

Guide to going abroad (RMA Utrecht)

When you are reading this, you are probably at the very start of your first year of the Humanities research master in Utrecht. This master's programme strongly urges you to spend the first semester of your second year abroad. Here is a rough guide to actually getting there, and some tips to help you along the way. Written especially for those who are not going to study at one of Utrecht's partner universities, it gives a general outline of how to find a host university, how to set up contact, and how to arrange actually going there.

Index

1. Key things to finding a place to study abroad	2
Preparation	2
Perseverance	2
Cheek	2
2. Choosing There	3
Academically	3
Geographically	3
Affiliation	4
Credits	4
Things to keep in mind	4
3. Getting There	6
Guidelines for setting up contact	6
An example e-mail to a university	7
Fees	8
Things to keep in mind	8
4. Going There	9
Get your abroad stuff in order	9
Get your home stuff in order	9
Things to keep in mind	10
List of Useful Websites	11

1. Key things to finding a place to study abroad

What you will need most to succeed in finding a host university:

Preparation

It is important that you start early with choosing which university you want to go to, setting up contact, and arranging the things surrounding your stay. An early start will help you overcome any setbacks you might encounter on the way.

Perseverance

However, things may not go as smoothly as you would like, and it can take several months before you have arranged for a university to accept you as a postgraduate student. Don't hesitate to ask your correspondent about the status of your application, but always stay polite and allow them a week or so to reply.

Cheek

Lastly, a teacher from your university of choice may well say they have no room for students who are only going to be with them for a single semester, but a later second e-mail to their International Office could result in you being accepted without a problem. This does of course not mean you can pester Harvard or Cambridge with tons of e-mails, but a little cheek can sometimes get you further than you think.

2. Choosing There

Start early with this one. Having a list of places you would like to go to makes it far easier to deal with rejections. Just move on to the next university on your list without losing too much time in having to find another university you might want to apply for.

Be careful when you select universities, because Utrecht will only accept postgraduate courses to count towards your degree. (Postgraduate courses are often called 'graduate' courses in America). If you are going to a partner university, check that the agreement in place is a graduate one. If not, you or the International Office can try to arrange your taking graduate courses.

Basically, there are three main strategies to handle this first step, which can be combined:

Academically

Probably the best, but probably also the most difficult way of choosing your university as this leaves you the biggest pond to fish in: focusing on the area of expertise or ranking of the university. It is very useful to search for certain areas of specialisation in universities. The University of Sheffield has an excellent Humanities Research Institute, for example, whereas The Australian National University boasts the Humanities Research Centre. It depends on you which area you find interesting, and you can ask your tutor or teachers which universities offer specialised courses. You can also look at where the important scholars in a particular field are based (although there's no guarantee that they will actually be teaching you). The advantage to choosing a university by the field it specialises in is also that there is a variety of interesting courses to choose from, so that if you don't get into the course of your choice, there are plenty of back-ups available.

Geographically

Perhaps you want to get away from the Dutch climate, or you are particularly interested in South African culture; geography is also a way of narrowing down your search. Going outside of Europe will often mean expensive flights, and America has its own set of rules concerning foreign students. These are all considerations to keep in mind.

Perhaps the most important factors in this strategy are culture and language. Consider whether you want to live in a country for four months, while you do not speak the language. Are you willing to learn the language? Is this an obstacle for you? Do many of the inhabitants speak English, or another language you speak? Also be careful that the language of instruction is one that you have a thorough command of—though most of the times having mastered your host university's language is a prerequisite to enrol.

Most importantly, you are going to be immersed into a new culture. One way to narrow down your choice of universities is to focus on a particular country or area

you are interested in. This way, the location of your university can help you in your studies.

Affiliation

Utrecht University has ties with several universities around the world, and students from the RMA are eligible to go to quite a few of them. If you are intent on studying in the States, arranging this via the university is a good idea. Going to a partner university of the UU is a safe bet, because many things can already be arranged for you. You will also be eligible for an Erasmus scholarship (only within Europe!), and the host university will sometimes provide housing.

Link to the UU partner universities:

<http://www.uu.nl/EN/informationfor/students/education/studyabroad/whywhere/Pages/default.aspx>

Of course, it is best to combine at least two of these strategies to narrow down your searches a bit, and it's always important to make sure the university has a few courses of interest to you, as the one course you have set your mind on might suddenly become unavailable (when you have already moved to your host country).

Credits

Not all universities award the same amount of credits to a given amount of work. If the courses you are taking do not add up to the 30 ECTS the UU requires of you, you can discuss this matter with your programme coordinator and the board of examiners of the Graduate School. Make sure you save the course outline and ask for a transcript of records, so that the board of examiners can evaluate how many ECTS you should be awarded.

Many universities that award other types of credits have a table somewhere on their website, with which you can check how much of those 'foreign' credits or courses equals a certain amount (30) of ECTS. You will mostly find this in the international pages, or pages for visitors. If not, you can try to roughly compare course loads in terms of hours per week, something that might help you in convincing the board of examiners if necessary. You can also apply for a small extra assignment to make up for the missing points—generally these count towards less than 7.5 ECTS.

Things to keep in mind

If you want to go to a partner university there are strict deadlines. If you are applying for a US university, for example, the UU deadline will be early December. For most other universities, the UU will set a deadline in mid-January. By this date, all the necessary forms have to be uploaded to Osiris. These are not completely binding, so don't worry about the budget form being slightly optimistic, or not knowing exactly what you're specific research interests are. Of course, when you can make all the arrangements so early that your budget is completely realistic, and your research aims completely defined, all the better.

However, if you are arranging your stay at a host university yourself, there are no deadlines. Some universities will still take in new students as late as June. This does not mean, however, that you can put off arranging your stay abroad to the very last minute. The later it gets, the more hassle, and the more deadlines of Dutch organisations you will miss, such as DUO (formerly known as IB-Groep) and scholarships (many of which need you need to apply for at least three months in advance of the start of your semester abroad). So, start early, but do not give up until the new academic year has actually started.

3. Getting There

So you have decided on a few universities you would like to go to, how do you succeed in securing a place there? Again, start as soon as you have an idea of where you want to study. Try contacting the universities before the 1st of December, so you will have the Christmas holidays to tally which universities reacted positively and at which you want to enquire further. There are several options: If it's a partner university, you're saved a lot of hassle. Otherwise, you can e-mail the university (teacher or International Office), or apply directly to the university website via forms or an online application programme. Often, the initial contact with the host university will be written, and after some correspondence on particulars, they will ask you to complete your application online, or send in certain forms. This application process differs for each university, and guidelines can be found on that university's website.

Guidelines for setting up contact

- Make sure that you properly inspect the university's website, to make sure you know what courses they are offering, and what the general conditions are. This way, you show you are genuinely interested in the university because you have taken the time to study what they offer. Possessing a lot of information beforehand will also speed up the correspondence.
- If you e-mail a professor and don't get a reply, you can forward the e-mail to the official office that deals with applications. This way, the office will be aware of your attempt and can try to help you find a place. Often, though, a professor approves and then directs you to the international office to sort things out. You will almost always have to arrange your application via their international office, but an approval from a professor strengthens your case. However, if the academic staff are of the opinion that a foreign student can't be admitted for a single term, the international office might think otherwise, so it's always useful to e-mail them in case of a rejection and ask if there are any other possibilities.
- Save the format of your e-mail, as you can use it for multiple universities, so long as you change the names and particulars. Spend time on drafting the concept e-mail, because it has to provide all the necessary information, be concise, and free of any errors.
- If you're applying to a highly renowned university that will not admit you, you can ask to be allowed to audit their courses. This means that you would take the course without receiving a grade for your work. In this way, the university collects its fees from you, but does not have to pay for you as a real student. Utrecht University can then transcribe your grades, if you ask your professor for a short e-mail to your tutor or coordinator, stating how you have done in the course.
- You can also ask UU professors if they have any contacts with the university you are planning to go to, or if they know any good universities in your particular area of interest. Other students who have already gone to your university of choice can also provide some useful information, as can those already studying at the host university.

An example e-mail to a university

Dear Professor *****,

My name is ***** , and I am a first-year student of the research master Literary Studies: Comparative Literature, at Utrecht University, the Netherlands.

As a part of the requirements for this master's programme, I have to study abroad for the first semester of the second year (roughly from September to February). I would like to take either postgraduate courses or tutorials that cover material connected to the area of my thesis, which will deal with late-Victorian detective literature and its connection with the anxiety produced by progressing technology.

I was wondering if there's any possibility of taking courses adding up to 30 ECTS at the Department of English, preferably the MA English: 1850-Present. Courses such as "Modernity and the City: 1850-1930" and "Prison Writing" particularly sparked my interest, but many others seem promising too.

If there is no possibility of taking postgraduate courses, I'd be more than happy to audit.

I have an excellent academic track record: BA English cum laude, GPA for the RMA is currently at 4.0, and I have enclosed an up to date CV.

Of course, I realise finding a place at a university Utrecht has no connections with is difficult, and the outline of what I would like to study is tentative. Perhaps you could give an indication of its feasibility?

Thank you very much for your attention,

Yours sincerely,

*****.

Basically, this e-mail has 5 elements:

1. Explain who you are and what programme you are currently in.
2. Mention how relevant/interesting the host university's area of study is to what you're doing. This way, you show that you're interested in their research, and that you are motivated to attend the programme.
3. Be specific about what you want to do. Here is where your research comes in: mention several courses that appeal to you, and indicate which programme you would like to apply for. Bear in mind that the courses they offer need not be tailored to your interests, as long as there are no great discrepancies.
4. Optional: if the programme requires specific grades (like a GPA of 3.7 or a honours degree) it won't hurt to mention in the e-mail that you have a good

track record if you do. Adding a CV or Osiris transcript of your grades may help too, but this will very likely remain unread.

5. Be polite and close off your e-mail modestly and appropriately. You are, after all, asking them for a favour.

Fees

It is important that you check the fees for your specific programme so that you can make an informed guess about what you will have to pay for a single term, although different universities have different ways of calculating fees. It's good to know what the fees for the entire year are, however, so you can object if the university tries to charge you an amount that comes dangerously close to what an entire year would cost. When you have contacted someone at your host university, it is wise to ask for an approximation of what you will have to pay. Ask them if you will have to pay 'pro rata' (course fees divided by number of terms or courses) and if there will be additional 'course fees' (charged per course) and 'tuition fees' (charged for being enrolled as a student) involved. This information is not binding, but at least it can give you a good indication of what you will have to pay, as well as some back-up when suddenly the fees turn out to be much higher. Beware though that you will have to stay registered at UU as an MA student and that those full year's fees will also apply to you.

Some universities have exchange guides where they offer rough estimations of how much a stay might cost you, including things like a sport card, average room fees, general living expenses, etc. Be sure to check these guides thoroughly.

Things to keep in mind

After you've sent your initial e-mail, it may take a few weeks before you get a reply, depending on how busy they are. Correspondence may go slowly, so it's up to you to reply quickly and speed up the process a bit. Don't underestimate the time involved in e-mailing back and forth, however. If each reply takes a week, you can only expect to receive four e-mails a month. Try to have all your questions ready so that your end of the correspondence goes smoothly.

However, if the e-mail exchanges are incredibly slow, without yielding any answers, consider enquiring at a few other universities. If you wait too long for information, and it turns out the university cannot offer you anything satisfactorily, you will have a hard time finding another host university to study at.

When you have come to the point that actual forms have to be filled in, make sure you always use the name as it appears on your passport or ID card. If you accidentally slip in a given name that differs from your official name(s), agreements may become void.

4. Going There

You've contacted a university and they accepted you as a student, now what? The hard part is over, and what is left is a lot of sorting out to do, which is not difficult, just time-consuming.

Get your abroad stuff in order

- Ask your host university whether they offer housing, and if not, if they know where you could look for good student accommodation. Inform after your possibilities as soon as you have received a confirmation of your acceptance, because campus housing is very likely to be limited. Countries or areas often have websites that offer housing. <http://www.gumtree.com/>, for example, is a website offering almost everything within the UK, including rooms for rent or sharing. Also try mailing lists of your host university, or a Facebook page connected with the university to ask for available rooms. Craigslist is also an option: <http://www.craigslist.org/about/sites>
- Some countries, like America, require you to fill in countless forms, get a visa, and go for vaccinations. Again, start early with this, as it is a lot of hassle.
- Make sure your rooms will be fully insured against theft and other damages, because your laptop will probably be the only place you'll have your university work stored.
- Be careful when renting rooms. Make clear agreements, and if at all possible, get a written (and legal!) account of the agreements. Try to keep a possible deposit as low as possible, pay it into a fund rather than to the landlord, or avoid paying one at all.

Get your home stuff in order

- Arrange everything with DUO (formerly IB-groep) at least two months in advance. Although this can be done later, if the necessary forms from the university haven't come in, for example, but keep in mind that if you pass deadlines, you will have to arrange more things by yourself, which would otherwise have been arranged for you by DUO. Details of what to do can be found here:

http://www.ib-groep.nl/particulieren/studiefinanciering/sfho/buitenland/Tijdelijke_studie_of_stage.asp

The forms that deal with the 'OV-vergoeding' have to be filled in by the Studiepunt, not the International Office! Take the forms together with: a copy of your something that proves you have been admitted to your host university, a form that shows what period you will be abroad, and possibly an ID to the Studiepunt and explain your situation to them. They might balk if you have arranged your stay yourself, but with the abovementioned information, they should be able to help you. DUO is very lenient on when they receive the OV forms, but if you mail them four weeks in advance, they'll arrange everything for you.

If you're from a country outside the EU studying here, keep in mind that you will have to remain registered with a Dutch (or Belgian) address to remain eligible for EU fees.

- Very important: check whether your insurance and health care cover a stay abroad, and what their precise conditions are. If you only have limited coverage, consider expanding this. Often, banks offer travelling insurance for an entire year, allowing you to compile a package to your specific needs.
- Check what the period of notice is for your mobile phone provider to either fully end your subscription, or to pause it. Some providers are more lax in this than others, so check at least two months before what your provider's rules are.
- When you're about to return from your abroad studies, don't forget to arrange to get a transcript of your grades for the UU system. Here are the necessary forms:
http://www.uu.nl/SiteCollectionDocuments/GW/GW_StudiePunt/eng-aanvraag-goedkeuring-vervanging-onderwijsonderdelen.pdf

Things to keep in mind

- Many things work with two- or three-month deadlines. Keep this in mind, and try to arrange everything within this time frame.
- Make sure you make photocopies of important documents, like your passport, driver's licence, health care card, etc. In case of loss or theft, these have to be reissued, which is difficult if you don't have something to prove your identity with. Another great idea is to scan some of these, and e-mail them to your own account, so that you can always access and print them.
- Many countries expect you to have a work permit in order to obtain a job, so if you're planning on working alongside your studies, fix this well in time. You might also consider doing some volunteering, as this does not require a work permit.

List of Useful Websites

UU partner universities:

<http://www.uu.nl/EN/informationfor/students/education/studyabroad/whywhere/Pages/default.aspx>

DUO foreign affairs page:

http://www.ib-groep.nl/particulieren/studiefinanciering/sfho/buitenland/Tijdelijke_studie_of_stage.asp

Scholarships for Dutch students:

<http://www.nuffic.nl/nederlandse-studenten/financiering/beursopener>

Transcribing grades to UU:

http://www.uu.nl/SiteCollectionDocuments/GW/GW_StudiePunt/eng-aanvraag-goedkeuring-vervanging-onderwijsonderdelen.pdf

Rooms:

<http://www.gumtree.com>

<http://www.craigslist.com>