

Exchange Semester at Howest

Academic Details

1. Where and when did you study abroad?

- I pursued my studies in Cybersecurity at Howest in Bruges, Belgium. This marked my 3rd semester at KEA, and my academic term at Howest spanned from September 2023 to February 2024.

2. What KEA program did you attend at the time?

- At KEA, I am currently studying IT-Technology.

Cybersecurity Classes at Howest:

- **Emergent Security (Industry, Software Defined Radio, RFID, and AI Security):**
 - Explored security aspects in emerging technologies such as Industry 4.0, Software Defined Radio, RFID, and AI.
- **Windows and Linux Server Security:**
 - Focused on securing both Windows and Linux server environments, addressing vulnerabilities and implementing robust security measures.
- **Datacenter Virtualization:**
 - Delved into virtualization on a larger scale, particularly within the context of data center environments.
- **Project Development:**
 - Engaged in a comprehensive project development experience, akin to creating a startup, to apply theoretical knowledge in a practical setting.
- **Web Pentesting and Honeypots:**
 - Created a secure web server integrated with a honeypot and a Security Information and Event Management (SIEM) system. The objective was to fortify one's server while attempting to breach the security of other groups.
- **Advanced Web Pentesting:**
 - Received advanced training from a professional affiliated with Centre for Cyber Security Belgium (CCB), focusing on sophisticated methods of hacking into web servers.
- **Infrastructure Security:**
 - Explored security considerations at the infrastructure level, addressing the protection of essential components in a system or network.

My Stay

I received my acceptance letter from Howest just a month before classes began and found myself in a hostel that was closed for the season, sharing it with 10-12 other students in a similar situation.

Before arriving, I was assigned to a study group with a Swedish fellow studying computer science and two other Howest students. Given our shared accommodation, I reached out to my Swedish peer about rooming together for cost efficiency and a more enjoyable experience, to which he agreed. Throughout the semester, there were only five of us studying computer science — my Swedish roommate, two students from Mexico, and myself. While most opted for easier classes together, I found myself in courses alongside local Belgian students.

The majority of Erasmus students pursued Global Business Management. I think the biggest foreign country at Howest was Mexico with around 8 students from Mexico. Our group of approximately 20 Erasmus students formed close bonds, engaging in various activities such as dining, ice skating, and attending festivals together. Initially, we stuck together as a tight-knit group, but over time, I also developed strong friendships with some from Belgium.

However, my closest companions remained those I shared the hostel with. Together, we explored numerous cities in Belgium, ventured into Holland, and even spent holidays in France. Our group was diverse, fostering conversations in German due to the presence of two Austrians and two Germans, often joined by another Austrian. Additionally, two Japanese and one Peruvian were also part of our hostel experience.

My exchange semester in Belgium turned out to be one of the most memorable periods of my life. Whether you plan an exchange anywhere, I highly recommend it. Anticipate forming lifelong friendships and embarking on an unforgettable journey. My only advice is to approach it with an open mindset and consider staying with fellow students for a more enriching experience.

Academic Experience

- 1. How helpful was the receiving school in the process of choosing classes and settling you in?**
 - I received warnings about the advanced nature of the classes I selected, but my passion for the subject helped me acclimate quickly.
- 2. What classes/study experiences did you find the most rewarding? Why?**
 - I honestly liked all the classes and I have learned a lot in all of them.
- 3. What classes/study experiences did you find least relevant or least valuable to you? Why?**
 - The Project Development class, while not directly related to security, was still enjoyable and insightful. The strong collaboration within my group made it a valuable experience.
- 4. What classes would you advise other KEA students going to the receiving school to choose or not to choose?**
 - Just pick the classes that look the most interesting. I can vouch for the cybersecurity classes at least. I attended one class the Global Business students had and it was pretty boring, but then again it is not really my style.

Practical Experience

- 1. How was the application process?**
 - a. **What did KEA help you with?**
 - My coordinator was very helpful and responsive.
 - b. **What help did you receive from your school abroad?**
 - Getting accepted to the school took an unexpectedly long time, and I received my acceptance letter only a month before classes started. There were challenges with absenteeism, and for a period, I found myself serving as a liaison between Howest and KEA to address these issues.
- 2. Did you have any practical difficulties settling down in at your destination?**
 - I resided with a group of 10-12 people in what used to be a hostel, now closed for the season, creating an intimate living space exclusively for us students. This turned out to be one of the most enjoyable aspects of the trip, as we formed strong bonds and were nearly inseparable. I highly recommend choosing accommodation with other students if you embark on an exchange semester—it adds a lot to the experience. During the holidays, five of us, including myself, traveled together to both France and Holland. The connections I made during this semester are undoubtedly friendships for life.

3. Where did you live?

- I resided on the outskirts of Bruges, but with a rented bike, the commute to school took a mere 15 minutes. Renting a bike is practically a necessity in Bruges, as it proved to be a popular and convenient mode of transportation for everyone. It significantly eased getting around the city.
- **a. Was it difficult to find accommodation?**
 - Despite attempting to search for accommodation, my efforts were futile. I couldn't find any available places, leading to Howest placing me in the hostel with fellow students. In hindsight, I couldn't be happier with that arrangement.
- **b. Was it expensive?**
 - I wouldn't characterize living expenses as particularly high, although we did spend a significant amount on frequent nights out partying. As an Erasmus student, it's typical to expect to engage in nightlife activities about 3-5 nights a week.

4. What kind of expenses did you have in general?

- Mainly alcohol...
- **a. Did you spend more or less money than you budgeted with?**
 - The Erasmus grant, coupled with the government's SU, proved to be remarkably generous. Thankfully, budget constraints were not a significant issue during my stay.

5. What kind of income did you have during your exchange?

- I relied on my SU, the Erasmus grant, my last paychecks, and some investment payouts to cover my expenses during the exchange.