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Introduction

My 2nd semester of Software Development I've spent at HvA in Amsterdam. This was the second time I decided to go to this school when opportunity appeared. First time I did Mobile Development semester during Computer Science studies, this time I chose Big Data. I had some knowledge in that direction and wanted to broaden it. Other thematic semesters are also available at HvA. I was considering doing Software for Science but ended up going for Big Data.

Experiences at the host university

Semester in Dutch schools looks different than in other countries. Here, semester is divided into two parts. At the end of each part there are exams and classes switch a bit. What usually happens at the end of semester, in Netherlands happens in the middle and end of the semester.

For Big Data Semester I had to attend Software Scientist and Engineer, Business and Visualization classes. I also had to choose additional subject which was very simple but provided a good amount of knowledge. I decided to do class that thought me more about writing professional papers for school and job. All students for that semester had to also attend group meetings for main project. Only those meetings and Software Scientist and Engineer class, lasted whole semester.

I had to program in new to me language, which was R. I thought I will do this semester in Python, but later I found out that only half of students will be doing their programming projects in Python. Groups were decided by the teacher and there was no possible to transfer since class was full. I heard that starting next semester all groups will program in Python, which is much better solution.

There were a lot of international students in my class, so I didn't feel out of place. Everybody was very welcoming and helpful. I ended up in a group with only Dutch classmates and I had the best time with them.

I liked working on a main project that most, even though I had to do it in R. It was challenging but in a good way. We worked on real life case, since HvA cooperates with real companies. We also received feedback from those companies.

I enjoyed all my classes, but I think there were too many exams and assignments. I found myself struggling a bit. I had little time for myself, because I had to keep working on different assignments. Especially since I had to learn new programming language and almost immediately work with it. I didn't enjoy written exams for the big data theory and visualization. I thought it was unnecessary and quite hard.

I had an opportunity to talk to students doing other thematic semesters. Even though overall I did enjoy my experience with Big Data, I do see it as difficult and time consuming. I liked what Software for Science students were doing much more and I would advise to go for that semester if you would like to have more time and enjoy Amsterdam with less pressure. Internet of Things semester also seemed to be very nice with enjoyable classes and time friendly.

Social and cultural experiences

I didn't end up going to that many parties, since I had to focus on my studies more. I also was living with my partner that I met before, so I wasn't interested in going out that much. There is however an amazing student organization that collects all abroad students not only from HvA but also University of Amsterdam. They organize a lot of fun activities and every week there is a party at the bar in the middle of Amsterdam, just for international students.

I would advise to attend those events and also bond with classmates. There are plenty of amazing people who can also feel a bit lost, because they are in a different country and don't know anybody. There is always somebody to talk to.

I would also like to stress how amazingly helpful is the International Office at HvA. Especially Janet Hofstra that always found a way to help me. She is one of the kindest people I've ever met and tries the hardest to help international students. In case of any problems, she is the person to reach out to.

Practical experiences

Application process was very easy, thanks to International Coordinators at KEA. I was always reminded about everything, so I don't miss any deadlines. I felt comfortable about asking any questions, even what felt like stupid ones. I just filled the application, chose program, wrote a motivational letter and few weeks later found out that I got accepted.

For accommodation HvA offers help with finding a place to stay in Amsterdam. I received help from them the first time I came to Netherlands and very quickly got an offer, which saved me a lot of stress. This time I also was offered help with finding accommodation, but I declined it, because I already had a place to stay. HvA also offers to pick students up from the airport, which is incredibly helpful.

I spent my money mostly on food and traveling. I lived in Hilversum, which is a city next to Amsterdam. It meant that I had to travel with train. I wasn't eligible for traveling reimbursement from Dutch government, so traveling cost me quite a bit. If you live in Amsterdam, this problem disappears. There are bike lanes everywhere and it's very easy to bike around the city. Metro tickets also don't cost that much.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would highly recommend going to HvA for semester abroad. The quality of teaching in this school is at a high standard. I can recommend Big Data semester for students that are interested in it. But if you rather have more time and less pressure, I would advise to choose

different thematic semester. From my experience, Mobile Development had nice amount of learning, work and free time. I heard that also Internet of Things and Software for Science offers nice program, while not overbearing with amount of work.