parks!

Dining
Amsterdam’s dining scene is constantly growing, but here are some of my favorites: Dignita Hoftiun, Vegan Junk Food Bar, Vatten Ramen, de Foodhallen, and Bocca coffee
Biking in de Pijp, near Albert Cuyp market

Exploring Hortus Botanicus

Amsterdam
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