Preparation for Exchange

Universiteit van Amsterdam (UvA) has a great transition and introduction period for international students to get them settled in. They have airport pickup dates, Start appointments, and transportation to your student residence. I decided to take advantage of this and booked my flight to arrive on one of these days mid August, a few weeks before classes started. Of course my flight had to arrive on one of these days so I didn’t have many options in terms of pricing. However, you can definitely save money and book a round trip as long as you’re clear on when your courses end.

For accommodation, UvA provides students with access to student housing companies DeKey and DuWO. These two companies have residences all over Amsterdam. You’re able to choose a residence according to your budget, roommate preference, and location. This process is made quite simple since UvA sends you a link when it’s time for you to choose. Most often you will be assigned to a shared room with 1-2 roommates including a shared kitchen and washroom. You can also choose to have a loft alone but I believe it’s more expensive.

I actually had a friend from SFU going with me to also study at UvA and we had the option to get a room together. Since we applied as a unit, we were able to save money compared to choosing a shared room with roommates. Compared to Vancouver, the cost of living in Amsterdam is just as expensive unfortunately.

A financial detail to note is that Amsterdam is largely card-based. It’s most convenient if you have a Dutch bank account and debit card. For example, the main grocery chain, Albert Heijn, only takes debit and cash. Many local shops
and restaurants also only take debit card or cash. UvA does help you schedule an appointment with the bank, ING, during your Start appointment and this account only costs 3-4 euros to have during the semester. However, Amsterdam is a tourist city so many places within the center do take credit cards.

Packing
The weather in Amsterdam is very similar to the weather in Vancouver, so be prepared for wet and cold. I would also recommend bringing scarves, gloves, and toques. These will help keep you warm while you’re biking! As for other items, I brought along enough toiletries such as toothpaste and toothbrushes so I would not have to buy any here. If you want to keep your luggage light, you can buy most miscellaneous items after you arrive at a department store called HEMA or Albert Heijn.

During Exchange
As I mentioned before, UvA has a great (free) transition program for exchange students. Definitely schedule your arrival to coincide with their Start days. Upon arrival at Schiphol Airport all I had to do was find the UvA booth where a representative directed me towards a shuttle bus, handed me a stroopwafel (delicious Dutch cookie) and a free SIM card. The bus then took us to UvA’s main campus where we could pick up our room keys and have our Start appointment. This appointment was great because in just a few minutes I picked up my student ID, had a bank appointment scheduled for me, and had an appointment scheduled to get my Dutch residency card. Basically all the technicalities of the transition are taken care of for you. The housing companies are also there so you can pick up your room keys. After you Start appointment, another bus will take you directly to your new home.

Before classes start, the International Student Network (ISN) has a great orientation week planned out. I would highly recommend buying a ticket to this. You’ll be assigned to a group of other international students and be led by a senior Dutch student. For five days you’ll attend orientation presentations and
activities to show you UvA and Amsterdam. Each day also ends with a party at some of Amsterdam’s most popular venues. The best part of this week is making friends that will be with you throughout your semester abroad. My closest friends during my semester abroad were those who were in my orientation group. Additionally, ISN hosts events throughout the semester including pub nights, pancake brunches, and trips throughout Europe.

Academic details
Aside from this, school is what I came to Amsterdam for and I was definitely challenged. The biggest difference I found between Communication courses at SFU and UvA is that UvA’s topics are much more focused and hands-on. Their courses are intensive and to do this they also organize their semesters into blocks. Their semester is split into thirds or three blocks where you take 2-3 courses each block. This allows you to focus more on fewer classes at a time. Similar to SFU, most courses follow the structure of a two-hour lecture and tutorial. For grading, they operate on a grading scale of 1-10, one being the lowest and 10 being the highest, with most classes needing a 6 to pass.

Country information
Amsterdam is full of culture and creates tons of opportunities for people to experience what it has to offer. As a student and Dutch resident, I bought a Museum Card for 60 euros at the beginning of the semester. This card allowed me to visit museums for free as often as I liked. I think I got the most out of that museum card, making around 20-30 museum trips. Amsterdam also had the Amsterdam Dance Event (ADE), which hosted electronic concerts, workshops, and seminars for an entire week as well as Amsterdam Art Weekend, showcasing art and performances all over the city during my exchange.

Reflection After Exchange
Returning from Exchange, I didn’t expect to have grown so much as an individual. This was my first experience living on my own and while I thought I
could handle it, there were times where I was extremely homesick. I missed my friends and my family, but it really encouraged me to be more outgoing and make friends here. Some advice I would give is to not be scared to step out of your comfort zone. Remember that all the other students here are also on exchange and feel the same way and everyone wants to make friends. I’m glad to say I’ve made great friends who I know I’ll cross paths with in the future.

Other advice I would give other students planning a semester abroad is to budget, budget, budget! Studying in Europe especially, there are so many opportunities to go and travel and I’m sure most students plan to. Plan your finances and schedules accordingly to make sure you’re able to visit the places you want to. You don’t want to end up rationing your last euros because of one too many impromptu trips!

Additionally, make sure you don’t forget about your courses. After all, you went abroad to study. My advice with academics is to reach out to your professors. It’s a great way to maintain a connection with them post-exchange and helps when courses are a bit more difficult than they are at SFU.

Overall, Exchange is a great time to realize exactly what it is you want from your studies and life. Being way from home, work, and my routine gave me the opportunity to really figure out my academic and personal goals. I’m excited to return home with a refreshed and focused perspective on my future.