Univesiteit Utrecht Exchange Report

Introduction

I went on exchange to Universiteit Utrecht in the Netherlands from September 2013 to January 2014. My major in political science at SFU and I was enrolled in the Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences at Universiteit Utrecht. I chose to go on exchange because I felt that it would provide an experience which would be instrumental in furthering my academic experience along with the perspective of broadening my horizons in general.

Preparation for exchange

Pack for less as it is likely that you will buy some clothes while you are away and you may want to bring back souvenirs with you as well! Also, pack for the season that will occupy the majority of the time you will be there. For example, don’t bring three pairs of shorts if you are doing the semester from September to January. They may be good for the first few weeks but you won’t be wearing them outside your flat in December… unless you want to show everyone how Canadian you really are and tell them that it really isn’t that cold outside. Also bring a few souvenirs from Canada to give to your new friends there.

Nearly everyone, including me, on exchange that didn’t come from Europe did a little bit of traveling before arriving. If you have the time and can afford it I would recommend that in order to adjust to the time change and to get a little bit of travel in before settling in Utrecht.

Acquiring a bicycle should be one of the first things you do upon arriving in Utrecht. It is much quicker to get from place to place within Utrecht by bicycle rather than bus. It will also save you money in the long run. It is best to purchase a second hand bike as it is more affordable and it will also be less prone to bike theft. I would highly advise to buy a strong lock for your bike as bike theft isn’t uncommon throughout the Netherlands.
When it comes to payment, it seems like they prefer to use card in the Netherlands. Yet, you can pay by cash anywhere. When the exchange rate is relatively good, try to exchange/withdraw as much money as possible. I also recommend to always have some cash on you in case of emergency and also just in case your credit card freezes. If you are staying for just a semester, I don’t believe that setting up a Dutch bank account is necessary and it may also be quite difficult. However, if you are staying for the full year it will be more convenient. I had to temporarily switch my bank account type here in Canada so that I could withdraw money from any ATM without the surcharge, you should ask your bank at home about that as well.

Some things are more expensive than living in Vancouver and some things are less. Food prices are relatively the same both in grocery stores and restaurants but the exchange rate means that it will actually cost you a little bit more. Another thing to keep in mind is that most restaurants charge for water.

**During Exchange**

Organize your accommodation as soon as possible as housing is limited in Utrecht. SSH isn’t the greatest to rent from as they can take a long time to reply to fixing things in the flat and you are paying more than your Dutch counterparts there but with them you will likely meet lots of other international students by living in their Cambridgelaan accommodation. I would recommend living with other international students if possible as they will be going through all of the same things as you and going through new experiences together is a good way of bonding and creating new friendships.

Class format didn’t differ too greatly from that here at SFU. It seems like there may have been more group work in general for everyone in my flat than what they were used to but I didn’t find a large difference. The Dutch grading system goes from 0-10. Getting a 10 is near
impossible. A 9 would be similar to an A+ here. An 8 would be considered an A. 7 would be a B. 6 a C and anything below 5.5 is a fail. Even if you are the smartest person you know, don’t expect to get a 10 or even a 9.

You may find some cultural differences between Canadians and Dutch but there are no large or major culture shocking differences. Language is not a major barrier as most people, especially younger people, speak English quite well. Expect a fair amount of rain as the weather is very similar to that of Vancouver. The Netherlands is a very beautiful country and it is also very accessible by train. You can be in Amsterdam within 30 minutes, and Rotterdam, The Hague, and Leiden all between 45 minutes to an hour. There are of course many other places you may want to see. I think that there is something for everyone in the Netherlands so do your own research and see what interests you.

There is no shortage of social and extra-curricular activities available in Utrecht. It is possible to join sports teams at through the Olympus sports centre and there are a variety of different sports and athletic clubs that you can join. There are also many activities, groups and things that you can join outside of the school. The Erasmus Student Network (ESN) organizes many events for international students throughout the semester so I would recommend signing up for an ESN card, likely during orientation, early in your stay as they offer a variety of events and activities at discounted rates.

**Reflection After Exchange**

This was my first time away from home for an extended period of time. Fortunately I didn’t feel homesick at all as I had a really great group of friends in Utrecht. I really lucked out! But do keep in touch with people back home, even if you don’t think they miss you… they do. In fact, they are completely jealous of you and the amazing adventure that you are having! The
life you are living while on exchange is not “real life” so take advantage of it and enjoy before you go back to reality.

Not everything is going to go the way you want it to while away and perhaps you don’t really know how anything will go. Sometimes you just have to go with the flow. Do not waste any of your time while away. Make the most out of your experience and enjoy all of the moments! You may realize that even the smaller things such as just playing a card game with roommates, a walk around campus with a friend, the bike ride into the city centre or just a casual drink with friends are things you miss the most. My time on exchange and while away was easily the best six months of my life. From seeing many parts of the world that I had always wanted, to see to meeting so many new people and creating new friendships, among so many other things made my time on exchange so memorable. Keep an open mind while away as it will allow you to broaden your horizons. Living with six other people all from different countries definitely adds to that as well!

Do not organize too many trips before you arrive. Perhaps plan one or two trips that you really want to do and do not mind doing by yourself. You will be meeting tons of other people who want to travel and they may want to go to the same place as you. Or they may even recommend going to a place you hadn’t thought of much before, but go with them as it could be an awesome experience!

Make the most out of your exchange and cherish every moment of it!