

Erasmus Student Experience Report

Participating in the Erasmus exchange programme was both a unique opportunity and an unexpectedly challenging experience. As a student enrolled in a double-degree master's programme, Water and Coastal Management and Environmental and Infrastructure Planning (DDM WCM and EIP), I initially believed that my inclusion in EIP was automatic. This assumption was widely shared among my cohort, and as such, we were all surprised to find out that a formal application was still required. By the time we were told this, a great deal of the application timeline had passed, and navigating the paperwork and requirements under time pressure created a stressful beginning to what should have been an exciting transition.

This early confusion affected my initial experience. It highlighted a broader issue I encountered during my time in the Netherlands: the lack of clear communication and support structures for incoming international students. Despite being part of an international programme, information regarding registration, course expectations, and local academic practices was often difficult to access or poorly explained. This was especially apparent when it came to exams. No one adequately prepared us for the format or expectations of the Dutch examination system. The types of assessments, the criteria used to grade them, and even the structure of exam papers differed significantly from what I was used to, and there was no formal orientation to help us bridge that gap. I spent much of the term unsure of whether I was meeting expectations. While they claim there is a 10-point grading system, I have not met anyone who scored a 9 or a 10; only exceptional students scored an 8.

Socially, the experience was equally difficult. While I did manage to form some meaningful connections, they were almost exclusively with other international students. The local Dutch students, while not unkind, were noticeably distant and insular. It often felt like they already had their established circles and weren't particularly interested in expanding them. This created a sense of isolation that was hard to shake, especially in group projects or seminars where participation and collaboration were key. Making new friends was far harder than I had anticipated, and though I made attempts to reach out, those efforts often felt one-sided.

As a result, my social experience in the Netherlands felt narrow and sometimes lonely. I longed to integrate more deeply, to feel a part of the local student culture, but that opportunity rarely arose. Only at the very end of my stay, after my final exams were submitted, did I finally get the chance to meet up with friends, travel around, and truly breathe. It felt bittersweet. I was grateful for those moments, but I couldn't help but wish they had come earlier, when they might have helped ease the pressure and stress of academic life abroad.

Adding to the challenge was the overwhelming intensity of the workload. Between attending classes, working on group projects, navigating unfamiliar academic expectations, and trying to stay on top of basic life tasks in a new country, I had very little free time. There was very

little room left for cultural exploration, spontaneous travel, or simply unwinding. I had pictured my Erasmus experience as a balance between academic growth and personal discovery. Instead, I found myself spending long days indoors, working late into the night, constantly worried about whether I was doing enough or doing things right.

All of these factors added up, and I felt myself becoming quite depressed at times. Luckily, I had some friends from my WCM year and from home who helped me through the roughest patches; however, the feeling of inadequacy still lingered. I had failed a class this year, which completely knocked my confidence as I had never failed an exam before. I am by no means a great student with extraordinary grades, but up until this exam, I had always passed. This made me extremely anxious for the following exams and for the submission of my thesis. After submission, I was already thinking of ways to change and improve it for the resubmission.

Still, it wasn't all negative. Despite the difficulties, I learned a lot about myself and about how I adapt under pressure. There were small joys too. I shared meals with my friends that reminded us of home. These were the fragments of connection and meaning that helped me through the harder days.

In hindsight, I believe the Erasmus experience has value beyond just academics. It reveals gaps in systems, highlights the importance of social belonging, and teaches you to advocate for yourself in unfamiliar territory. But to truly serve international students, universities must do more to provide clear guidance, accessible support, and proactive integration opportunities. Had those been in place, my experience could have been not just instructive but transformative.

In the end, I'm grateful I had the chance to go abroad. Still, I also carry the experience as a quiet reminder that even the most exciting opportunities can come with unexpected weight. And sometimes, the most important lessons are not in the classroom, but in learning to find your place when everything feels unfamiliar.