

**Exchange university**

University van Amsterdam (UVA)

**Degree programme**

Urban Studies

## Amsterdam: trying out research study program, doing an internship, going around on bike, and having a good time

### Before departure

I always wanted to try studying in different countries, contexts, from different people and in different ways. Therefore, there was no chance I would miss an opportunity to do a semester abroad during my masters. The hard part was to choose the program and university for the exchange: it took a (very) long time, a huge amount of research, and I still was surprised in the end: the courses I planned on taking were unavailable, and others appeared that were not on website. Overall, I would say while doing an exchange semester, you should be ready for unexpected stuff to happen on a regular basis 😊

I chose Amsterdam and UVA because I really wanted to try living and studying in this city, and it was definitely worth it. However, while I was focused on the location and slightly overwhelmed with the number of options in general, I chose a program that has a radically different approach than the one I'm used to: being an architect and an urban designer, I have chosen a research-based study over the project-based courses and studios I always took. I got to like it, and I appreciate my own decision as it allowed me to try out different things and learn from a new perspective, but I would still advise to really check all the parameters of the program you're applying to – location, focus of studies, approach to education, etc. So, I was expecting a completely new challenge of doing a research semester, and it turned out really interesting. I also coupled it with an internship at the architectural office (independent from studies), so I can say I got a wholesome research and practice semester abroad.

In terms of preparations, I didn't do much while I was in Sweden apart from application for the residence permit, with which university really helps. I didn't have to do an entry visa, and the only thing I would suggest to do as soon as possible is to look for time-slots to do biometrics for the permit, as it may take months to get a slot.

### Upon arrival

I have arrived 2 weeks before the start of the semester to get into the flow of things and get ready for the semester. University and the students were organising different events that you could participate in, and the exchange department at UvA has also organised a meeting of all exchange students in the program, which was nice, as we got to meet, chat and help each other out with technicalities. I spent the first 2 weeks getting used to a new location, meeting new people, going to IKEA and simply enjoying summer in Amsterdam.

### Financials

I have received Erasmus scholarship from KTH, and was also doing a part-time internship. Although it was an insufficient amount of money, it was still nice to have some income. I believe that money matters are extremely personal, but in order to compare Sweden and Netherlands I would say that my life in Amsterdam was generally comparable to my life in Stockholm in terms of finances. A bad thing:

public transport only offers free rides for Dutch students, so it's rather expensive. A good thing: going to cafes in Amsterdam is less expensive than in Stockholm!

### **Accommodation**

I got my accommodation with the help of the university, which was super helpful. They prioritise short-term (exchange) and non-EU students among other applicants for help with a search of accommodation, so it was a huge relief not to search for a short-term rental contract in Amsterdam. Stockholm may be challenging to find an apartment, but Amsterdam is even more hard in this regard. UVA reserves some places at student housing providers, and you get a place through the specific provider (you don't choose). I got the DeKey provider, and the process worked like this: during the original request to have an accommodation you state the maximum amount of rent and other preferences, and then the provider will give a choice of places (if you want to keep the biggest number of options, I suggest stating higher rent you're ready to pay, because deKey don't show options with higher rent once you stated your limit). You then sign a contract, pay the rent for the first month + the deposit, and now you have a place! One small tip: I was living in Noord, and although it has all the conveniences like transport, shops etc., I wasn't very happy about the choice. It's only 2 metro stations from the city center, but still rather far if you bike, and if you want to have the experience of living in Amsterdam for a short period such as exchange, I think going for more central location is nicer.

### **University and studies**

UVA is huge university with 7 faculties: Humanities, Economics& Business, Science, Law, Medicine, Dentistry, and Social & Behavioural Sciences (I was enrolled in the last). UVA specialises on research; it is known for research programmes. Literature reading is therefore a big thing at UVA, almost everyone I got to meet agreed with me that it's the biggest amount of reading they've ever done for university on a weekly basis. Campus is located all over Amsterdam in old and new buildings. All classes were held in English, and I didn't feel the need to learn Dutch for such a short period of time as exchange. However, UvA does hold language courses. A regular week of studies consisted of 2 days of 1 to 3 classes each (lectures, seminars or fieldworks), and the rest of the week was free: we had to organise time ourselves to work on group projects and read literature for classes. I would say that all the readings, classes and independent work were taking 3,5 days a week in a heavy regime for me, but 4-5 would constitute a better relaxed pace.

### **Courses**

I took 3 courses at UVA from the social science department. All of them may be characterised as theory and research based, which was a new thing for me, used to design thinking. It was somewhat challenging to get used to a new model of studying, but still rather interesting to try out new ways to study.

- Out of the courses I took, my favourite was Current Debates in Geography (6 ECTS). It was centered around food as a prism to discuss contemporary debates in Geography, and I really liked the focus on food to highlight modern day geography discussions: it's both interesting, allows multiple worldviews to come together, and is also relevant for everyone in class. Course consisted of seminars/lectures, creative group project (we did an audio-tour through restaurants), and a couple of other assignments. Teachers were great, topics were exciting, readings weren't that difficult – recommending!
- Another course was Advanced Urban Studies, a mandatory course for exchange students, lasting for the biggest part of the semester (12 ECTS). This course was packed with readings, preparation assignments to discuss the readings, several fieldwork assignments to observe and use theory in practice, and an essay to build on course content and work on the topic you're interested in. It was a heavy course in terms of workload and theoretic knowledge, and it was challenging, yet allowing to really dive into the core issues and discussions in urban studies.

- Finally, I took the course Climate Proof Development of Cities and Strategic Planning (6 ECTS). This course was announced as a more project-based and practice discussion course, and I was expecting to know more about practical aspects of making a climate-proof plan for a city, or methods to create resilient places. Yet, it was a course of theoretic introduction to what resilience, climate-proofing and other concepts are, and the project was badly structured. I didn't find the course stimulating in terms of practical approach, and it didn't seem to deepen my knowledge in this area. This course was also packed with (often) difficult and tedious readings.

### **City and country**

I genuinely liked Amsterdam and Netherlands! I can't say there were lots of cultural shocks waiting for me, although I was surprised to realise that those common herring vans usually sell sandwiches and other things with raw herring ☺ I liked the fact that you can comfortably move around the city on a bike (though the first few days or weeks of riding in the city center may be a bit stressful), and I do recommend getting the bike, because it's a special experience in Amsterdam. If you do – go for renting a Swapfiets bike, they are nice, rarely stolen and great in terms of money. And be careful to park the bike correctly in the city center – or it'll be towed away!

Amsterdam is great in terms of its multinational, multicultural and bustling character, it is beautiful, and the weekend markets are something – I do hope you're going to love it there!

### **Leisure and social activities**

Doing an internship along with my studies was somewhat challenging in terms of free time, so I didn't participate much in student and university activities. That doesn't mean there were none! UVA has a sport center, a bunch of creative studios, student cooperatives, activities, lectures, discussions, etc., etc. You will be able to find an activity for sure! My leisure time was mostly centered around getting to know the city, finding nice coffee places, going to museums and cute shops, visiting the countryside. I also had fun time with other students from the program, we went to bars, cafes and even neighbouring cities – in other words, there's quite a lot to do in Amsterdam!

### **Sustainability**

I contributed to sustainability by practically only using the bike to move around. It's also rather easy – and not very expensive - to take the train or the bus from Amsterdam to other destinations, and lines at Schiphol airport can sometimes be awful, so I would say it's a nice location to practice sustainable train travel! UVA is also rather aware of sustainability issues – there were student organisations, discussions and activities that aimed to contribute to sustainable lifestyles.

### **Other recommendations and observations**

During my 5 months in Amsterdam, I got to know nice places to have coffee, lunch, pizza or a beer. If you are interested in my google maps saved locations – send me a message, I'm always open to share!