

My Experience Abroad in Utrecht, a report written by Kimberly Kaufeld

Introduction: This report documents the enriching experiences during my stay abroad in Utrecht through the Erasmus program. It encompasses various aspects such as the application procedure, accommodation in student housing, academic pursuits, everyday life, leisure activities and a personal conclusion.

Application procedure for Erasmus: The journey began with the application process for the Erasmus program at my home university, which was continuously guided by my supportive exchange coordinator from the English Department. I was offered a range of partner universities from different countries. After thorough research into the available universities and their respective programs, I prioritized at which university I would like to do my stay abroad. The *Hoogeschool Utrecht* emerged as my preferred choice due to its interesting exchange program called *Global Citizenship*. The application process was comprehensive and transparent at any point in time. It required to submit academic transcripts, a statement of purpose, and letters of recommendation. Once accepted, the partner university took over and provided valuable guidance regarding further steps and necessary documentation.

Accommodation in Student Housing: Finding accommodation was paramount to ensuring a smooth transition into life in Utrecht. This was actually the most challenging part of preparation because housing for students is scarce and expensive in Utrecht. Through the assistance of the exchange university that recommended student housing organizations, I was able to rent a comfortable room in a student residence called *De Sterren*, organized by SSH and located close to the university campus. I had been scared by the idea of living together with 11 other students but it turned out to be the most rewarding experience: Living among other students from diverse backgrounds fostered a sense of community that I have never experienced before and it provided plenty opportunities to do group activities.

Studies: As an English student, one of my academic aspirations consisted in improving my English speaking competences simply by speaking English all the time. For that reason I even agreed on speaking English with other German students in order to be constantly confronted with the English language. My exchange program *Global Citizenship* was both challenging and inspiring. As the name suggests the study program is about how to deal with current global challenges such as climate change, inequality and AI from the perspective of global citizens. In order to become global citizens, the students learned to (further) develop and use skills such as critical thinking, multi-perspectivity and social engagement.

Engaging with the mentioned issues and skills on a theoretical level either happened in the classroom by discussing readings and assignments or by means of workshops. On a practical level the students had to do an internship in a non-governmental organization and an interview with a displaced person for example. In this way, me personally, I gained deeper insights into the circumstances of homeless people and asylum seekers. As a result, I have become more sensitive towards social issues that don't affect me but that affect disadvantaged people. The interactive nature of the classes and the emphasis on practical learning enriched my academic experience significantly. Additionally, the opportunity to collaborate with students from various countries enhanced my understanding of global perspectives.

Everyday Life: The everyday life in Utrecht felt unreal: Utrecht is a young and vibrant city. Living there is a pleasure, but also expensive. Before I had arrived in Utrecht, I was told that the living costs were comparable to my home town Hanover. It turned out that food and travel costs are more expensive. Apart from that, thanks to the city's charming atmosphere and my flatmates' welcoming nature, I felt comfortable from the very first moment. Daily routines typically involved attending classes, riding the bike (the most essential means of transportation in the Netherlands), spending times with my study fellows and flat mates and exploring the city's rich cultural heritage and beauty. The city's picturesque canals and charming cobblestone streets are characteristic of Utrecht and they have never ceased to captivate me.



Leisure Time: During leisure hours, I had the opportunity to go on weekend trips to nearby cities such as Amsterdam and Rotterdam, which provided a glimpse into the country's rich history and contemporary art scene. Additionally, the university offered many sportive activities like badminton lessons or volleyball competitions that I participated in. I also spent time in *The Green Office*, a platform for sustainability organized by students from the Hogeschool Utrecht. By joining activities like vegan cooking workshops or the *Repair Café* I got to know a lot of Dutch and international students. Joining the *Green Office* also informed me about possibilities on how to mitigate climate change and consolidated my preference for a vegan and sustainable lifestyle.

Conclusion: My stay abroad in Utrecht through the Erasmus program has been a transformative experience both academically and personally. From an academic perspective, I have realized my goal to improve my English language competences. The exchange program has positively shaped my mindset on certain social issues and I have become more sympathetic with people who are disadvantaged. From a personal perspective, I have grown even more, which I did not expect to happen: Before living in Utrecht, I had majorly felt obligated to do my stay abroad. I didn't look forward to it because I am scared of the unknown. Being an introvert, I feared to be rejected by other students and I had a narrow-minded mindset in some respects. Contrary to my rather negative expectations, I was able to come out of my shell and to make the most of the experience. The friendships and memories will undoubtedly resonate with me for years to come. That is why I can only recommend future Erasmus students to get fully involved with the foreign country's culture, your fellow students and flatmates in spite of your fears and prejudices. Looking back to the stay abroad in Utrecht, I am filled with gratitude for the opportunity but also melancholy because my time has come to an end. Nevertheless, I look forward to carrying forth the lessons learned into future endeavors.