

# **Student Experience Report: A Year at the University of Groningen**

As part of my master's programme, I spent a year abroad at the University of Groningen. In this report I will expound on my experience.

## **Preparation**

I am studying a double degree programme for my masters in Oldenburg. My first year was in Oldenburg, and my second year in Groningen. Thus I had already known that I would spend my time abroad in Groningen when I applied to study my masters in Oldenburg. Due to the nature of the double degree programme, we needed to be enrolled in both universities for our second year. At the beginning of the first year, we were told that the enrolment process would be explained closer to the enrolment deadline for Groningen. However, we almost missed the deadline, since nobody contacted us about it at the time. Some students in our cohort were applying for SSH housing (student housing in Groningen) and experienced some problems. The cause of which turned out to be the status of their enrolment, or rather the lack thereof. We had just a week to actually enrol for Groningen before the deadline. Since I could enrol through the Dutch system, my enrolment went pretty easily. Though there was some confusion about what course we should sign up for. In Oldenburg I was signed up for the DDM Water and Coastal Management, but in Groningen I had to sign up for Environmental Infrastructure Planning, something that was not communicated all that clearly at the time.

We were notified about the Erasmus grant by our programme supervisor, Dr. Ingo Mose, who helped us to apply. When I was enrolled in Groningen, the communication between both Erasmus coordinators went smoothly. Both responded in reasonable time, and were able to help answer questions when they arose.

## **Travel and Arrival**

The host university is the University of Groningen, which is not too far from Oldenburg. In addition, the semester ticket also allows for free travel to Groningen. This made moving somewhat easier. I made one trip by car for bigger items, but also brought smaller bags on the train/bus on later trips. I moved over the course of a week just before summer break.

The host university did not help me with anything upon arrival, but I already knew the city and organised my own place to stay. We received information about the beginning of the year and about where to be at what time a week before the programme started.

## **Accommodation**

I was fortunate enough to study in Groningen before I started my masters in Oldenburg. Because I knew my second year would be in Groningen again, I sublet my room in Groningen for a year and was able to move back in for my year abroad. This made finding accommodation much easier compared to experiences from my peers.

## **Studying at the Host University**

The University of Groningen works with a block system. Each semester has two blocks of about 7-8 weeks of teaching and then 2-3 weeks for exams and resits. Thus the full year had four blocks; 1a and 1b in the winter semester, and 2a and 2b in the summer semester. The full year is 60 ECTS/EC, which is divided into a workload of 15 ECTS/EC per block (see figure 1). Unlike Oldenburg there is not a break between semesters. There is a Christmas break, and if you do

not have a resit, there is one free week between exams and the start of the new block. This makes the pace and academic pressure higher than in Oldenburg.

Courses	Semesters			
	1a	1b	2a	2b
Dilemmas in Infrastructure Planning (5 EC)	■			
EIP: Interactive Workshop (5 EC)	■			
Planning Theory (5 EC)	■			
Comparative Research and Planning Practice (5 EC)		■		
Optional Course (5 EC)		■		
Master's Thesis EIP (20 EC)		■		
Reinventing Environmental Planning (5 EC)			■	
Transitions in Water Management (5 EC)			■	
Fieldwork Water Quality (5 EC)				■

Figure 1: Course Programme in Groningen (Source: <https://www.rug.nl/masters/ddm-water-and-coastal-management/?lang=en#!programme>)

The first block was very theory heavy, with three courses that demand quite a bit of time. For EIP: Interactive workshops, there are weekly essays and there is a lot of course literature for both Dilemmas in Infrastructure and Planning Theory. Next to this there are midterms, group assignments and final exams. Compared to Oldenburg, the first block especially was an adjustment period. The courses are quite theory heavy with a lot of examinations compared to Oldenburg. The focus on theory continued throughout the whole year and a link to practise or more practical examples, like in Oldenburg, was not very present except a few courses (field work water quality, and project and programme management (my optional course)).

Another difference between both universities is the ability to choose your own courses. In Groningen the programme is already set with only one option for an optional course with limited choices to choose from. This has the advantage that the courses do not clash, which was a problem in Oldenburg, where I had to choose all my courses from different faculties and course times often overlapped. Although it is much easier for scheduling, it does leave little option to individualise the programme. One way to do this is through group assignments. Almost every course had a group assignment of which the topics could be decided upon within your group. Thus extra research, especially water-related topics which could connect more to the DDM programme, could be done at my own initiative if my group were also interested in the topic.

The courses themselves are pretty interesting, but the course load overall is heavier compared to Oldenburg. There was little free time and a lot of commitments to each course. Each course (except the thesis) has an average of 4 hours of lectures a week, sometimes with additional seminars. In addition, each course (except planning theory) had multiple modes of examination, often a group assignment and an exam. To pass a course, each individual examination needs a pass, and compensation between the aspects is not always possible. Class time is reserved for lectures and sometimes seminars. This means that students need to schedule group work themselves. In addition, the lectures do touch on the prescribed course literature, but depending on the course not very much. Course literature does come back in exams, though, so next to studying lectures reading all course literature and understanding it thoroughly, even though it is not mentioned in depth in the lecture, is also necessary. Thus

there is quite a bit to do outside of the mandated lectures. The lectures themselves are often taped and posted online, which means that you can watch them back for review or if you missed a class. This is a nice feature that allows for a bit more freedom in scheduling and reviewing.

There is a study advisor available for questions and help if students need extra academic support, though depending on the topic, they might not be able to do much. Other support was not available, or not advertised, through the university.

After my grades were posted online, I was easily able to obtain a transcript of records which I could hand into Oldenburg. Since the period abroad is a mandated part of my programme, the credits should be transferred without too much trouble.

### **Everyday Life and Leisure Time**

There was little free time due to the heavy course load, and university culture is different than Oldenburg. A big difference is the lack of a Mensa. In Oldenburg students often eat together or hang around after class, while in Groningen most students only come to university for their lectures and leave right after. This made making new connections harder.

The University of Groningen does have many student sports clubs and facilities, all under the umbrella of the ACLO which you can join for a yearly or semester fee. There is a huge variety of weekly lessons you can take. This provides an option to get to know new people and try out many new sports.

### **General Experience**

Overall my year in Groningen was very busy. While sometimes it seemed to go by very slowly, looking back, it was incredibly quick. With the heavy course load, I did little outside of university, which is a shame. In addition, public transit in the Netherlands is not included in our student fees, which makes travel to other places somewhat expensive. Through the NS app, you can sometimes get discounts if you book in advance, and I recommend downloading the app if you plan to travel within the Netherlands. 9292 is also a great app for all public transit in the Netherlands. You can always get individual tickets for public transit in advance in the app or pay with your debit card directly with the 'check-in-check-out' system on transit itself.

The city itself is very nice, and (maybe because it is a Dutch city) cycling is the main mode of transportation. There are bikes everywhere, and I would really recommend getting a bike when you study in Groningen. It is often quicker to get somewhere by bike, rather than taking public transit.

For DDM water and coastal students, there is one slot for an optional course, for which I chose Project and Programme Management, and I could really recommend the course to others. The course links theory with practice and is taught in an engaging way with guest lectures from practice.