



UNIVERSITY OF AMSTERDAM

Digital  
magazine for  
exchange  
students



UvA Study Abroad

# Exchange Express

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We are 

Photo by Lisa Maier

# EXCHANGE EXPRESS

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## Introduction

Two years into the COVID-19 pandemic, our desire towards returning to our old lifestyles and ongoing uncertainty caused by the pandemic are at constant odds with each other.

In some ways, things seemed almost 'back to normal' this semester; we were able to meet each other inside and outside the classroom, at ESN events, sports clubs or the pub, and for the first time in almost two years we were finally able to welcome exchange students to the University of Amsterdam again!

However, this seemingly 'normal' semester was not so normal after all. The situation of our ambassadors this semester shows this too; meetings were moved online and the make-up of our group was different than usual as there were no outgoing exchange students from the UvA in this cohort.

This edition of the Exchange Express shows this strange background of both normalcy and restriction. In the first section, our ambassadors show how financial aid remains an important matter that demands our attention, even during the pandemic. Section two celebrates the social connections and exceptional bonds that bring together international and exchange students from a wide variety of backgrounds. In the third section, our ambassadors show our desire for international education and travel, but also the lingering effects of the pandemic. In the final fourth section, our ambassadors show how valuable digital educational tools can be.



# STUDENT FINANCIAL AID

With online education and COVID demanding so much of our attention, it is easy to lose sight of other important matters around international opportunities that are also vitally important! In this section, we shine light upon such an important issues: financial aid. Receiving financial aid can make a significant impact on a student's life; from increasing othe standard of living to being able to attend university at all. But, what is the best way to allocate these funds? Can we justfully and without bias consider each students's individual situation and potential? The article '*Too Many Applicants, Not Enough Funding; UvA considers a pilot program to "draw" for summer school scholarships.*' critically examines the possibility of scholarship selection using a randomized draw. Also in this section is the story of ambassador Bright Asamoah, a scholarship recipient himself.



## Too Many Applicants, Not Enough Funding; UvA considers a pilot program to "draw" for summer school scholarships.

*By Ekaterina Purgina, Maxim Greiser, Maksim Bondarev, Henry Saldala, Shuyang Liang, Michelle Naidoo, Ege Kaynarca, Sophia Mizinski, and Viktória Pál*

### **What is the lucky draw and why was it suggested?**

Now more than ever there is growing regard for the role of inclusivity in selection procedures employed by universities around the world. In particular, the focus lies on designing programs to help disadvantaged students continue with their education. Such programs may be the doorway to overcoming existing structural, economic, and geographic barriers students face when applying to academic programs and for scholarship opportunities.

To address structural inequality within their selection procedure, the University of Amsterdam Office of International Student Affairs (BIS) is enacting a "lucky draw", a randomized selection procedure to disburse 8 out of 10, 1000-euro scholarships, while the remaining two will be given out by the selection committee. Under this new selection procedure, all first-generation students who self-report financial need will be given a chance to attend summer school at UvA. This method of selection is intended to eliminate bias and align with the department's "Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion" (EDI) goals.

As part of the initial implementation, BIS sought feedback from a diverse group of university staff and faculty to gauge their opinions as it pertained to the concept of a lucky draw, and whether such a procedure was practical and equitable from their

perspectives. To that end, several UvA Cultural Ambassador students interviewed administrative staff from a range of departments including the faculty of law, faculty of science, school of social sciences, school of psychology, the office of financial aid, and the office of international student affairs. This article is meant to present the results to a broader public.

### **Situation at UvA**

Currently, the UvA offers a limited amount of merit-based and need-based scholarships at different institutional levels. Depending on their fields of study and level of education, students can apply for scholarships offered by either their own department or by the central office of student affairs. Some scholarships are funded by the departments themselves, giving them a scope of action in terms of implementation of the selection process and making general policy changes challenging. However, they still have to keep interoperability in mind. In the end, central policies of scholarships are quite limited. While students from the EU have to pay around 2000 Euro per year for a study program at the UvA, non-EU students are charged more than 10000 Euro, differing from program to program. Summer Schools cost participants 1650 Euro regardless of their backgrounds, therefore being much more accessible for non-EU students compared to a full-year program.

Unfortunately, within many programs, and at

the university as a whole, there is more need than funding, which requires committees to make difficult decisions when choosing the eligible candidates to receive these awards.

Most selection procedures at the UvA are merit-based and are weighted heavily upon a student's grade point average (GPA). Other information that may influence a decision (depending on the program) can include motivation letters and teacher references, which could be considered extremely subjective and biased, given a student's language abilities and personal background. Additionally, students of social sciences and humanities showed, probably due to their training, better writing skills, leading to their over-presentation in students selected by motivation letters. However, plans are being made to reintroduce the motivation letters. Acknowledging the problems of personal evaluation, the UvA began to offer anti-bias training. Quotas, on the other hand, are not used.

### **About the Interviews**

Our interviews included respondents who had been at the UvA for many years and some who were fairly new, offering us a wide historical perspective and a diversity of opinions. The questions we asked concerned fairness and inclusion of the selection procedure, and thus allowed us to compare a range of currently used selection procedures to the proposed lucky draw. We also gathered a lot of information regarding the situation at UvA during our research.

### **General Observations**

Firstly, several respondents mentioned that existing structural systems have influenced the creation of selection committees, the effect of which may sometimes create

we cannot predict who will flourish and who won't. Instead of doing very difficult things like measuring two numbers after the comma, having stories, or reference letters or things that could introduce bias into the selection. I prefer to say, OK, you're all good, you would all profit from this, but we cannot say who would profit more than the other or who is needing it more than the other? In fact, it's so positive that we even decided to go against the grain of what is nationally accepted in past selection."

### **Drawbacks of the Lucky Draw**

Despite the benefits previously mentioned, adopting the lucky draw system also has potential drawbacks that must be taken into consideration. The first drawback mentioned by many interviewees is that lucky draw could not effectively identify and verify those students that really need financial support, giving those who do not necessarily need the scholarship an equal chance of winning it. A second issue with the lucky draw is that it is no longer related entirely to student performance and motivation. By removing the "merit" component, students who outperform other applicants according to their academic record are not given special consideration. Some individuals may feel more deserving of the scholarship, thus creating resistance among these students, faculty, and staff members in general, who believe in and prefer the merit-based approach.

Another concern is that a purely random selection process would not help to remove existing inequalities between students. One solution may be entering the name of the student from the target group (example: first-generation student with extreme financial need) multiple times in the draw. In this way,

documentation and effort in completing the application, easing the process for students who may face additional barriers or disabilities. Students facing such exceptional barriers would need to find the information that relates specifically to their case (regarding costs, practical issues, etc.), investing additional time and effort. Therefore, with an easier application, it is more likely that more of these kinds of students would apply thanks to a more inclusive process using the Lucky Draw.

In terms of implementation, the Lucky Draw offers a very attractive selection process for the administrative staff compared to the one currently in place. It is faster because it does not require staff to invest time examining each student's application material (motivation letter, recommendations, GPA, test scores, etc) nor comparing and ranking each student's merit in receiving the scholarship.

One of our interviewees, drs. EE (Eveline) Zandvliet, Education Policy Advisor (Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences at the School of Psychology and the Graduate School of Psychology) shared a similar type of system that is used for admissions at the Graduate School of Psychology. Currently, some of the programs have more applicants than available slots within the school. As a result, they adjusted their acceptance policy to include a system for "Drawing Lots". Under this system, the "most excellent" (top 10%) students according to their GPA are admitted first, the remainder of the available slots in the program are filled via a random selection among students who meet the program requirements. "By drawing lots, what I like about that is that we acknowledge that in a certain pool of suitable candidates

unintended bias. For example, the lack of women, especially non-European women on the staff means they are also less represented in committees. Secondly, the effects of pre and self-selection are broadly acknowledged. Students went through a certain education system that taught them different skills and can not be compensated. Certain language choices on websites are known to attract different groups of people, while others are discouraged. Thirdly, our interviewees recognized a push towards inclusive policies in general. Amongst universities, both Vrije Universiteit (VU) and Hogeschool van Amsterdam (HvA) were mentioned as more inclusive due to their more diverse student body regarding socio-economic background and ethnicity.

#### **Benefits of the Lucky Draw**

Many of our respondents held the opinion that a lucky draw is a "fair" form of selection. In contrast to other selection procedures, it does not reinforce the already existing inequalities between students. It is extremely transparent, and also eliminates the possibility of biases influencing the selection procedure, granting all suitable applicants the same chance.

A lucky draw may also help ensure certain student groups are no longer under-represented or over-represented within the university. A more balanced student body can help to improve social cohesion and team-working, preventing students from feeling isolated, and perhaps also leading to stronger personal development, since there would be more interchange of cultures and experiences.

Another benefit of a lucky draw may be a more streamlined application process, eliminating the need for excess

the selection would still give most of the students an equal chance of being selected, but now it would give marginalized groups a higher chance, making the selection process more inclusive.

Furthermore, the lucky draw system itself would not address some of the biases held by students and staff. Without providing proper explanation and training to reduce bias, not only will the lucky draw be strongly opposed, but those students who finally win the scholarship and enter the program might experience discrimination and other unforeseen difficulties as well.

According to drs. F. (Femke) ten Bloemendal (Faculty of Humanities Student administration) most program directors might not be in favor of the lucky draw. She feels that they are confident that they can make an objective decision (in terms of merit) with accuracy. She also recognizes that there is no such thing as "objective" in the selection process, there's always subjectivity.

### **Recommendations**

Without a doubt, the topic is highly contested, which will provide challenges for the future.

Some students thought it was unfair and would marginalize their efforts towards academic achievement. Other students thought it was extremely fair and removes biases that are inherent to any selection process. The staff also had differing opinions. Some believe the current selection processes are fair and equitable while others agreed we ought to be considering alternate forms of scholarship for university education. Our discussions reflected this contestation.

Despite those differences, some conclusions can be drawn and recommendations for future UvA policy on different levels, from small to big, can be made.

In general, a need for a UvA policy for selection was expressed. Danna Harmsen, (Office of International Student Affairs) told us: "It is essential to have a clear UvA policy regarding the students who should be selected and those for whom the selection should be made more inclusive. Once the policy is set, the specific criteria and tactics would be created, which would lead to the achievement of UvA's goals and greater inclusion of students." For this purpose, it is important that the university continues carrying on student surveys, including those after the application procedure.

We also recommend the introduction of scholarship committees which would evaluate the diversity of the intended student population and suggest the changes to the selection procedure, thus helping the university reach a balanced population target.

However, doubts were raised if a purely random selection process would really help to remove existing inequalities between students. This problem could be tackled on different levels.

On a very technical level, one solution would be entering the name of the student from the target group (e.g. first-generation students with financial need) multiple times in the draw. In this way, the selection would still give most of the students an equal chance of being selected, but now it would give marginalized groups a higher chance, making the selection process more inclusive,

which was one of the main reasons for introducing the new system.

Also, it may be quite easy and fairly practical to mix the lucky draw with other procedures in the current framework. After installing a threshold, for example, a GPA, a test, or a motivation letter, a lucky draw would allow decisions in cases when the field of candidates is very dense. At the same time, its drawbacks would be significantly reduced. In combination with, for example, a test, a lucky draw could be used between all students who passed. By first carrying out the test, known as UvA Matching, which is basically evaluating knowledge and competencies acquired in a short amount of time, Students would be able to prove that they are motivated to study or follow the summer/winter programme. UvA Matching is less likely to lead to the exclusion of marginalized groups because it just requires students to study certain material (either based on their study programme or even on the theory about intercultural competencies). At the same time, this combination would ensure students fulfill the necessary requirements to meet a predetermined threshold to participate in the program. It could also be combined with GPA and motivation letters.

Despite questions of practicality, a broader view seems to be necessary, especially when thinking about the further implementation of the lucky draw in other programs. On the one hand, the lucky draw should not be declared a threat to a meritocracy. Even with a lucky draw, there are still structural thresholds in place. Just to name a few: Former education, limits of the subject, language skills. On the other hand, the positive effects of the lucky draw should not be overestimated. There are still the previously mentioned thresholds, which hardly will be eliminated. Moreover, there are other ways to reach inclusion. Additional counsel for marginalized groups could be offered, texts could be written in a way, which does not discourage people from applying.



## Ambassador's Testimonial

*By Bright Asamoah*

It all started with one exciting email I received one afternoon stating, "congratulations, we are pleased to inform you that you've been awarded the Amsterdam Merit Scholarship". This was an exciting moment knowing that my tuition fee has been waived. From that moment I knew my journey to the Netherlands has just begun. One of the mountains to climb to study in Europe, as a non-EU, has been surmounted.

Fast forward, after completing visa and other administrative processes, I arrived in Amsterdam on one sunny morning. My first shock, the morning was sunny yet the breeze was unusually cold. How could there be so much sunlight and yet the weather is that cold? Interestingly, I found that the transportation system in Amsterdam was so much better compared to that back home. With the 9292 app, it did not take me much effort to find my way to my student hostel. My first week I termed as the 'novice week'. I barely knew anywhere. I had to rely on the internet for most information. Unlike back home, I realized bicycle was a very common means of transportation in Amsterdam, so I decided to buy one to help me move about. But this also meant that I had to heavily rely on google map to move from one location to the other. And I need to confess, I loved the bicycle tracks in Amsterdam. I wondered

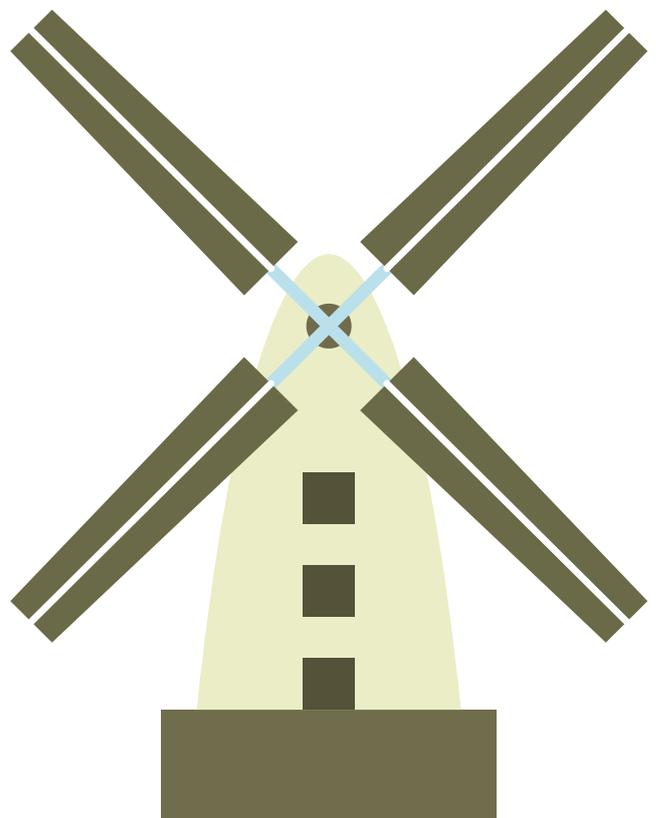


why we didn't have such a seamless transport system back home. And hey! lest I forget, the canals in Amsterdam are beautiful.

The experiences were not all that bliss, I found two things that made me a little bit concerned. Prices of goods and services were

quite expensive compared to prices back home. "Living in Amsterdam is going to be expensive", I said to myself. Also, I realized that the Dutch language was common and more popularly used in public and market places. But this wasn't that much a challenge. Most people switched to English as soon as they realized that I did not understand the Dutch language. It was about a week more for classes to begin, so I had to spend the next one week with my neighbors. All my neighbors on my floor in my apartment were also foreign students, most of them from other EU countries. We didn't have a Dutch resident neighbor so we spent most of the time together in the common area in our

apartment sharing our stories and experiences. I wish we had a Dutch neighbor who would have given us all the gist and tips about living in Amsterdam. But It did not take too long to have a Dutch friend. That was my first day in class. I was able to make some friends, some of whom were Dutch. I looked a little odd in class the first day. I looked around and I was the only black (African) student admitted to my study program. But after some days I met other African students on the UVA campus and made friends with them as well. I began to feel more comfortable, and more at home as I continued to make more friends week after week. The story continues....





# SOCIAL CONNECTIONS ABROAD

Studying abroad is not all about the studying, it is also an amazing way to make new social connections and get to know people from all kinds of different places! In this section, we look at 25 years of ESN (Erasmus Student Network) in Amsterdam. We also see, through Ambassador Isabella's story, how studying abroad can introduce you to all kinds of different people, perspectives and cultures.



*Celebrating*

**25** YEARS OF



Erasmus Student Network

## How the Erasmus Programme Can Change Your Life

Though the Erasmus Programme is now active in 42 European countries (and still growing!), the network was originally set up here, in the Netherlands, in 1987. The name 'Erasmus' is taken from the Dutch philosopher Desiderius Erasmus, a man who was a big believer in education, travel, and the fact that "Human affairs are so obscure and various that nothing can be clearly known."

What can be known, however, is the various fantastic wonders and achievements of the Erasmus programme over the past few years...



In the last 25 years, ESN has grown from 3,244 students to over 10 million people...



...And approximately 1 million babies have been born due to their parents meeting through Erasmus!

Since 2005, the Erasmus programme had also had an official seat in Brussels...

...as well as hosting language courses, Oktoberfest trips to Munich and Salsa dancing nights (and much, much more!)

## Forget Tinder, is ESN the Ultimate Matchmaker?

According to Keystone Bachelorstudies, over 27% of Erasmus students find long-term love whilst on exchange. Cultural Ambassadors Ellie Treasaí-Ní Aodh and Bright Asamoah interviewed one such couple, Michael and Krysia, to discover more about their Erasmus experience 6 years ago. Michael, from Belgium, and Krysia from Poland met whilst on a semester abroad in Germany.



*What was your motivation to go on exchange?*

**Michael:** The opportunity to have a semester without too much pressure for grades, time to relax and enjoy the experience. Also, the social aspect of getting to meet new people etc.

**Krysia:** Honestly there was a lot of social pressure to go. Studying architecture, it is somewhat expected to travel and see new places. Also, knowing you can meet so many new people. Prague in particular is cheap and the financial support afforded

independence from living at home with the parents. It was also a good opportunity to practice English.

*How much different did you feel doing Erasmus?*

**Michael:** For me, I decided that my life lead up to this semester: I told myself I would be the most social version of me. And it went really well, but I don't think I came back changed.

**Krysia:** He was more social on Erasmus than he is now in real life. For me, I realised even more that I am a social person who's very extroverted. I realised I got energy from talking to a lot of people.

“ I think of it like almost a kind of alternate reality

**Michael:** I think of it like almost a kind of alternate reality there. Like, I did some stupid stuff and got away with it. You can really get lucky. It really felt like a dream, like half a year where you can do whatever you want - which isn't true, it's still the real world.

**Krysia:** Yeah, I knew I was going there and I didn't have to think about it. Normally I would be thinking about work but it was nice to just go and not think about it.

*Do you have any advice for current or prospective exchange students?*

**Michael:** You should go alone, if you want to open your horizons to the fullest. Go with the mindset that you're open to everything.

**Krysia:** I would even say make sure you're there for the first week/orientation. The first week is like a month, the amount of people you meet. After a week you have this

“ You should go with the mindset that you're open to everything

impression you've known them super long. And I agree with Michael, you put yourself out there the most when there is nobody that knows you.

Not content with the feat of cross-cultural matchmaking, ESN has also begun a project called the 'Erasmus Love Lab'. Launched on Valentine's

Day of 2021, the Erasmus Love Lab aims to create a comfortable and open environment for research into intimate issues surrounding sex, love and relationships. So even if the people you meet, the trips you make, or the mindsets you've adopted don't change your life, then perhaps the research conducted here will!

ESN is a fantastic programme which aims to bring travel and education to everyone, not just the elites who could afford it in Desiderius Erasmus' time. Though COVID-19 is not yet over, celebrating ESN can inspire us for when we are free to explore the world again.

Leah Renz

## Ambassador's Testimonial

*By Isabella Molon*

Before coming to Amsterdam, everyone jokingly told me that I would feel at home living in a city that is built around canals like Venice, my home city. They were obviously wrong for many reasons.

When I came here i did not expect to feel as welcomed as I was, a hotpot of cultures condensed in place a that accepts you no matter your nationality, gender or sexual orientation. Coming from a city that is ethnically homogeneous and unfortunately still has a closed mindset, I was pleasantly surprised but a little afraid: it was the first time that I really came in contact and interacted with people completely different than me.

A lot of questions popped up in my head: am I really aware of racism and identity discrimination? What can I actively do to educate myself and contribute towards a more equal and kinder society? Being an international student is helping me find the answers to those question thanks to the amount of new people I am meeting. It may sound obvious to some, but finally experiencing on my own skin what it means

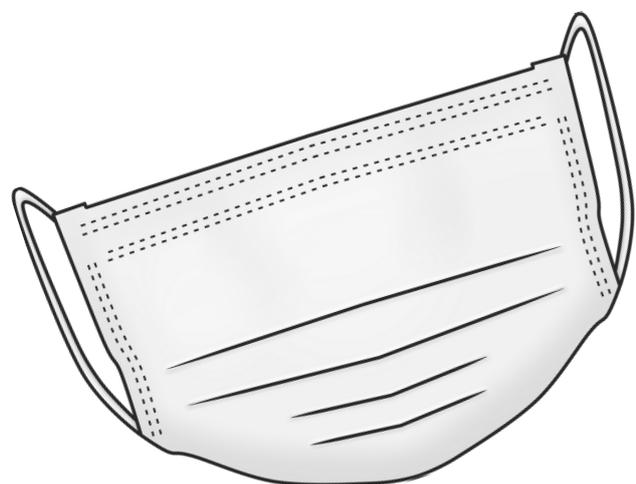


living in an international city brought to light many issues and topics I wasn't even thinking about while living in my small, old and secluded city. If people from my town experienced what I and other lucky students are experiencing, our canals wouldn't be the only beautiful things we have in common with Amsterdam.



# BACK TO NORMAL?

With student exchanges and all its social events and connections slowly coming back the way we were used to, it almost seems like COVID is no longer with us. However, international experiences such as student exchanges are not fully 'back to normal' yet. The article '*Diversity in pre-departure Perspectives*' shows how COVID anxiety and pre-departure enthusiasm combine into a complicated pre-departure preparation process for UvA students. On the other hand, our Ambassadors themselves highlighting the non-COVID related issues and difficulties they encountered, and how to prepare for these issues as well. Finally, ambassador Shuyang Liang reflects on cultural differences in dealing with COVID.



## Diversity in Pre-Departure Perspectives

*By Alexandra Franco, Linda Zöllner, Jingjing Liang, Anna Misz, Bedirhan Balioglu, Xiyan Chen and Kristina Kosovska*

Going abroad is, every year, a new and exciting prospect that keeps students in suspense, and the pre-departure meeting organized by Guido de Wilde and the International Office aims to creatively and interactively address such concerns. This year's topics included, among others, the theme of cultural integration, safety measures to take into consideration when traveling, and experiences of students already studying abroad here, in Amsterdam.

When asked about what motivates them to go on an exchange, students' answers are numerous and diverse, ranging from jokes, such as the desire to have a mini vacation or drink a lot of beer to serious academic considerations to the wish to improve themselves personally and professionally. For these reasons, during the meeting students showed exceptional interest and motivation to adapt to the culture of their host country, but are slightly less confident in their ability to do so. When asked, they reported that over the course of their preparations, almost all of them have received their acceptance letter from their host university, and some have already arranged or reserved their accommodation. Slightly more have arranged visa or immigration matters, although not all students need such considerations, as it was mentioned during the meeting with regard to students on exchange to other European countries. However, only a few students have booked their flights and are ready to go, which is no wonder, considering the

worsening state of the pandemic. Students strongly expressed their anxieties over the unfolding situation and their uncertainty over whether they can go on exchange at all. Under such conditions, they felt it was difficult to concentrate on cultural integration and diversity. However, it is not impossible to have a meaningful exchange during COVID, as current exchange students know well from their varied experiences and will demonstrate over the course of this article.

Throughout the pre-departure meeting, several Ambassadors from the Cultural Exchange program responded to some questions that may arise before and after going abroad.

Alexandra, a current master's student from Mexico, talked to the students about the most important things to arrange before going abroad. She recommended making a list of all the things you will require (such as a valid passport, a student VISA, finding a



place to live and arranging for insurance) and explained that it is essential to start organizing everything early on considering that many processes (e.g. student VISA) may take longer due to the pandemic. Regarding housing, most universities offer student housing that they can apply for and if not, looking for a place by yourself is always an option. Either way, it is important to inform yourself of the city's housing market, since some cities may have housing shortages. Alexandra told the students that even when you have arranged everything before leaving your hometown, it may happen that you forget something you didn't even anticipate once you arrive at your destination. For example, when she arrived in Amsterdam she couldn't charge her phone as she realized she had forgotten a plug adapter, as plug entries in the American continent are different. The important thing is to laugh about these things and to remember that there is always a solution.



Another Ambassador to tell her story was Xiyang, an exchange student majoring in finance from China. She shared some of her own experiences and thoughts on how to adapt to a new cultural environment. The key was to not only focus on the differences, but to try and understand habits of another culture, since it is a valuable part of the exchange. Xiyang shared an interesting story about herself. When she arrived in Amsterdam, she didn't really understand why Dutch people don't use umbrellas on sunny days or rainy days. She was used to sun protection. But after some observation and reflection, she understood that it may be because people want to enjoy the sun and it is inconvenient to ride a bike with an umbrella, especially on windy days. In the beginning she was worried that people would think it was weird for her to use an umbrella on the road. But then she tried something different and bought a waterproof jacket. Even though she still prefers an umbrella, she does not panic when it starts raining now.

Kristina, another student that shared her impressions on being abroad, discussed the difficulties international students usually come across. There are moments, where you are unsure how different cultures would react to a situation, what they find funny and what is totally unacceptable as a topic. The ultimate solution is to not feel embarrassed and ask for help. After all, we all learn from our mistakes. The hardest reason to adapt, however, was the school system in the Netherlands for Kristina. She struggled the most with the intensive workload that is differently allocated compared to her home university. Still, due to the interactive way professors at the UvA organize lectures,

students can actually receive direct feedback and focus on getting better. The point is, even if you feel overwhelmed with the assignments, try to stick to your schedule and heads up, there will always be someone who will lend you a hand when you need it the most!

It gets clear that everyone has a different going abroad story and that your own experience abroad will be unique - even if you face difficulties. These difficulties can differ from issues like cultural differences or practical concerns to problems that are out of your control. The current situation of the pandemic is extremely unfortunate and we all experienced the stress of our exchange getting canceled, so we feel extremely lucky that we can have this experience, which is not taken for granted. Not being able to take things into your own hands is not easy and it is frustrating to have no control over the situation. Still, it is important to stay positive



during these hard times and sooner or later, you will have an amazing going abroad experience that hopefully will fulfill your expectations.





## Ambassador's Testimonial

*By Shuyang Liang*

My name is Shuyang and I come from China. I currently study at UvA as an exchange student. My home university is very different from conventional Chinese universities and highly international because it is affiliated with the University of Nottingham in the UK. There I learn how to communicate with people from diverse cultural background in a multicultural environment for the first time. Then I chose to come to UvA as an exchange student. I have been here for only about twenty days and I have learned much more than I had expected. I participated in the intro-week activities and met with peers from all around the world. I am able to practice my communication skills in the interaction with my newly-made friends and during the process enhance my self-confidence. I also learnt more about the culture of socializing here in Europe (drinking and partying sometimes till late in night), which is very different from that in China. Therefore, this experience has also sharpened my cultural awareness in

exploring and accommodating cultural differences.

Before I came to Amsterdam, I had heard about its atmosphere of tolerance and freedom. But my understanding of this is only deepened after I have experienced it myself. For instance, a few days ago I ran into a massive demonstration in the city center where people protested against Covid measures. This came into stark contrast with an old couple I met at the entrance to the Van Gogh Museum where the old lady said to her partner, "where is your mask, double mask, okay?" Experiences like this made me constantly reflect upon the reasonable limits of tolerance and freedom. Which behaviour should be allowed and what are the consequences of this? How much freedom could one enjoy before another is hurt? These questions are not to be easily answered but only by reflecting upon them can we make the society more inclusive and equitable. These are what I have gained with this exchange experience.



# DIGITAL INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION

In the last couple of years, we have had to rely on digital tools more than ever before. Looking at the Digipass Staff Toolkit and Ambassador Therèse Koelé's digital international program, this final part of the Exchange Express shows how valuable such online tools can be for international study experiences.

# The Digipass Staff Toolkit: Supporting the staff working in student mobility

*By Elif Alkan, Preskal Tadrous, Matei Virsta, Andrei Calin Moroianu, Isabella Molon, Caterina Moro and Emily Raymond*

Have you ever heard about Digipass?

Digipass is “a virtual environment to support students and staff throughout each stage of their mobility lifecycle”. It is a multi-university partnership project made by the University of Edinburgh, University College Dublin, University of Amsterdam, University of Granada, The University of Pavia, and Jagiellonian University (here you can also find an [introduction video](#)).

It provides a Toolkit for staff working in student mobility, divided into four sections: Finance, Health and Wellbeing, Culture, Marketing Communication. Each section presents Best Practices, “How to...” page, Checklist, Useful Websites, and FAQ. In addition, each section has a specific page: Budget calculator for Finance section, Useful Apps for Health and Wellbeing, “Third space” page for Culture, Canva suggestions for Marketing Communication.

The sections are presented below, as they were presented via breakout room sessions during the Digipass International Staff Week (day 2 session, “Resources for Staff”) on 23rd November 2021.

In the Finance breakout room, information about financial stability and challenges, both for students and staff, were given. The main topic discussed was how, through Digipass, the finances of students doing mobility abroad could be better managed. The main solution to this problem was to inform as much as possible about the living costs of the country. Budgeting was also mentioned as



one of the most important actions to take when going abroad. In the Finance section of the Digipass page you can watch a very useful [video](#) of students sharing their experiences with their financial journey abroad, with tips and tricks on how to manage students’ money.

The Health and Wellbeing breakout group first session had a wide range of staff members interested in hearing how they could support students using Digipass. After introductions, there was a Jamboard brainstorming session about what the biggest challenges are for the health and wellbeing of students and staff.

The Toolkit also provided resources, methods, and help for staff assisting students with these various problems. Participants were given a few minutes to go through the Toolkit on their own and ask any questions or provide feedback afterwards.

What are the biggest challenges when it comes to the health and wellbeing of students and staff (especially those on mobility)?



Examples of responses are Covid, culture shock, finances, and homesickness.

As for the Culture breakout session, information was provided on how staff could help students develop intercultural competencies before starting their mobility. Time was given for staff to check the resources offered to them to achieve this goal. Digipass really offers a wide range of online resources, such as videos in which Experts offer innovative projects discussing different mechanisms to support students in the experience, a FAQ with all-important expected questions, a checklist with all important documents, and various websites on the matter. It was discussed on how the staff not only provide the students this material by just forwarding it to them but rather on how to actively make it interesting to them to actually use the offered service that can potentially help them. Especially the team responsible for the cultural preparations face the challenge of how to catch the student's intention and actually prepare them for such a serious matter, as students invest most of their preparation time into more perceived important matters, such as housing, visa, and courses issues. For this part of the experience, not only do students feel underprepared, and when they realize the shock really hits them hard, but also the staff feels underresourced, with very little ideas on how to actually help students.

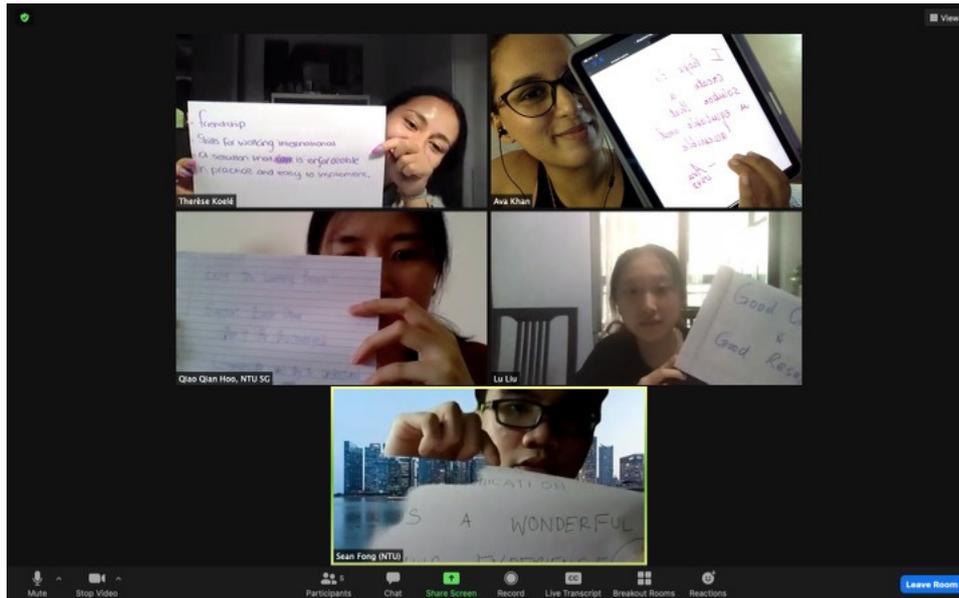
This transparency showed that staff also feel the need for them to receive this kind of help and therefore appreciate how much of an aid the Toolkit from Digipass could be.

Finally, there was a breakout session for the Marketing Communication sections. Staff had the time to explore the Toolkit and a discussion was held on how to improve the communication with students that would like to go on mobility abroad or are currently abroad. In particular, what was discussed were the biggest challenges that staff have to face and some solutions were proposed.

It emerged that sometimes even reaching students could be difficult - in this case it was proposed to also use a Telegram channel. Engaging students can be challenging and also provide them with clear communication - to improve these aspects, the Toolkit suggests to use Canva as a website to make nice and clear communication material.

What is your biggest challenge when it comes to promote your international mobility programmes? Do you think it is important to have a marketing strategy?





## Ambassador's Testimonial

*By Therèse Koelé*

I chose to study at the University of Amsterdam because of all the international possibilities they offer. When I began my studies in 2018, I knew I wanted to go on an exchange to Singapore. I began my second year and started the application process for a global exchange experience at the National University of Singapore. I was thrilled when I got the message that I was selected for this exchange in the beginning of my third year. Unfortunately, the joy did not last very long because a pandemic broke out. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic my exchange was deferred two times and eventually it was canceled.

I found this incredibly unfortunate, so I began looking for another opportunity to gain foreign experience despite the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. I found a summer school offered by the University of Amsterdam called INCiTE. The summer school took place in July 2021 and lasted for three weeks. It was a collaboration between The Netherlands, China, Singapore, Australia and the United Kingdom. For three weeks

long I was working in a team with people from Singapore, China and Australia to come up with a solution for a global health issue. Every day from 09:00 till 13:00 we were working on our project, got lectures and had social activities. It was nice and excited to meet people from other countries all over the world and work on a project together. Thereby I still had my abroad experience with Singapore.

In this little time of three weeks, I became really close with my teammates despite not able to see each other in person. I learned a lot about the culture and countries in Asia. During the summer school I learned in which way you can get the maximum of working in a cultural team, how to cope with different culture habits and how to combine all the great things that each culture can bring to the table. It was an amazing experience, working on a project together where in the meantime you will learn so much more than just working on a project, you will learn how to become a world citizen.