Exchange Report

During the Fall 2014 semester I did an exchange to The Hague University of Applied Sciences, in The Hague, Netherlands. The semester began in September and ran until December with exams in January. SFU has an agreement with the Faculty of European Studies, which offers courses about politics, cultural studies and law in Europe, as well as globally, in addition to language courses.

Before my exchange I was lucky enough to get into contact with other SFU students who had previously studied in the Netherlands, and they gave me some valuable information before leaving. At the time of my exchange, Canadians didn’t need a visa to study in the Netherlands, only a Residence Permit, which my school applied for on my behalf. In terms of financial matters, the Netherlands is not a very credit card friendly country. Although I didn’t have too many problems because I had a MasterCard with a chip, the easiest way to pay for things is always with cash, or to set up a Dutch bank account.

Flying to the country is simple enough and once in the Amsterdam airport, there is one train that goes to The Hague within 40 minutes, stopping at the central train station and also at the station right across from the university. When it comes to packing, it’s important to remember that it rains a lot there, but it’s also often too windy for an umbrella, so you’re best chance it to bring a good rain jacket!

Upon arrival, the first thing I did in The Hague was to go to the office of DUWO, the student housing service that operates around the country. Because I had printed off maps before leaving home, it was easy enough for me to find it by myself, but The Hague University also organized a pick-up service wherein permanent students will meet you at the train station and assist you with finding and checking into your housing. I lived in a student residence about a ten minute walk from campus, and a half-hour walk (or ten minute bike ride) from the city centre. My housing costs were about €440 per month, which was approximately what my friends who were independently renting flats also paid. Although the quality of the building wasn’t great, for instance, the fact that the two elevators that served 23 floors were nearly always broken, the location was perfectly placed near school and the grocery store and I found living with other international students was the perfect was to meet people.

Before classes began there was a week-long orientation period. This consisted of presentations and activities during the day, then usually social events organized by student associations at night. I thought that the sessions were very comprehensive and gave a good overview of the courses we would be taking, services offered at the school and the staff. They gave us a tour of the school, and then had us complete some “intercultural” activities, mixing all of our nationalities. Registration was the last two days of orientation and was a grueling, paper-based process of writing your name on a list that was posted at 7:00am, then going at 9:00am to confirm which classes you wanted and to make any changes. In classes, I found that most of my classes were full of international students, although some were mixed with Dutch students. There are some courses, such as the Dutch Language, that are offered only to exchange students. The format of the semesters was incredibly different from SFU and consisted of many breaks. Each semester is divided into two 6-week terms, with exams at the end of each term. Some classes last the entire semester and others are only 6-weeks long. Because the school I attended was a University of Applied Sciences, and not a research university, the courses are much more project and presentation based as the school is focused on practical skills and often attended by students before they go to a research university. Furthermore, I found that my courses were very content-based, as opposed to SFU classes which usually are focused on analysis and interpretation of material, and this made the exams and papers very straight-forward and much shorter than I was used to. There is also a
mandatory “Introduction to Dutch Culture and Society” class that is intended to give students an experience of Dutch Culture beyond their classes, and includes lectures, field trips and independent cultural activities.

One of the most iconic things about Dutch culture is biking. Biking is one of the most efficient ways to get around and the infrastructure is fully supportive of this with clearly designated bike paths on almost every street. My university offered a bike rental service that I found to be much easier than having to independently find a bike then sell it when the semester was over. It was also useful because the rental organization also took care of any necessary maintenance for free. Another benefit of studying in the Netherlands is that the country has one of the highest rates of non-native English speakers in Europe, so essentially everyone who is Dutch also speaks and understands English. This makes it easy to communicate with people, but also hard to learn Dutch as the Dutch will usually respond to you in English even if you speak to them in their own language. The Hague is known as the International City of Peace and Justice, and because it is such an international city there are many institutions to visit, such as the International Criminal Court, the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, the Dutch Parliament and many museums. The city is also very well located for day-trips to other parts of the Netherlands including Leiden, Delft or Utrecht, and is only a 40 minute train ride from Amsterdam and is close to the beach. One cultural difference is that the Netherlands is a very rules-based society, and this makes it difficult to sometimes find services that you need. For instance, if you ask a question to one office at university and they are unable to help they may not immediately recommend where you should go to have your problem solved or may be initially unwilling to go outside of their rules to assist you. Moreover, it might be necessary for you to press your case more than normal and act more independently to find someone to help you.

One of the challenges of this exchange was adapting to a new academic environment and getting to understand different expectations. One good thing, however, was that all the other exchange students were also adjusting to the new system, so I wasn’t alone in my confusion, and I found that the most effective way to figure something out was to ask questions in person to the international office, advisors or the front information desk. I would suggest to other students to really make an effort to meet as many people as possible on exchange. While it is easier to bond with people from Canada and the U.S., I found that some of the most valuable relationships I made and the ones that I took the most from were with people from cultures very different from my own. Their different perspectives challenged many of the beliefs and opinions that I took with me before I went on exchange and taught me many things about myself and about the world that I couldn’t learn through university.