



UNIVERSITY OF AMSTERDAM

Equity,  
diversity and  
inclusion in  
student  
mobility



UvA Study Abroad

# Cultural Exchange Express

[www.uva.nl/ambassadors](http://www.uva.nl/ambassadors)

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# Introduction

Dear reader,

This edition of our semesterly Exchange express, which covers all things Exchange, features three interesting articles written and designed by our beloved Ambassadors. **DIGIPASS** is an exciting Project, the multi-university partnership initiative is designed to improve the impact of mobility experiences for students and expected to be launched in the Fall semester of 21-22. The ambassadors got a preview and reviewed the project whilst in its final stages of development. Contrary to Digipass, **The new Erasmus charter** has already been published, putting strong focus on social inclusion, the green and digital transitions, and promotion of young people's democratic participation. All details you'd possibly want to know are brought together in an interesting overview. Also, on the topic of inclusion, the introduction of the **student disability platform**, provides an examination of the goals, ambitions, and visibility of the UvA's representing body for people with disabilities.

Other than these ambassador' constructed articles, this semester's Express looks at the initial decision of the UvA's board of commissionersto cancel the exchanges for the 2021-2022 fall term. In virtual conversation with affected students, Tineke Wiering, managed to take stock of the attendees' interests and produce a strong and condensed **article that echo's the disappointment** felt by a significant portion of the UvA's student population. Though eventually not relevant anymore, because of the amendment that was later published, we felt that it was important to provide insight in the heartfelt frustration among our students about not only the cancelation decision but also the process leading towards it. Since exchanges, both physical and of thoughts, are above all, interesting and stimulating experiences with an unprecedented potential for growth, a page dedicated to **the top scoring posts** on our social outlets, couldn't miss out. Last Semester's EDI-festival proved an enormous success. UvA-ambassador Dila and Birmingham-Ambassador Kamil **reflect upon hosting a webinar, about inclusive cities**, which kicked off of the series revolving around the celebration of equity, diversity and inclusion, founded to honor the unique identities of the UK's second largest metropolis and the Dutch Capital and emphasizing the special relationship between the city's institutions. **The genuine reports** of a select number of our Ambassadors make for a nice and touching end of both the Express and the current academic year of international mobility, or the saddening lack thereof.

Let's hope that next year's editions are set in a less harsh reality that allows for continuation of our core practice of facilitating adventure, growth, and wonder.

Have fun reading!

The Ambassadors

# DIGIPASS

A VIRTUAL ENVIRONMENT TO SUPPORT STUDENTS  
AND STAFF THROUGHOUT EACH STAGE OF THE  
MOBILITY LIFECYCLE

Written by Nicole



## ABOUT DIGIPASS

### *Project Description*

DIGIPASS is a multi-university partnership project designed to improve the impact of mobility experiences for students. The six institutions that are part of the project are the University of Edinburgh, University College Dublin, University of Amsterdam, University of Granada, the University of Pavia and Jagiellonian University. The project provides a virtual environment to support students and staff throughout each stage of the mobility lifecycle and is co-funded by the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union.

DIGIPASS will offer a unique online student training programme, including online tools and open educational resources, which will support students during each stage of the mobility life cycle: orientation, pre-departure, during and after mobility.

Furthermore, webinars and a staff toolkit will be developed in order to support both academic and administrative staff working in the area of mobility.

The project will provide students with the opportunity to engage with mobility through additional customised support, including students from underrepresented communities as well as students with special need requirements. Furthermore, DIGIPASS has the goal to enhance students' employability prospects through reflective learning based on mobility experience.



Co-funded by the  
Erasmus+ Programme  
of the European Union

# DIGIPASS CAPSULES

As the core of Digipass is the Student Mobility Lifecycle, the project concerns issues areas that students will encounter while abroad. **Health & Wellbeing** and **Cultural Awareness** are two examples. Based on these topics, two capsules have been developed in order to help and educate students regarding these areas. The capsules contain theoretical and practical work and emphasize self-reflection as each personal experience differs from others.



*The DIGIPASS module about health & wellbeing helps you, among others, with mental health while abroad.*



*Going somewhere you have never been before?  
The DIGIPASS module about cultural awareness prepares you for cultural differences.*

# CULTURAL AWARENESS

Rosa

*"IMAGINE GOING TO ANOTHER CONTINENT, SOMEWHERE YOU HAVE NEVER BEEN BEFORE, AND INSTEAD OF GOING THERE JUST FOR A SHORTER AMOUNT OF TIME, YOU WILL HAVE TO LIVE THERE, SUDDENLY BECOMING AWARE OF ALL THE CULTURAL DIFFERENCES."*

**IF YOU WANT TO PREPARE YOURSELF FOR THIS, PLEASE CONSIDER PARTICIPATING IN THE DIGIPASS CULTURAL AWARENESS MODULE.**

## **The cultural awareness module**

In the cultural awareness module, which only takes you a total amount of five hours to finish, you will start thinking and learning about your new (cultural) environment. The module is designed to take in the orientation phase and is designed to make you aware of cultural and linguistic differences between you and your future temporary new home. The course will help students to explore the process of cultural adjustment and develop their intercultural intelligence. This intercultural intelligence refers to your ability to detect cultural rules and adjust to these rules to function fully in these new intercultural situations. The course ultimately promises you that after fulfilling the module you will be able to deal with cultural differences, increase your knowledge on cultural dimensions, reduce stereotyping, and last but not least: it will help you to choose or prepare for a specific study abroad destination.

"We may have different religions, different languages, different colored skin, but we all belong to one human race"

## **Making up the balance: does the module do what it promises to do?**

First of all, I do believe that every aspect that helps you as a person to become more aware of yourself or your surroundings, is a good thing. And indeed the cultural awareness module helps you to do this! Nevertheless, the module sometimes has a bit of an inconvenient structure and is not always fully able to motivate you. It is hard to find the motivation to complete a quite intense course, at the moment that you are not even sure if you will be able to study abroad, and if so, where you will be going to. However, even if you are still unsure of this, the module is fun to participate in. It has a nice balance of activating assignments and educational parts. In a short amount of time, you will learn a lot about your own (indirect) perceptions and those of others.

# Not to forget: Mental Health

*Dewi*

NOT ONLY CULTURAL AWARENESS IS IMPORTANT DURING YOUR STAY ABROAD, ALSO YOUR MENTAL HEALTH IS AN ISSUE THAT YOU SHOULD CONSIDER PAYING ATTENTION TO. GOING ON AN EXCHANGE, ALL BY YOURSELF, IS SOMETHING VERY EXCITING, BUT ALSO SOMETHING THAT MIGHT BE SCARY AND LONELY AT TIMES. LUCKY, YOU ARE NOT ALONE AND THERE ARE A LOT OF PEOPLE THAT ARE ABLE TO HELP YOU OUT. THE DIGIPASS MODULE ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH PROVIDES TOOLS TO HELP YOU ALONG REGARDING YOUR MENTAL HEALTH ABROAD.

***'THERE ARE A LOT OF PEOPLE THAT ARE ABLE TO HELP YOU OUT'***

JUST LIKE THE PREVIOUS MODULE, THIS MODULE TAKES A COUPLE OF HOURS TO FINISH. YOU WILL BE INTRODUCED TO PRACTICAL ISSUES REGARDING MENTAL HEALTH, LIKE WHO AND WHERE TO GO WHEN FEELING LIKE TALKING TO SOMEONE ABOUT YOUR MENTAL HEALTH. BUT ALSO HOW TO STAY WELL DURING YOUR STAY, LIKE TAKING UP SPORTS AND PREPARING TO MEET PEOPLE. YOU WILL BE ASKED ABOUT YOUR SOCIAL PITFALLS AND HOW TO OVERCOME THEM.

AT THE END OF THE MODULE YOU ARE ASKED TO PREPARE YOUR AGENDA FIRST THE FIRST WEEK. TO MAKE THE MOST OF THIS MODULE, YOU CAN SEEK OUT ALL THE THINGS THEY ADVISE YOU TO, AND MAKE PLANS FOR YOUR FIRST WEEK'S STAY. THIS WAY, YOU KNOW WHAT YOU ARE ABLE TO DO AND WHAT IS OUT THERE, SO YOU DON'T MISS ANYTHING THAT YOU MIGHT HAVE LIKED TO PARTICIPATE IN.

***'THE DIGIPASS MODULE ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH PROVIDES TOOLS TO HELP YOU ALONG REGARDING YOUR MENTAL HEALTH ABROAD'***

# #ItsNotTooLateToReverseYourDecision

On April 22, the University of Amsterdam announced they were cancelling all exchanges in the first semester of the new academic year due to the continuing uncertainty of the pandemic. This decision was made now, opposed to in a few months' time, to allow students to change their plans and sign up for classes. The university is justified in its decision as they remain responsible for all exchange students.

However, many of the students who were supposed to go on exchange disagree. Especially now, as the current situation begins to improve, many students are angered by the decision to cancel everything. The cancellation announcement was followed up by the announcement that the university expects to return to classes on location next September. Understandably, these two announcements seem to contradict each other since places such as Australia or New York are handling COVID-19 better than the Netherlands. In our eyes, there is no more risk to study abroad (in most countries) than studying in Amsterdam.

The students that we talked to, feel that the UvA's Executive Board made their decision too abruptly and that they did not consider all options. Instead, they immediately pulled all applications from the host universities, making it nearly impossible to reverse their decision. On top of that, they also did not listen or interact with any of the students involved. These students were more than willing to sign responsibility waivers and do whatever necessary to go on a safe exchange. Most importantly, they want to be heard and given the opportunity to go on exchange at their own risk.

We, the exchange ambassadors, know the effort, hard work and joy that goes into the preparation of studying abroad, and we cannot imagine a more heartbreaking scenario. We hope that everyone will get the chance to safely study abroad and have the experience of a lifetime.

**\*\*Update:** Fortunately, the UvA has decided to reverse their decision, and the Office of International Student Affairs is working hard to send students abroad. We decided against changing the message above as we believe it is essential for the UvA to reflect on their mistakes, especially as not everybody may be able to study abroad as a result.

Written by Tineke Wiering



# New & Improved Erasmus Programme

Sieuwert Kiewiet de Jonge & Kasper Moes

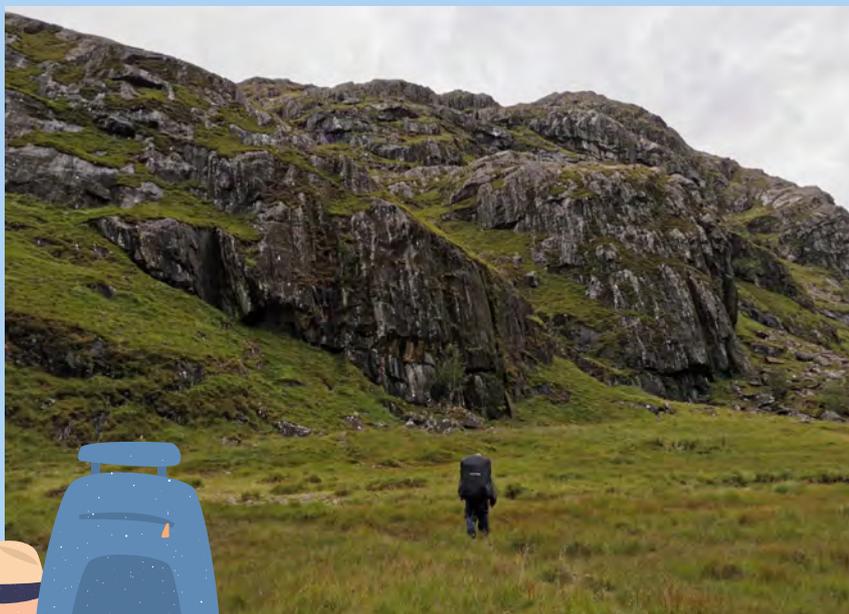
## ENRICHING LIVES, OPENING MINDS

That's what the Erasmus Programme (Erasmus+) is set out to achieve. And it has succeeded in this for over 35 years. Simply put, Erasmus+ enables students, faculty and staff to spend time at other European universities as part of their studies and work. For this article, we talked to both sides of the story: on the one hand students partaking on an exchange adventure, and UvA Erasmus office officials on the other hand. Specifically, we were curious about their views and experiences from right before the actual exchange, and what is relevant in the phase after their return.

This article gives you, passionate and studious goal-getters, a peek behind the curtains of Erasmus+ and first hand experiences of students who walked this path before you. In particular, this article shares insights on two phases: before- and after going on exchange (before/after mobility). From both students' and Erasmus office officials' perspectives. Read on for interesting insights that could help you in deciding on your student exchange adventure!

## BACKSTORY

Before diving into the specifics, some context. Are you a student in Europe and do you plan on going on exchange at some point during your studies? Big chance you'll get involved with Erasmus+. The programme, EU funded, is a grant that makes it financially possible for students to complete part of their studies at another university. Whereas initially it facilitated inter-European exchanges, the programme's reach today extends further than Europe alone. People from all over the world can access her opportunities. The guidelines for the programme are laid down in the European Commission's Erasmus Charter for Higher Education (the Charter). It is updated every 7 years and this year marks the start for the newly revised provisions (2021-2027). This time the programme puts a strong focus on social inclusion, the green and digital transitions, and promoting young people's participation in democratic life. All this in the context of conducting an exchange period abroad.



Matthieu conquering the Scottish hills

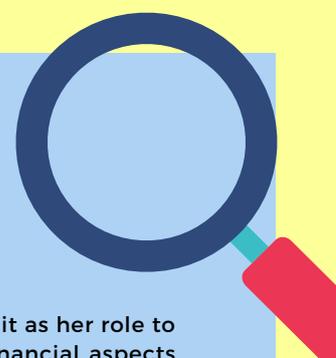


What's your next destination?

## THEMES OF THE NEW CHARTER

In order to gain first-hand information on the intentions and effects of the Charter, we talked to Carine de Wilde, currently the Institutional Erasmus & Financial Aid Coordinator at the UvA. In the 15 years that she has been working on the harmonization of the UvA's exchange services with the Programme, she has seen the possibilities under the Charter grow. Not only in terms of time spent abroad or countries to be visited, but also in regards to types of students (from Bachelor- to PhD students). All this is in line with ongoing efforts to make the Programme as inclusive as possible.

Apart from **inclusivity**, **sustainable mobility** has been a main point of attention. How can we decrease our environmental footprint while enabling more students to go on exchange? These matters are being pressed top-down from the European Commission to all member Universities and a lot of emphasis is put on best practices undertaken by students themselves during their exchange.



## UVA ERASMUS OFFICE INSIGHTS

### BEFORE MOBILITY



Camille (left) exploring Aix-en-Provence, France

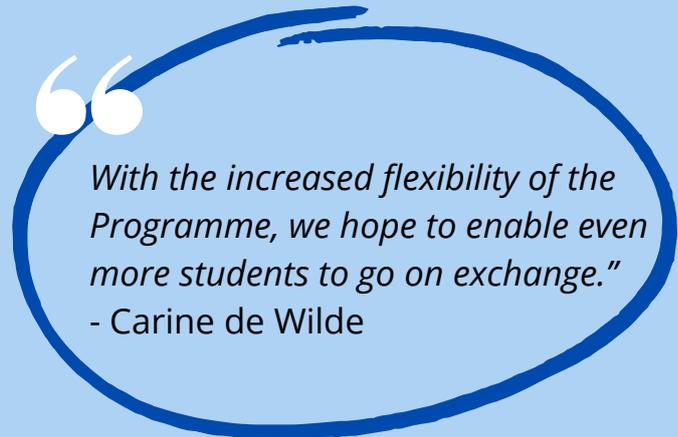
The UvA, under the current Charter sees it as her role to timely inform the students about the financial aspects of going on exchange. While Erasmus+ provides grants to students, this will not cover all the costs. However, the increased fluidity of Erasmus+ is geared towards lowering this financial threshold so that more students can experience a study abroad. If you think you're not eligible for an exchange due to financial reasons, get in touch with the UvA Erasmus Office. Let's explore the possibilities together!

In upcoming years, the application process will be made easier: there are talks about creating a centralised digital platform on which students can effortlessly track the proceedings of their application and review all documents involved. This platform, called **Digipass**, will also provide modules on cultural education as a way of making the prospective exchange students aware of the norms and values in their country of exchange. This preparation, whether done by the students themselves or with guidance from the UvA will ensure students get the most out of their adventures abroad.

### AFTER MOBILITY

Close communications between the student and the university is as important upon returning from your studies abroad as it is before your exchange. In previous editions of Erasmus+, this has been a somewhat neglected aspect. During your time abroad you undergo life changing adventures, all in a relatively short period of time.

Meanwhile back at home, things carry on as they did before you left. Upon your return, you will have endless stories to tell. In upcoming years, all parties involved in the Erasmus programme seek to further open the floor to discussions and the sharing of insights when it comes to the implementation of the programme. In this pursuit, student feedback will be even further applauded in which their input will be evaluated and taken along in future decision-making in the programme. Collaboration is key, amongst the institutions involved, but also increasingly with student communities. Together, we can continue to improve the programme.



*“With the increased flexibility of the Programme, we hope to enable even more students to go on exchange.”*  
- Carine de Wilde

### ALL ERASMUS+ COUNTRIES

As mentioned before, Erasmus+ continues to expand year by year, not only in terms of the provisions laid down in the Charter, but also in terms of eligible partner and programme countries you can choose to go to. At present (June 2021) these countries are:

#### EU member states

Belgium, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Denmark, Germany, Estonia, Ireland, Greece, Spain, France, Croatia, Italy, Cyprus, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Hungary, Malta, Netherlands, Austria, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, Slovakia, Finland, Sweden

#### Non-EU member states

Republic of North Macedonia, Serbia, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway, Turkey



## STUDENT INSIGHTS

### BEFORE MOBILITY



Maartje at her host university in Segovia, Spain.

A great aspect of the Erasmus programme is that students will receive a grant which definitely has an influence on participating in the programme, according to Matthieu and Sieuwert. They were considering to live abroad and even though they thought about living outside of Europe, for a brief moment, they both decided to stay in Europe and the grant they received guided this decision, at least to some extent. It's not as if they wouldn't participate if they didn't receive the grant, but it sure makes things a lot easier. Since all students receives this grant, the programme could be considered to be inclusive.

According to Matthieu, there is room for improvement. Currently a student receives 70% of the grant during the exchange and 30% upon completion of the exchange (with some requirements). However, the programme could be more inclusive if this 30% could be received during the exchange as well. Some students might depend on this financial aid more than others but there should be possibility to give the structure of the grant a touch more inclusivity.

With the hands-on experience from 2 students that participated in the Erasmus+ exchange, we hope to provide you with some valuable insights. This might prove useful to you! Even though Europe can be considered to be quite similar across countries on several aspects, there are still many cultural differences that lead to very diverse exchange experiences. For example, the experience of Matthieu, was very different from that of Sieuwert. We are talking about an exchange in Scotland versus Milan, respectively. One can perhaps imagine the differences, for example, the food culture of both places are at opposite ends of the spectrum. On the other hand, the student life can be comparable because we all know what students do on the weekends...

However, because of the charter for the Erasmus+ programme, there are some similarities regarding the procedures a student needs to go through in order to actually partake in an exchange. Generally, most students will say the exchange was an awesome time but that preparing the documentation before leaving can be quite laborious. In the experience of Matthieu and Sieuwert, you have to actively organize and arrange your documents without having a clear picture of when you have satisfied all requirements. Could this perhaps be solved by improving the platform through which students upload their documents?



Matthieu in Scotland

Rome

Roeter's Island

Istanbul

Your Dirty Dishes



Sieuwert at a music festival in Milan

It is worth mentioning that there is always room for improvement. The Erasmus Charter is revised and updated every 7 years in order to improve the program. But as far as Matthieu and Sieuwert can remember, they were not actively asked for feedback when they finished their exchange. Some vague memory about a questionnaire came to mind when they were asked about their experiences. Does this mean that the Erasmus organization doesn't receive any feedback? Probably not. However, the two would have liked the possibility to meet with other students that came back in order to share their stories.

A similar meeting/session like the one they had before leaving. This relates to the reverse culture shock mentioned earlier: who better to share your stories with than with people that went on an exchange as well? Such a meeting shouldn't be a big issue to organize right? Additionally, a feedback form or a digital platform to share your thoughts on improvement could be established as well. For those students that might have valuable insights regarding the improvement of the program. Giving all students the proper opportunity to share their experience could be a focus point in the future programme.



## STUDENT INSIGHTS

### AFTER MOBILITY

A common feeling of exchange students when they come back home from their exchange is that they have to get used to their own environment. That place called home suddenly might feel a bit strange because for some students it could be hard to share their experience with friends who haven't been on an exchange. This is believed to be only natural and being aware of this reverse 'culture shock' means that you now know what it means to have lived abroad. This is not to say that going on an exchange is only for those who are able to cope with these differences! In fact, everyone is able to participate in the Erasmus program and those that are willing to take the challenge will develop themselves in such a deep way. This makes the exchange really valuable.

Of course, there are people that are not as conscious about their self-development, and perhaps for those kind of students the experience could be more challenging. Therefore, if you are aware of the opportunities of self-development: then by all means, go on an exchange!

### FUN FACT:

Former Erasmus students are more likely to have transnational relationships. 33% of former Erasmus students have a partner of a different nationality, compared to 13% of students who stay home during their studies. Source: [www.trainingexperience.org](http://www.trainingexperience.org)



The Duomo in Milan

## ERASMUS 2021 AND BEYOND

In this Summer's edition of the Exchange Express, we cannot avoid dealing with the elephant in the room: the cancellation of all student exchanges for upcoming semester, be it under Erasmus+ or through a global exchange. After opening discussions with the affected students, the university's Executive Board has decided to revise this decision. In the upcoming period, the UvA will work hard to make a physical exchange possible for in- and outbound students during semester 1. This decision is not entirely up to the UvA alone, and agreements must be made with partner universities to explore what the possibilities are, if any. While the matter isn't entirely in our hands alone, which makes this so complex, it is now top priority of all UvA's international offices to see what can be done. These are unprecedented times and the health and safety of us and those around us are paramount. COVID-19 is still among us and we must take all precautionary measures to prevent further break outs. Even in the worst case scenario, please do not let go of your goals and ambitions of going on exchange. Instead, postpone these until times when we as global citizens have taken control of the pandemic. All students involved will of course be kept posted on any proceedings regarding the semester 1 exchange. We won't make promises we can't keep, but we do promise to leave no stone unturned in this endeavour.

If anything, your time spent at home could be of a reflective character. Reflect on the academic path you took, and what steps are needed to get to where you see yourself in the future. Which courses could you take at another university that would help you become the person you want to be? Just imagine how it would be for you when preparation and opportunity meet. Simultaneously, we won't be sitting still ourselves. While we hold our hearts for the countries far worse off than ours, we will continue to make Erasmus+ more inclusive, sustainable and enriching as ever before. This will go hand-in-hand with efforts towards digital- and green transitions.

Since the establishment back in 1987, the programme has come a long way. But there are still steps to take. And that is where you, the student, come in. With your input, we can continue to make the programme more inclusive for people with fewer opportunities, and more sustainable to our planet. The amount of knowledge that is gained by going on exchange through Erasmus+ is immensely valuable. Not only to yourself, but for the improvement of the programme and enjoyment of future exchange students. Let's shape Erasmus+ 2021-2027 with students, for students!

## FURTHER INFORMATION

For Erasmus+ 2021-2027 in a nutshell, please see: <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/ff1edfd8bca11eb-b85c-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>.

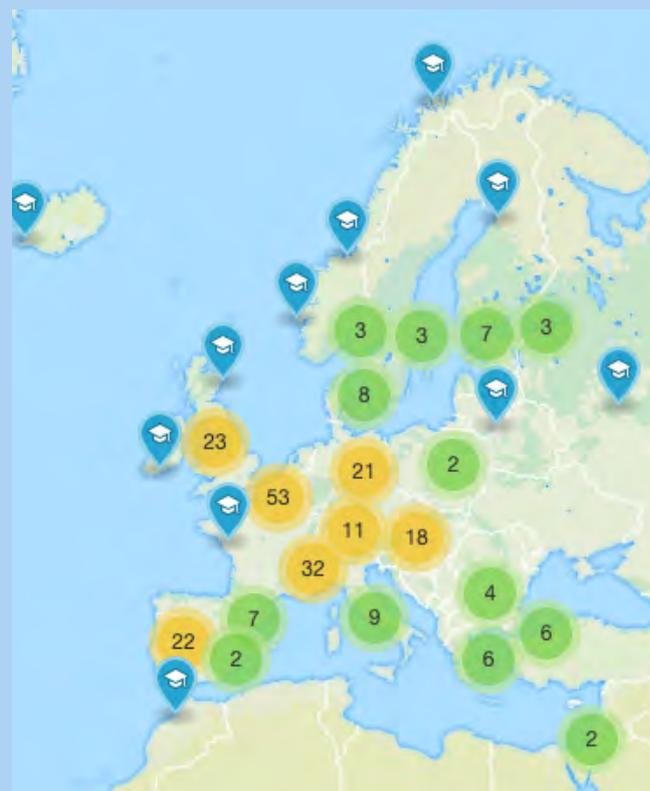
For a more general knowledge source, please see: <https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/>

For programme updates related to the coronavirus: [https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/resources/coronavirus-impact\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/resources/coronavirus-impact_en).



The view of Verona

**Below:** a map showcasing all universities involved with Erasmus+ (please disregard Morocco and Israel). The numbers indicate the amount of universities within a particular region. The graduation hats indicate there is only one university in that region.



# Selection of popular social media posts

Provided by our UvA Global Changemakers!



uvaglobal

uvaglobal Going on a student exchange doesn't just bring you countless unforgettable memories and enriches your views on your place in the world. It teaches you how differences can create bridges. It's a unique setting in which you can learn from each other's cultures. Because equality and inclusion start with understanding!

11w

Liked by willv96 and 59 others

MARCH 21

Add a comment...



uvaexchange

uvaexchange Hello! My name is Lois and I went on exchange to the University of Copenhagen 🇩🇰.

During my exchange I booked a trip with some friends to a Danish Island, called Bornholm. We rented a car and took a ferry to the Island. We were one of the only tourists and it was so cool to interact with the locals. We saw some beautiful landscapes and enjoyed the local cuisine. I had the best freshly smoked salmon ever!

I think it's really important to take some time to travel during your exchange. I remember that I just met some people and we were already planning our first trip. Everyone wanted to explore Denmark and its

Liked by willv96 and 44 others

MARCH 3

Add a comment...



uvaglobal

uvaglobal Every moment during your experience abroad will contribute to your personal growth. Whether you're going abroad for six months or four years, you'll develop the confidence that comes with independence, problem solving, and the capability to succeed in an international setting. You'll learn how another culture faces daily life: new food, new ways of being, and

Liked by hugo.botman and 56 others

APRIL 7

Add a comment...

# ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE STUDENT DISABILITY PLATFORM

This article is based upon an interview that we conducted with Maurits, history student and ambassador at the UvA's Student Disability Platform. Maurits acts as the platform's representative and talks about the struggles and future of both accessibility in general and the platform in particular.



We talked with Maurits about the role of the platform which mainly serves as a signaling body. Whenever there is a complaint or something, people turn to the platform. In a way, the SDP functions as the eyes and ears of lived experiences and report back to the student counselors what is going on at the forefront. This is really valuable.

One of the struggles when it comes to accessibility is the wide range of disabilities, be it visible or not. Maurits, who uses a wheelchair, jokingly notes that he is the literal representation of disabilities, yet, he also recognizes the invisibility of other disabilities. Think about mental illness, neurodiversity or other disabilities that cannot be seen. This divide between disabilities can be difficult to navigate especially as everybody has a different experience studying with their respective disabilities. As for Maurits's personal experience; he explains that the hardest part of studying with a disability isn't necessarily the actual matter of accessibility, which is arranged and solved via the University of Amsterdam, but rather the social dimension that comes along with studying. Because of his wheelchair and his reliance on a taxi service socializing can be difficult at times, Maurits often struggles when his classmates and peers go out for a drink after class.

The first generation of the student disability platform primarily focused on policy within the UvA. Student outreach, while important of course, was not the platform's top priority. But this is about to change. Maurits enthusiastically shares with us the platform's plans on implementing changes. The building of a student community through the Peer-to-Peer initiative is one of these changes

*“Mirroring the exact same experience of being disabled is not possible, but organizing fun activities and letting people experience ‘what it is like’ comes close to understanding it.”*

This initiative is all about connecting students both with and without disabilities to help each other out. Specifically, among students with varying disabilities, the Peer-to-Peer initiative has the potential to be extremely empowering and inclusive. For it helps to create a social platform and facilitates mutual understanding. Another concept that the student disability platform is considering, is organizing a small activity during the introduction week. Aside from being present at one of the bigger events, the platform aims at organizing fun activities and hopes to enable people to experience what 'it is like to have a certain disability'. Maurits: "whilst mirroring the exact same experience of being disabled is of course impossible, simulating some experiences might bring people closer to a form of understanding." Besides, activities like the "what's it like"-experience create a space where participants can interact with people who are, for example, in a wheelchair or blind.

One thing to be mindful about is that the platform is still in its early stages, yet has been making progress rapidly. In fact, currently at its second generation, the platform is already in the process of reshaping and redefining itself. This imperative even stretches to the very name and logo of the platform. Seeing that the term 'disability' is undergoing revisions, we asked Maurits to reflect on 'diffability' (differently abled) , an alternative term, of which the usage has been growing.

*Maurits: Well, my personal take on the term is that it is not the right way forward, because it cloaks the meaningful differences in between the ability that people have and downplays the role that disability has as a constituent part of someone's identity by suggesting that everyone is different. When using this or similar terms, one needs to consider that while promoting empowerment (which is a progressive thing), they might be unintentionally pushing for a certain narrative regarding how one ought to define and experience their disability. I would suggest a more social model that does not view disability as something an individual must overcome, but instead opts to look at it as a challenge for society. However, I must emphasize that this is my opinion on the matter, and other people with disability might find it inspiring. I would advise you to talk to people who have lived the experience of being disabled prior to using the label of 'differently abled'.*

***“I would suggest a more social name that does not view disability as something an individual must overcome, but instead opts to look at it as a challenge for society.”***

Last but not least, we asked Maurits if the platform plays a role in the exchanges of students. He explains that there are many similar student platforms across various countries. For example, recently the platform was in touch with a counterpart-organization from Luxembourg. The people there asked whether it was possible to study with a disability at the University of Amsterdam. These sorts of questions are often handled by the student counselors. But Maurits tells us that he offers to talk with students to exchange experiences and explain how things are structured for students who are willing to study at the University and who have a disability. The platform is happy to connect exchange students with students with a disability and Maurits says that it would be nice to create an international network for students with a disability. Besides, it might be good to look at and learn from other Universities to see how they go about creating a more inclusive and accessible studying experience.

And with this we conclude our short article about the student disability platform. We were very excited to be able to talk with Maurits about the platform and hope to see more of them in the near future.

# Reflections on Intersections of Cities: Amsterdam meets Birmingham



Dila Gormus and Kamil Rog, student ambassadors from UvA and UoB, reflect on the joint EDI Festival exploring broader conversations about fostering a more inclusive and cohesive community in our diverse cities.

The Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) Festival is an annual celebration of the aspects of Amsterdam and Birmingham that make both our Universities and cities great places to be. Student ambassadors of each University collaborate to share knowledge, experience, and best practice across our international communities through the partnership.

Our student ambassadors supported and co-developed four webinars in this year's first-ever virtual festival, which centered on the theme of *Intersections of Cities: Amsterdam meets Birmingham*. You can access the recordings of the webinar series via the EDI celebratory website<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [Virtual EDI Festival 2021 - University of Amsterdam \(uva.nl\)](https://www.uva.nl/en/virtual-edi-festival-2021).<sup>1</sup>

## Personal reflections of 'Embedding EDI' from Dila, University of Amsterdam



I am Dila, 20 years old and a second-year Communication Science student at the University of Amsterdam. When I first heard about the opportunity of joining the Cultural Exchange Ambassador Programme, it immediately sparked my interest as there is a big focus on celebrating cultural diversity, promoting equal access to study abroad and stimulating students to engage with their student community, all of which I am very passionate about.

As a Global Changemaker, I got the chance to host the '*Visualising the Diversity of Amsterdam and Birmingham*' EDI Festival webinar. Even though I have often spoken in public for school-related events, this was a very different experience as it was fully virtual due to

COVID-19 and had an international audience. The webinar series was great as everyone was actively participating and sending in questions, which led to very interesting discussions and insights of Anne de Graaf and Jo Duberley, the strategic equality leads of both universities and our guest speakers of the finale webinar.

One beautiful quote that stuck with me is: *“diversity itself is critical to education because part of education is getting to understand different perspectives, that people come from different backgrounds and have different views”*. This sentence perfectly represents the theme of the webinar series. I think all in all this was an amazing way to connect with students and staff from the Universities of Amsterdam and Birmingham and also very innovative: hosting a webinar with students and staff of another university in a different country is the newest modality of study abroad!

## Personal reflections of 'Inclusive Cities' from Kamil, University of Birmingham



As an Urban Planning student, I jumped at the opportunity to co-host the '*Inclusive Cities*' webinar, which combined a broad panel of academics and governance stakeholders to understand how the fabric of our two cities brings people together. My career ambitions to create urban spaces which benefit all people as an urban planner.

Cities like Birmingham and Amsterdam are melting pots of different cultures, enabling people of all backgrounds to share physical space. The interactions between city residents are essential for acknowledging identities different to our own and the subsequent awareness of existing within something more significant than our independent selves. Dr Justin Varney of Birmingham City Council acknowledged that creating inclusive communities is both "a science and an art", requiring a combination of supportive

infrastructure provided through decision-making and the presence of community voices that celebrate the differences that make cities unique.

Simion Blom from Amsterdam's Green Party (GroenLinks) evoked the importance of comparing national perspectives. Simion's visit to Liverpool's International Slavery Museum highlighted an apparent openness in the UK to disseminate understanding of the issues of colonialism amongst the public, an approach which could support the Netherlands in addressing its on-going political tensions.

## TESTIMONIAL TIME

Each year, we ask our Ambassadors to write a short testimonial. These students have recently enjoyed, or are in the middle of, an exchanges experience and, as the executive body, facilitating all forms of exchange, our Bureau is very curious about the Ambassador's take on the value of intercultural cooperation and practices.

Rather than telling them what to write about, we give our ambassadors the license to freely shape their own stories. We do ask one thing however, namely, to remain true to one's own unique experiences. Sometimes this means to not shy away from the negative incidents that will inescapably be part of most journeys.

For just like the rest of life, exchange experiences too, contain not so desirable situations, loneliness, practical struggles, language barriers, and more. However, overcoming hurdles and dealing with difficulties conveys an innate empowering quality that helps one to learn and grow in life.

The following three honest stories are touching in their vulnerability but show that an exchange experience will almost always be defined by the positive things rather than by what, at the time, might have been perceived as failing.

All three reports make us truly proud of the perseverance and flexibility shown by the students that we receive or send to our partner universities and they help reinvigorating the desire to keep on facilitating dreams.

The Bureau of International Student Affairs

# Exchange Student Testimonial: Copenhagen

Lois van der Kroft

Bachelor Communication Science at UvA

Exchange to University of Copenhagen, MA Film and Media Studies



## Exchange to Copenhagen

Before my exchange to Copenhagen, I had never been to Scandinavia. I was not sure what it would be like, but my mom convinced that I would love it. She was absolutely right. Copenhagen felt like coming home. The climate might not be the sunniest, but I'm used to that here in Amsterdam. However, it is a beautiful city with lovely people and amazing food. During my daily walks I was amazed by all the beautiful buildings around me. I never knew I could love a city this much.

## Learning a lot in a small amount of time

Even though I followed some courses in Copenhagen, I think I learned the most outside the University. My exchange taught me about becoming independent, being proactive and

how to deal with many different cultures. When I arrived in Copenhagen, I knew nobody. So, during the first couple of days, I tried walking up to as many people as possible, finding friends. As an introvert and overall shy person this was new to me and quite challenging. However, after two days I already met some amazing friends from all over the world. My closest friends were from Canada, Germany, Italy and The Netherlands. Learning about each other's cultures was really interesting and the language barrier made for some funny jokes. We almost came up with our own language.

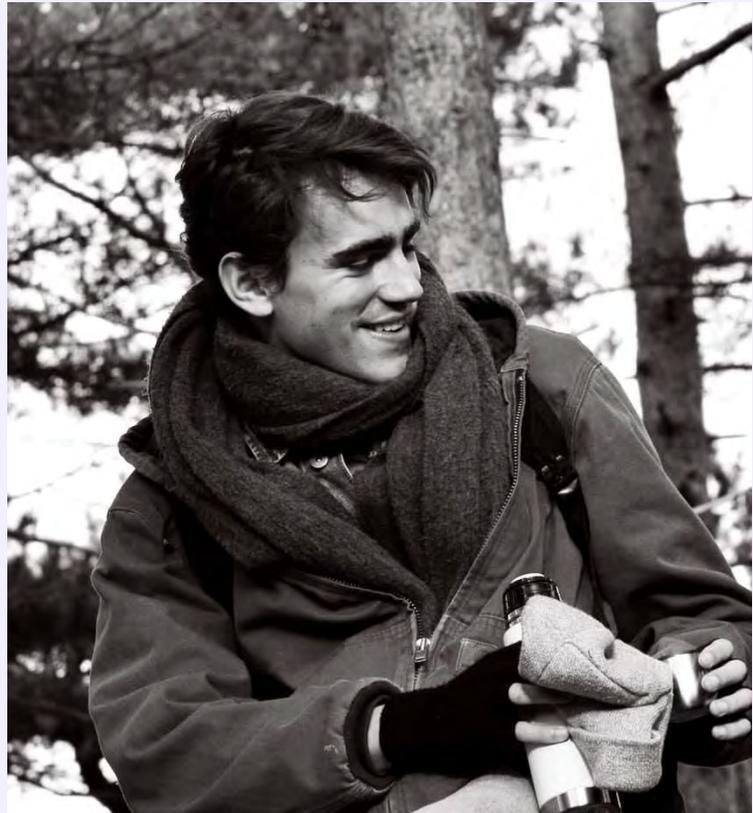
## My advice

One of the most important parts of any exchange is to have fun. Try to go to all the events that are planned and meet new people. It is the best way to learn about cultural diversity and to get a diverse group of friends. Also, be open to every culture. Don't try to only find friends from your own culture, extend your horizon and learn. It is really an eye-opening experience. Enjoy!

## Exchange Student Testimonial: Amsterdam

### **Be brave**

One thing I've learned over these past few months abroad can be summarized in two words: be brave. During my first month here in Amsterdam, I found myself getting confused, lost, and overwhelmed by many of the small things that influenced me throughout my day. And my response to these confusions was to retreat into myself and hope things would work out on their own.



### **Go out there**

Word of advice: don't do that. Instead, I've been realizing every day how important it is to step outside of myself and "be brave" during my exchange. Whether it's a small thing, like buying a new, Dutch SIM card. Or maybe it's something big, like putting myself out there to a new friend and opening up emotionally in a way I hadn't before. Honestly, I think being brave is the one way to ensure that you get the most out of your experiences abroad. Bravery leads to experiences that change your life, especially when you're in a new place. So, if you're thinking of doing an exchange program, don't be like me and waste time holding yourself back.

### **Embrace the present**

Also, during COVID, I believe it's still possible to have a fun and productive time on exchange. Of course, everything's different, but I get to be a part of this new landscape and experience this unprecedented time alongside all my new acquaintances. My experiences, no matter how small, have changed me as a person, more than I probably even realize. And, if you think about it, everyone's dealing with something new and scary during this time, and life is shaking up for everyone. We're all on the same journey, trekking through the same adventure. But I still believe there's beauty in these unpredictable experiences, beauty that wouldn't have been found in any other capacity. And for that I'm excited.

## Exchange Student Testimonial: Singapore

Hello!

My name is Nicole and I'm a Global UvA Ambassador. I'm Italian-Dutch and almost five years ago I decided to leave my beloved city, Rome, and move to Amsterdam for my studies.

At the UvA, I followed a Bachelor's in business administration and, during my last year, I had the opportunity to study abroad.

Travelling is something fundamental to me and I strongly agree with Sant' Agostino's quote: "the world is like a book and those who do not travel reads only one page of it".



*My flatmates and I during one of our weekend trips in Indonesia, on top of the Ijen Volcano.*

thought me to go out of my comfort zone and to think 'out-of-the-box'. I would definitely recommend it to everyone.

Afterall, the magic happens out of your comfort zone!

Therefore, one and a half year ago, I decided to apply for the Global Exchange Programme, and I had the opportunity to spend one semester in Singapore, at the Singapore Management University.

I've been to Singapore before and I fell in love with the city. However, what pushed me to pick this destination is the diversity that characterizes Singapore. The Singaporean population has a mix of Chinese, Malay, Indian and Eurasian origins. This diversity is reflected in the spoken languages (English-Singlish, Malay, Mandarin, and Tamil), in the food culture and in the city itself. I explored different areas of the city and, every time, I had the feeling to be in a different country. What inspired me the most was seeing how these different cultures harmoniously blended into society. Thanks to this diversity, I've had the most exciting time of my life. I met new people and learned about different cultures.

This intense experience deeply enriched and inspired me both on a personal and on an educational level. Studying abroad