



EXCHANGE EXPRESS

Equity,
diversity and
inclusion in
student
mobility

UvA Study Abroad

Cultural
Exchange Express

www.uva.nl/ambassadors

We are 

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EDITOR- IN-CHIEF



We are nearing an end to the COVID restrictions in many places in the world. For 2 years, our online education system has been online and is transitioning back to offline. We see the excitement of the students to go back to in person classes and they share with us the many experiences they are able to have now in person. The transition back to in-person has been with some adjustments and students are trying to get familiar with it. Nevertheless are we seeing a group of exciting students who are taking the opportunity with everything they have to seek the most out of their life of experience.

In this edition of the Exchange Express, we would like to highlight the experiences the students have and we would like to share them with you.

Here you will find testimonials of several students, their favorite places in Amsterdam, their experience with the Study Abroad Fair, ESN, their visit to Leiden University and some of their more personal experiences studying abroad. I hope you enjoy reading this edition!

- Diederik Schiet

Study Abroad Fair

By Allison Cox

When I was invited to attend the Study Abroad Fair to represent a cultural ambassador I wasn't entirely sure what to expect. With the promise of getting to talk about myself and meet new people I thought, "Sure! Why not!" In fact, I adore getting to meet new people, learn about different cultures, and discuss opportunities the world has to offer. My optimistic side beamed at the idea of getting to talk about my home which I miss dearly and to socialize the afternoon away! With my expectations at high, the entire study abroad fair experience was surpassed with the help of wonderful company. As a fellow Texan, I was stationed at the North American side of the discussion tables. I got to meet people both interested in North America and those who have just experienced it first hand. Our little group answered dozens of questions during the session. Anywhere from questions that truly concerned students regarding study abroad or curiosities about stereotypes or cultural associations about the regions. Before I knew it, the fair was coming to an end and I had a new understanding about student's fears, desires, and curiosities are for studying abroad. More importantly, I was reminded of the unifying traits every person has that connects everyone together. Amongst the hustle and bustle of the successful event, I even managed to make a few extra friends along the way.

There were important positives and negatives towards my experience at the Study Abroad Fair. The fair had a pretty clear layout. It was easy to find staff in case I had questions. The randomness of the crowd made it much easier to talk and get to know others. Everyone had great questions and smiles. The idea of sorting out different continents was great! That made it super easy to find someone from a specific place or region.

There were some points that could be improved in the future. I wasn't particularly in favor of the structure of the continent groupings. The 'Americas' section was very crowded, however there weren't many students present to be able to talk about their South American experience. I personally came dressed like a subtle cowgirl to represent my state. I got the feeling that I was the only student who got the memo to wear a shirt or clothing based off their location. I think a lot of people have a team sport, colors of their flag or a travel T-shirt that would represent their place better. Finally I think the signs in terms of joining workshops/talks/presentations could've been more clear and if they weren't full that more people could join.

Despite all the improvements that could be made in future, my experience at the Study Abroad Fair has been absolutely amazing. I had a fantastic time and would absolutely do everything all over again!





TEAM AMBASSASWANS

By Xinyu Jing

TESTIMONIAL

As an incoming exchange student at University of Amsterdam, I am still amazed by how much more I am able to achieve every single day in the brand new environment. During the one month that I have spent in Amsterdam, I had the chance to be exposed to the diverse multicultural environment, and I started to improve my overall understanding as a global citizen. For example, during tutorials I was challenged to discuss problems with students coming from different cultural backgrounds, and I learnt so much about the different angles at which people are looking. Through this, not only I am provided with more academic researching skills, but also I have the opportunity to learn how differently people can be when solving the same problem. In addition, the thinking process itself allows me to pick up more cultural inclusion skills and methods. Other than study, the extra-curricular activities such as the Cultural Ambassador takes my open-mindedness to a whole new level, as we start to talk about cultural differences and similarities in depth. In the past, although I was trying my best to learn different cultures and to feel things from someone else's perspective, it wasn't easy for me to know what should be appropriate to ask, so I always felt I didn't know enough. Whereas now with this platform, all the students are so open to share their own thoughts, and we are learning so much more about each other as well as the different culture behind them. This unique type of experience allows me to carry out the similar practices, with people that I will meet in future learning and working environments. Spending a long period of time in a different country also gives me the chance to make life-long friendships with some many bright students, that I would never meet if I stay at my comfort zone. During our daily conversations, we get to celebrate different cultures more and more, and these connections will benefit us for a really long time in the future. Therefore, in the future, I will be able to solve problems using techniques and methodologies from different countries, and always stay well-informed on international affairs. Overall, this journey helps me to become more confident to engage with the global community, and to rise my awareness of global citizenship.

Favorite Place



TEAM AMBASSASWANS

By Xinyu Jian

The café at CREA is our team's favorite place to visit. Located on the campus makes it really easy for us to be in, especially during the cold dark winter season in Amsterdam. The friendly and relaxing vibe allows us to take a break from our busy study and to catch up with each other. The menu serves a good variety of choices, and they are always affordable for students like us. This is a place where we have created a lot of valuable memories, and we will definitely miss it so much when we finish our UvA career!

Erasmus Student Network

Creating A More Inclusive Environment For International Students

By Carla Mollenhauer, Cend-Suren Altangerel, Gianna van Stokkom, Helge Moes and Xinyu Jian

The Erasmus Student Network Amsterdam (ESN) is a social community network organization that helps the international students of UvA to build up their network, find their way in a new city, and stimulate the Dutch and other cultures' experiences by organizing a wide range of social and cultural activities. ESN works hard to try and support the integration of international students in a network of both locals and other internationals, which they consider to be an essential part of experiencing student life abroad. Furthermore, the ESN is a source of information for the international students on everything they need to know about living and studying in Amsterdam. Some of the services the ESN provide are organizing an introduction week, a buddy programme, language exchange and Dutch lessons and social Erasmus activities.

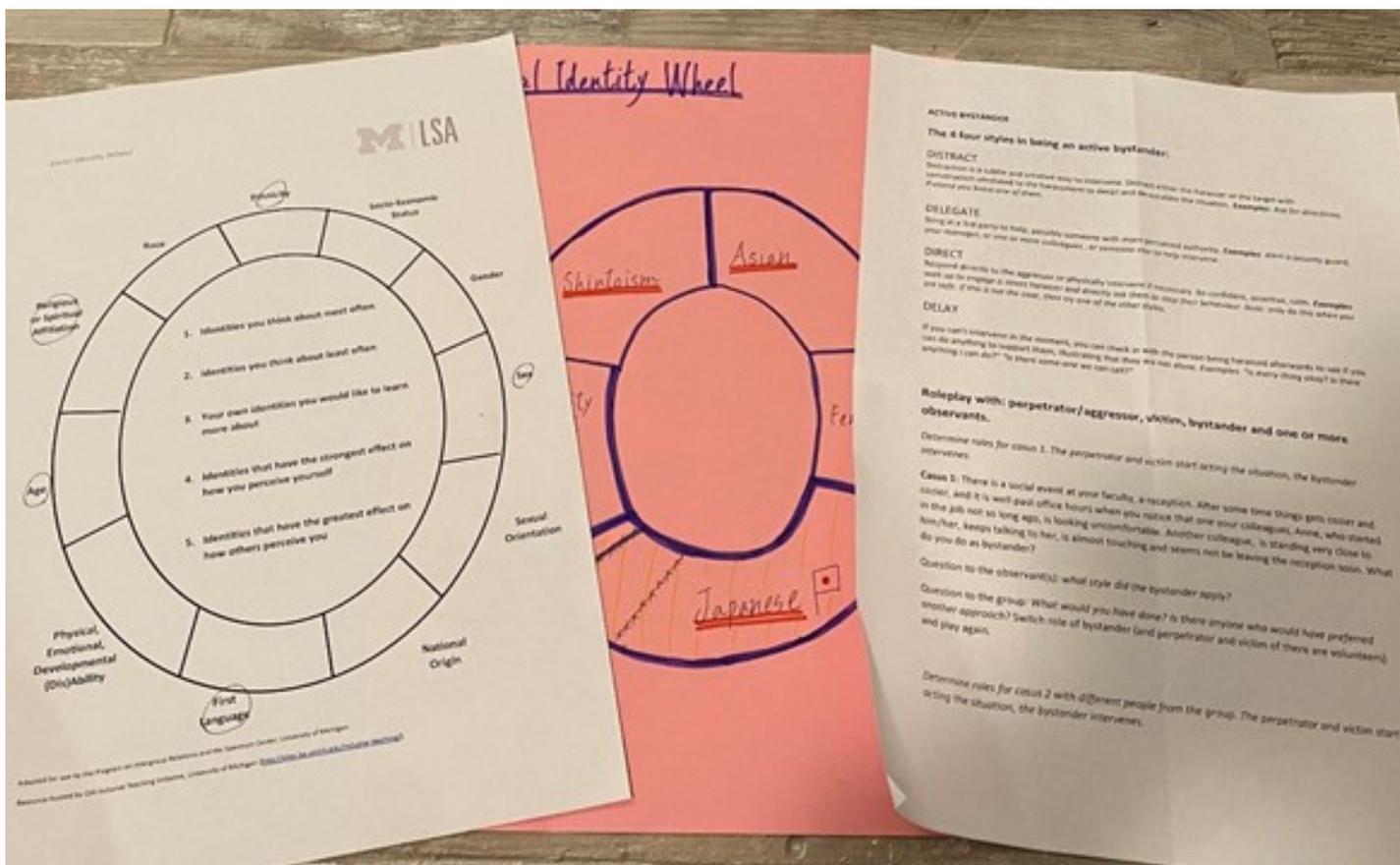
Since the ESN is always striving to improve its services, a brainstorm session was held with students from the Cultural Ambassadors Programme and a board member from ESN, to help improve inclusivity at the ESN's activities. During the session, the Language Exchange event was central to the discussion as to how this could be made more inclusive for the students interested in partaking in the event. The aim of the language event is for exchange students to come together in an informal setting and help each other improve their verbal language skills with a language partner. One of the things that was discussed during the session, that could make the event more inclusive, is to send out a survey to the students who are interested in the event. With this tool the organization could ask the students for their language level to ensure that the appropriate partner can be found, ask for physical disabilities in order for ESN to adjust the physical settings to their needs and ask for allergies to guarantee that everyone will be happy with the food offering. Moreover, it was suggested that the event could resemble a 'Dutch borrel' atmosphere, including Dutch snacks and drinks, etc. These suggestions also included to cater the necessity of vegetarians in order to include the students that differ in preference, culture and religion.

Another suggestion to promote inclusivity was the implementation of promotional posters of the event in the toilets of the UvA buildings, as well as to grab the reader's attention. One important aspect of these posters, which was discussed, was that the poster could include one or two sentences asking the interested students that if they have any special needs they can contact the organization. Additionally the leaders from the groups, which are formed during the introduction week, or the buddies that are assigned through the buddy programme, could be instructed to notify their groups or buddies of this event and possibly share the survey to accompany the invite.



During the event the idea of implementing wristbands showing people's language proficiency was also suggested to make people feel open to try and speak with others and to not be self-conscious about their language level. After the event, feedback forms could be sent to allow future improvements and reflections, in order to hear directly from the attendants how the event could be more inclusive moving forwards. Another possible way could be to set up brainstorming sessions with the exchange students, since these students have experienced the events of the ESN and may have valuable feedback. These tips could be extrapolated to all future ESN events and hopefully this helps to make them more inclusive and diverse in the future.

ERASMUS STUDENT NETWORK



Creating an atmosphere that is accessible to all students!

One of the main issues the ESN has been struggling with in recent years, as clarified by the board member present, is the participation of students who have more introverted characters. For students who are more introverted or who are struggling with social anxiety for instance, the social events can be difficult and can affect the exchange experience from the beginning. This results more often than not, in an exclusion of students who are afraid to express themselves due to: introverted personality traits, social anxiety, lack of proficiency in the English language and cultural differences among others. This can ultimately result in students no longer feeling a part of ESN and can set the bar high for these students to go to an event.

The cultural ambassadors suggested adhering to a structure, within the ESN, that resembles the Cultural Ambassadors Programme, where there are smaller groups and leaders. By creating smaller groups it may feel less overwhelming for the international students to start talking to people and try to make different connections. Also within these smaller groups, activities that are separate from ESN can be organized amongst the group members, therefore encouraging further social engagement beyond the organization. This allows for information exchange and engagement between the students. By appointing an international student as a leader of the group, there is no extra work needed for the volunteers within the programme or for ESN.

The idea behind this suggestion is that by creating an atmosphere that feels more accessible for introverted students who find it hard to reach out to people, they may feel more at ease at participating and engaging with the programme in its entirety. By putting the students in groups from the beginning, they might find comfort in the idea that they already know other students from the programme and have talked to them, which may make them feel more connected and more confident to breach out and talk to others as well. Another tool that was discussed to help introverted students engage in the events was the use of speed dating rounds. This could be especially beneficial in the Language Exchange event.

In conclusion, the cultural exchange ambassadors have made suggestions and recommendations for ESN on making their approach more inclusive. As well as, to become more engaging with the exchange students. We wish ESN nothing but success for the future. This brainstorm session was made possible by the incredible contributions of ESN, the cultural exchange ambassador programme and the University of Amsterdam, as well as the unwavering support from Guido de Wilde, Evi Rongen, Gianna van Stokkom, Carla Sofia Mollenhauer, Jian Tom, Helge Moes and Cend-Suren Altangerel.



TEAM AMSTERDAM

By Aine Peasey

My study abroad experience is something I'll never forget. I made friends for life and learnt so much more about myself and others than I could've imagined.

The photo above shows my best friends and I after winning our first (and only) five-a-side football match. While football wasn't our strong suit, being able to spend time together and participate in university activities at the same time was great fun.

I studied abroad at University College Dublin for one semester and although not everything went smoothly, I wouldn't trade my experience for the world. Not only did I meet some amazing people, studying abroad also gave me the opportunity to take 6 different classes that allowed me to branch out from my psychology course at the UVA. Learning about history, politics and even economics helped me expand my knowledge, while also experiencing a new culture. I found it so interesting how every course represents the values of the country it is taught in.

Next to learning more about another culture, I also learnt a lot about myself. Moving to a new country by yourself can seem daunting and it's hard to step out of your comfort zone. But learning how to be in my own company and put myself out there was such an important step for me. I can now say that I have become much more secure in myself and I would 100% recommend study abroad to everyone.



TEAM AMSTERDAM

By Gianna van Stokkom

FAVORITE PLACE

For our team meeting we went to bar Lempicka near the university. Initially we had other plans but because of a lot of scheduling conflicts we decided to just do the team meeting right after the boat tour. We then decided to go to bar Lempicka because it was one of the places that Aine mentioned she had always wanted to go to and that looked really fun! A lot of other places that were contestants for our 'favorite place in Amsterdam' were mostly closed at the time we finished the boat tour so bar Lempicka it was! When we arrived, we found a lovely table outside on the terras where we could sit down and have a couple of drinks and share some food. Which is what we did! We all decided to order some espresso martini's and share some fries and cheese sticks. We had a really nice time chatting about the boat tour that we had just been on and the programme in its entirety. Since me and Aine are both from The Netherlands and have been living in Amsterdam for a while, and Karen, Sae and Noemi were from abroad, we had some really interesting conversations about what life is like for the international students in Amsterdam and how that compared to Aine and I's experience. We also shared our experiences with language and culture in regards to an exchange. But we mostly laughed a lot about some funny things that happened during the boat tour. We really had a lot of fun and talked a lot for several hours, until it was time to go call it a night. For some of us it was actually the first time we had seen each other than talking in our group chat, so it was really nice to finally get some bonding time in as a group, even though we were missing some people. All in all I feel like we had an amazing day with the boat tour and then going to the bar where we talked, laughed a lot and most of all bonded as a team!

MICRO-AGGRESSIONS IN SYSTEMS DESIGN: PAYMENT OPTIONS AT THE UVA

By Noemi Florea



I step out of class, having just finished a two-hour lecture at Science Park. With the lecture starting at 9:00, I hardly had time to grab breakfast or a coffee before getting to class. By the time class ended, I felt tired and little weak from low sleep and no food. Then the scents wafted in from the ground-floor cafeteria at Science Park: an amazing blend of meats and cheeses, breads and sauces, all freshly cooked and steaming hot. I'm extremely tempted to pick something up, but then I remember: I have no way of paying for it.

It's not that I don't have any money — I spent years at my home university saving up for the time I would spend studying abroad. It's just that the University of Amsterdam doesn't accept payment by any means besides a Dutch bank card. For someone like me, who can only stay in the Netherlands for a single semester, it's not realistic to open a local bank account — paying fees and exchange rates for it in the process — when practically every other venue outside of the university accepts cash, a credit card, or both. Even had I endeavored to open a local bank account, for my first month I still would've been stranded without a payment option at UvA as I awaited confirmation of my registration with the municipality, receipt of my BSN, and account approval from any one of the local banks here in Amsterdam. Where UvA should've been my anchor as I arrived alone in a foreign country, instead I felt alienated and excluded by the systems that run everyday life here.

Taking this experience into account, let's zoom out to look at the broader practice of system designs as it governs many of our decisions about financial, political, and social mobility. Within systems design, there's a concept known as "micro-aggressions," where groups or entire populations are indirectly discriminated against by key planners and decision-makers who choose to omit their needs in the options presented by a system. A good example might be any requirement to select a gender identity when creating an account or filling out a survey. Recent advocacy has made it so that non-binary or transgender individuals can select their respective identities on many new platforms, but prior to the past few years many of these individuals would face regular micro-aggressions from any gender-binary question or option. Because their needs weren't being explicitly recognized by the social constructs or services offered on a regular basis, this marginalized population only increasingly felt excluded from the systems that guide everyday life.

Having defined what micro-aggressions look like in systems design, we can return back to the available payment options at the University of Amsterdam to take a critical lens to how the university might be committing a micro-aggression against international students, and particularly short-term exchange students. The lack of accessible payment options can be exclusionary and discouraging to exchange students, especially as they might hope to spend several hours at the university studying or working alongside their peers. That the university does not recognize how this might impact student well-being might also be indicative of a general lack of support or empowerment for the international student body. Should UvA hope to attract more students on exchange from distant parts of the world, then the administration should first aim to incorporate their most basic needs into the dominant systems that make up life here, starting with accessible payment options and going beyond.

MENTAL HEALTH AND STUDY ABROAD

By Ruby Whelan

My study abroad adventure here in the beautiful city of Amsterdam has been one of the most fulfilling, incredible experiences of my life. I have made deep friendships, explored the world, and gained a confidence that I never knew I could have. Despite these wins, studying abroad also comes with massive challenges. It is difficult to leave your friends and family behind. It is exhausting to move to a new place and have to start from scratch. With all of this in mind, it is important to remember to take care of your mental health while abroad.

Regardless of whether or not you have been diagnosed with anxiety, depression, ADHD, or any other mental health disorder, everyone has 'mental health' that they must take care of. Spending time with friends and family back home is often an integral part of maintaining your mental health, but when abroad, it is important to make sure you have structures in place that do not rely on the presence of others. For example, during my study abroad I kept a consistent journal and went on daily walks to clear my mind. My journal helped me keep track of what was making me happy, and my walks made me feel at peace when I was overwhelmed.

Mental health is a strong passion of mine, and so when presented the opportunity to do a research study in one of my classes, I jumped at the opportunity to dig a little deeper. During my time at the University of Amsterdam, I conducted a study that looked at the differences between how Americans and Dutch people conceptualize mental illness, specifically depression (Whelan, 2022). I discovered clear differences between the two countries. Through interviews, literature review, and website audits, I found that Americans perceive depression as a very social issue and are quick to prescribe medicine or medical solutions to the problem (Whelan, 2022). Dutch people, on the other hand, view depression as a largely biological, individual issue, but then argue that the solution lies within fixing the social fabric of the community (Whelan, 2020). Without getting too technical, we can see that the individuals in America and the Netherlands perceive depression and its treatments differently. Looking at these results from a broader perspective, this reveals that attitudes, solutions, and treatments to mental health issues may not look the same in your home country as they do in your host country. Navigating a new culture is difficult in itself, and finding resources and support might look different than you expected.



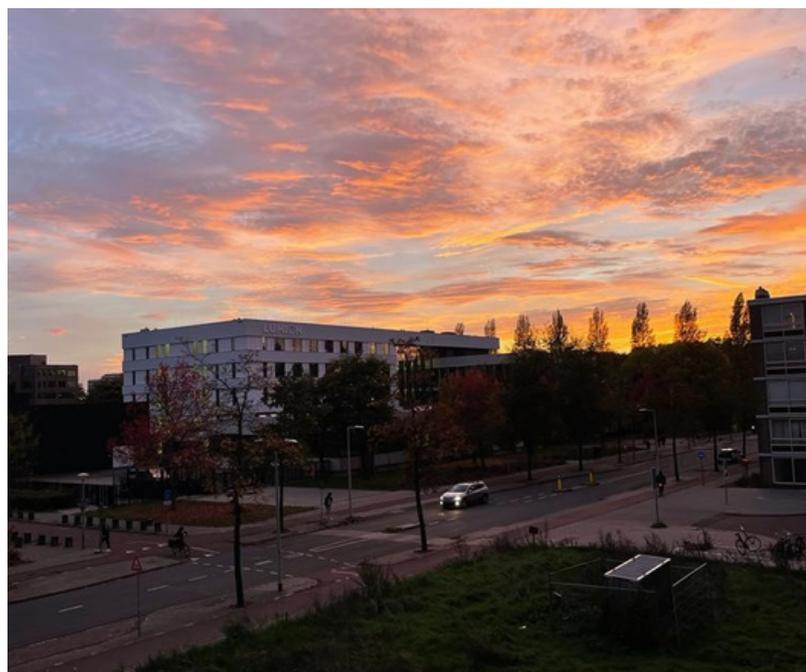
Mental Health And Study Abroad

Now, I recognize that so far there has been a lot of doom and gloom in this article. It is not my intention to scare you into thinking that your mental health is going to decline during your study abroad. Everyone experiences a unique exchange, and no one tip or trick is going to make everything sunshine and rainbows. The point of this article is, however, to emphasize the importance of taking care of yourself during your time abroad and being gentle on your mind and body. You are going through an incredibly exciting, stressful, unique, and unforgettable period of your life—enjoy it!

My research demonstrates that there are different ways of handling mental health issues in different cultures, which is important to keep in mind when seeking support during your journey. This is why it is important to have rituals in place that support your mental health from the inside out, and to recognize that it is okay to struggle on this wonderful, crazy adventure. Your home university, as well as your host university will have resources in place that you can use to stay mentally healthy and make the most of your experience, they just might not look exactly the same. Taking some time before your study abroad journey to get familiar with the mental health resources your host university offers is an easy step towards protecting your mental health abroad. It could also be beneficial to talk to someone you trust about your fears and anxieties about what your study abroad will look like. No matter where you are, there will be people who are willing to help you with whatever bumps come your way, but you have the power to set yourself up for success in the meantime.

University of Amsterdam Resources:
www.student.uva.nl/en/topic/mental-health

Suicide Hotline:
113 or www.113.nl



References:

Whelan, R. (2022). *The Medicalization of Depression in the Netherlands and the United States: A Comparative Study*. University of Amsterdam.

TEAM CULTURE CLUB



In my last semester of my Bachelor studies Communication Science, I was able to go on an exchange semester to Lima, Peru. Through this experience, I had the opportunity to get to know the Peruvian culture better and to settle down in a Latin American city for the first time. In the welcome week that was organized by my host university, we were assigned to buddies and had lots of fun activities planned. Thus, I got to know Peruvian traditions and lifestyle from students that have the same age. They really helped us integrating at the new university and in Lima by showing us around and explaining Peruvian culture to us. After spending a month in Lima, I started traveling around in Peru with friends I made during the exchange. Traveling with friends that come from various countries such as Syria, Slovenia, France and the Netherlands and meeting people from all around the world, allowed me to also get to know their culture better and to exchange our experiences.

As the studies were online due to the pandemic, I also went to Bolivia, Chile and Colombia which allowed to compare the uniqueness of each Latin American country. I really tried to gain a local perspective by sleeping at host families or learning Spanish. Moreover, as a person that loves to cook, I enjoyed exploring local markets, trying out new dishes or street food and taking cooking classes. All in all, I am really happy that I got out of my comfort zone by leaving Amsterdam and am grateful to have collected moments I will never forget in my life.

By Lea Hoffmann

Favorite Place

TEAM CULTURE CLUB



For our team building activity we chose Winkel 43, a café that is located in Jordaan and known for its apple pie. There were a lot of places we took into consideration for this assignment, ranging from several parks over famous sights to cafés. We decided very quickly that we didn't want to go to a park or a tourist attraction since we thought it would be nicer to go somewhere chill to simply sit down, talk and get to know each other better so we figured a café would be the best spot for this. After looking up several cafés, we decided to go to Winkel 43 as most of the other locations were closed and we were curious about the apple pie. Eventually, we all tried it and agreed that it was one of the best we have ever had.

Fighting Social Marginalisation

A Workshop On Creating Safe Spaces

One of the many visions of the UvA is to create an international and inclusive university environment for its students in the 21st century. That is why the UvA's many objectives include helping its staff engage with multicultural student groups, fostering inclusion on campus and online and supporting the students as they develop their own intercultural competences. This is one of the reasons why the SAFE SPACE workshop was held this past November. Guido de Wilde (Manager Global Student Experience & Engagement) and Heleen Straesser (Head International Office of Social Sciences) held a workshop for study advisors and international officers about 'creating a SAFE SPACE for diversity and talent' in order to aid them in their engagement with these multicultural student groups. In this particular workshop, there was an emphasis on student mobility (and the effects of this on campus) and student needs, which include their education, physical as well as mental health and socio-economic status. Its aim was to explore the challenges of creating a SAFE SPACE, showcasing diversity and nurturing talent.

A few ambassadors from the Cultural Ambassadors programme were in attendance to join the workshop and take part in its activities. Since the ambassadors have been learning about the framework for creating a SAFE SPACE in the previous weeks, this was a perfect opportunity to contribute to this workshop. The ambassador's aim for this workshop was to promote equity in student mobility, celebrate cultural diversity and inspire UvA students to engage with their international student community. They did this by adhering to the SAFE SPACE rules, which they just got acquainted with.

One of the central questions that Guido, Heleen and the ambassadors tried to tackle was what the study advisors and the international officers from the UvA could do to create a more SAFE SPACE for the UvA students. By discussing how this could be realized, the issue of disability was something that was elaborated on during the workshop. Disability can have several implications like visual and invisible disability, but also physical disability and mental disability. These implications do not have to be distinct from one another, and they often overlap. Another aspect of disabilities is that they are not necessarily detectable at first glance and symptoms of these disabilities can differ from person to person. What the workshop has made clear is that disabilities cannot be put under the same umbrella. This can make it difficult for the study advisors and the international officers to anticipate the needs of the students who deal with certain disabilities. One possible solution for this problem, that was discussed during the workshop, is to implement the "Social Identity Wheel". Identity wheel exercise is an intriguing way to determine how multidimensional our personality is, as well as how we view ourselves and how we believe others view us. Race, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic background, nationality, age, physical and mental (dis)ability, and religion are the characteristics of the wheel. Since each characteristic of this wheel changes over time, the fluidity of identity emphasizes how diverse even a single individual is, and thus all of the students.



Therefore, it is essential to have a fair and accepting attitude toward different ideas and personalities. This specific tool can be used by the advisors and officers to help understand the students better, but also for the students to help understand themselves better. Another way for the advisors and the officers to handle this is for them to act as supporters towards the students by performing either of these 4 styles: to distract, to delegate, to direct and to delay. Which one of these should be used is dependent on the student and their situation.

Another interesting thing that was discussed during the workshop for creating a SAFE SPACE was to put the emphasis on embracing diversity and engagement rather than discouraging it. One of the things that could help is to implement a 'check-in' moment with the students at the beginning of a class or interaction. By asking students how they feel and how motivated they are to start the interaction, they could feel more respected, valued and appreciated by their advisor. What could be added here is a question to the students about the most important aspects of their identity. This could help the students feel like their identities are important and appreciated.

The skills that were talked about during the workshop can be difficult to build because there is a level of vulnerability involved that not everyone is initially comfortable with. Nonetheless, emphasizing the need to build these skills and teach advisors and international officers how to navigate those spaces is essential. Workshops like these, therefore, should be widely publicized and UvA staff members should be encouraged to attend them. This can be the first step in creating a safer space for international students and in making all students and staff feel more comfortable in their work and educational environments.

Testimonial



TEAM GAME CHANGERS

By Allison Cox

On a random evening, in which I spent winding down with a cup of tea in one hand and my phone in the other, I decided to check my email notifications. I came across an email invitation requesting new members to join a certain “cultural ambassadors program.” Intrigued, I decided to submit a reservation for the first meeting. I had just moved to the Netherlands and was juggling with the idea of making new friends in an entirely new continent. Even though I was accepted into my master’s program, which is surely impressive on its own, I had many worries, fears, and reservations, about myself and my ability to conquer these new changes. Frankly, I wasn’t very impressed with who I was or the way others might view me. That was, until I joined the cultural ambassadors program. Each week I attended a meeting that taught me more about human connection than I’ve ever learned about before. I had short bursts of lessons throughout my life regarding workplace, cultural differences, and societal understanding. However, the program I joined had found a way of expressing the many aspects of human connectivity in a gentle and cohesive way that really got me to think about people. It’s difficult to capture the lessons and experiences I’ve encountered through the entire process but it did release some of this pressure I put upon myself as an international student, young adult, and simply, as a person. I consider myself lucky to have read that email, signed up for the program, and gained the experiences offered to me. I’m even more lucky to have gained all the friends I have made throughout the time.

Favorite Place

Team Game Changers

By Allison Cox



While there are many options to choose from, and I haven't visited as many places as I'd like so far, I think my favorite place in Amsterdam at the moment is The American Book Center and the courtyard right outside its vicinity. I love books and it's comforting being surrounded by the smell of paper. The ABC is a three story English bookstore with a cafe inside. Not only can I spend hours perusing books, sitting down to read, or getting some work done at the cafe, but it also reminds me a lot of my hometown. I'm familiar with giant bustling bookstores and it comforts me in knowing that so many people gather at a bookstore in the same way that I have done a million times in the past. Out of all the places in Amsterdam, it's the one place that feels like someone cut out the store and pasted it in the city so I could feel comforted by familiar surroundings—especially when everything in Amsterdam is so vividly different from my geographical and cultural upbringing.

On a side note, the courtyard outside has markets where they sell art prints, maps, and more books! It's lovely to come across new things unexpectedly.

A Visit To Leiden University

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Leiden plays a historical role as the meeting point of internationals, from serving as the initial setting-off point for pilgrims travel to North America, to today welcoming refugees from around the world and citizens of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in the Global South to support how they integrate with new opportunities unhindered by challenges of the past. As cultural ambassadors, we had the unique opportunity to visit the University of Leiden and connect with their officers in support of international student well-being, while at the same time applying what we found to uncover new potential for the University of Amsterdam.

The day began with a brief tour of Leiden guided by Carine de Wilde, the Senior International Relations Officer of Leiden University. We climbed De Burcht, one of the oldest surviving castles of The Netherlands, and checked out the currently dormant "hortus botanicus," a botanical garden located at Leiden University that is among the town's must-sees in the spring.

Our tour promptly took us to the doorstep of Meeting Point, an office and support service offered by Leiden University to assist students with refugee status, first-generation students, as well as students from the Dutch Caribbean and Suriname with planning and social support. Their various services include language training and translation (especially when dealing with official documents written in Dutch), as well as social gatherings for students still seeking to build a community for themselves in Leiden. Created to represent a "safe haven" for such a diverse range of students, the Meeting Point's office in itself was designed to foster a living room-like atmosphere, complete with couches, armchairs, and tea. As we spoke with the office representatives, a student with refugee status from Hungary briefly joined our conversation to shed some light on his perspective as a core stakeholder of the program. He shared with us that Meeting Point provided a powerful service in facilitating how he joined the Leiden University community, and that the language services were exceptionally useful as he initially struggled to navigate the city and university without a strong level of fluency in either Dutch or English. Our time together ultimately came to a close as we each reflected on the qualities that might unite students with refugee status, first-generation students, and students from the Dutch Caribbean and Suriname. With such a wide range of cultural, academic, socioeconomic, and demographic characteristics that might set them apart, we all collectively agreed that one powerful quality they shared in common was the ability and the desire to dream, and to hope for a better world. A service such as Meeting Point would be well-suited to support students of similar background attending the University of Amsterdam, as it truly fulfills on the broader academic mission of UvA to provide a nurturing environment to cultivate student potential.



Leiden Visit

Creating an understanding environment

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Following our time at the Meeting Point, we then attended a presentation hosted by a student representative of Leiden University's Office of Student Well-Being, where we had an interactive discussion on the activities and programming that can support students through periods of both stress and community engagement. The office goes above and beyond by provides seven different types of support groups -- student support, well-being support, study support, students who are older than 30 support, Meeting Point support, Ph.D. students support, and working service -- in addition to a buddy program, an annual well-being week, and a well-being office for each faculty. Some of us from UvA's Cultural Ambassadors program found that dividing students into smaller groups by their interests or shared traits might be a better tactic than the current general programs offered to international students, such as ESN Amsterdam. Allowing students to connect with those in similar positions as them might lend itself better towards fostering sustainable connections than the often brief and fleeting moments of camaraderie typically experienced while on exchange. Additionally, one of the unique qualities that sets student support service at Leiden University apart is the training they often to group facilitators, who are often students themselves. This training, which is also partially offered by the Cultural Ambassadors program though with less hands-on experience, instills leadership and mediation skills in students in order to equip them for leading organizations and movements in the future.

To close out our time in Leiden, we had a festive borrel at a local pub between our ambassadors group and members of the student well-being office. For a brief moment, even Sinterklaas joined us! We all shared the sentiment that Leiden University has put an incredible amount of effort and planning to curating a comprehensive student support system, and that the University of Amsterdam would strongly benefit from following suit. Providing the opportunity not only to celebrate but to also share points of criticism or feelings of disenfranchisement remains critical to ensuring that students feel included by the dominant patterns of school and life at the university. While many of the international student events and programs are created to uplift positive experiences for students on exchange, what Leiden University showed us is that at times, students need the opportunity to reflect and de-burden themselves of feelings of stress, and this can be a strong point for innovation at the University of Amsterdam, as well.