

EXCHANGE

EXPRESS

Cultural Exchange in Challenging Circumstances:

Visiting the Taipei Representative Office

BOSTON COLLEGE TESTIMONIALS

by Anna Zoeler

"My unique story abroad experience by Zanita Levíčková"

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A story for the minorities?

Believe in your self – how can UvA library create a more diversified environment

EDI PHOTO COMPETITION
Winners

UvA Study Abroad

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BOSTON COLLEGE TESTIMONIAL

ANNA ZOELER

"Opening the acceptance email for my semester abroad at Boston College, I immediately felt excitement. However, it did not take long for this first initial wave of joy to turn into a hundred questions. Even though the uncertainty and ambiguity overwhelmed me at first, my experience as an international student at UvA has shown me that being open and flexible will help me tackle these issues. Additionally, knowing I will not be the only one in that position has been a very comforting thought throughout my journey.

When I first landed in Boston, I noticed a Swedish girl with a BC file at the luggage claim. I pushed myself to step out of my comfort zone and went to speak to her. We ended up sharing an Uber, and it was only for her, that I met one of my later best friends at BC. It taught me to use every opportunity to meet people even though you might be skeptical at first, you will never know where it will lead you. Academically, I realized that BC is a lot more time-consuming than I expected. Especially, finals were a hard time, but my friends and I kept each other motivated.

I believe especially more difficult times are the ones in which a friend group really bonds. Because we experienced so many unique moments of joy, be it going to New York, a road trip to Niagara Falls, tailgating and watching BC's football matches, but also every one of us going through extreme personal disperse, we grew so close to each other. For this reason, saying goodbye was almost the most difficult part for me. Overall, it was an enriching rewarding time, full of adventures. It was not always easy, but in the end, it was one of the best decisions I ever made."





CULTURAL EXCHANGE IN CHALLENGING CIRCUMSTANCES VISITING THE TAIPEI REPRESENTATIVE OFFICE

HUUG ROOSJEN AND DIDI SPELBOS

On the 26th of April, we went with a small delegation to The Hague to visit the Taipei Representative Office, which informs visitors about Taiwanese culture. We were received there by Representative Chen Hsin-Hsin and two of her colleagues.

Some important facts to know about Taiwan are the following. First, Taiwan has more residents than the Netherlands (23.6 million approximately in Taiwan in 2020 compared to 17.7 million in The Netherlands in 2022). Also, as the Representative informed us, there are quite some Dutch companies with whom Taiwan has a good relationship. The two best known are ASML for their microchips and KLM, which is the only European airline (and the flag carrier of the Netherlands) that flies directly to Taipei, the capital of Taiwan.

“Taiwan has 23.6 million residents, which is more than the Netherlands”

For this trip, we were asked to think about the following question: What can the Cultural Exchange Ambassadors learn from the Taipei Representative Office and how they represent Taiwanese culture? In this article, we will share our considerations regarding that question.

As a culturally diverse group of ambassadors, we understood that there were several challenges facing us on this trip. The fact

that the Office was named after the capital of Taiwan rather than the name of the country itself because of political reasons, is illustrative of the controversial circumstances we would be bound to find ourselves in during our visit. Moreover, we struggled with accepting the information that our fellow ambassadors from mainland China would not be allowed to join us. This raised the difficult question of how to handle a culturally controversial and challenging exchange without jeopardizing our mutual goal: to foster meaningful intercultural communication and to learn from one another. We debated about how critical our questions to the Representative could be, as we did not want to offend anyone, while at the same time not avoiding the most difficult topics since those are usually the most important ones as well. We decided we accepted the challenge and went to The Hague with a small delegation of curious students.

Upon our arrival, part of our initial concerns dissolved, as we were warmly invited into the majestic Office by three spokespersons, and were presented with a range of delicious snacks, among which was bubble tea. Luckily, we had not come empty-handed either, and were able to answer their nice gesture by handing them some typical Amsterdam cookies. We quickly realized how important this welcome was in breaking the ice and bridging part of the cultural gap between us and the Representative: sharing aspects of one's culture with each other is an effective way of involving the other. Next to this, the Representative easily found common ground with each of us, as she had visited almost all of our native countries.



We noticed immediately how open the Representative was in talking about the issue between Taiwan and China, which made it easier for us to ask those critical questions that had been burning on our minds.

“Sharing one’s culture with each other is an effective way of involving the other”

Still, we ran into several issues, for instance, how to deal with maintaining good relations with mainland China and with Taiwan at the same time, but also what exactly our role was in this, as cultural exchange ambassadors and students. Were we to take a stance on the issue? What kind of language should we use, both among each other and to the Representative? We figured that we would try to address the difficult points without using too emotionally laden language, however, even that decision met with criticism, and understandably so. Some of our fellow students felt that we should deploy more specific language, pointing out the situation “as it is”. However, is there just one way in which to view anything? The same situation might look very different to different people in various places. A similar idea became clear when we realized that the standpoint of the Representative was not neutral either, but rather influenced by her

own opinions and emotions. It is her job to represent “Taiwanese culture” and “the Taiwanese people”, but how to do this as one individual? Will there not always be a part of the culture and the people that will be left out? Is there even such a thing as a “collective identity”? These questions guided as well as hindered us during our visit and in the discussion that arose afterwards.

“Is there such a thing as a ‘collective identity’?”

We have learned a lot from this trip. The Representative gave us two essential tips for working in the diplomatic field. Firstly, it is of utmost importance to be honest and open to whoever is sitting across from you. However, there is also a fine line between lying and just not saying everything. You will need to find a balance between the two; there are no tricks for that, that is something you need to learn. Secondly, there is the importance of listening to one another. If you do not listen carefully, you will miss crucial information. Another aspect of diplomacy is finding a way to bridge cultural gaps. But how can you do that? You can try to find the ‘me too’: the common ground. Another important thing is to keep issues visible and communicate about them with one another, especially in difficult political situations such as the one surrounding Taiwan.

Our overall experience was eye opening. The warm welcome made us feel at ease, which was very helpful in maintaining the conversation. Many of the questions we posed in this article remain unanswered, however this only adds to our fascination with the field of diplomacy as well as with Taiwanese culture and political situation. We think it is essential to keep the cultural exchange going, even as it can be difficult sometimes. With this article, we hope to open up the conversation among students from different cultural backgrounds, and we invite them to try to navigate the difficulties of diplomacy like we have done. It will be hard, but we have to keep communicating with each other and listening to one another, if we want to address some of the most pressing issues of our time.

"MY UNIQUE STORY ABROAD EXPERIENCE"

ŽANETA LEVÍČKOVÁ

For me, Erasmus was an opportunity to find myself and to step out of my comfort zone. Coming from Prague, the Czech Republic, I was used to what some would call luxury. I was living with my parents, didn't have to pay any rent, didn't have to clean, do groceries, or pay bills. Studying abroad taught me to be more independent. I have also mastered patience and tolerance since I share a room with someone who comes from a completely different background than me. I have also become more frugal and realized the real value of money. As for my self-development, I feel like I'm becoming more resilient and I have built a tolerance to stress. Although time management has been challenging because I'm also taking courses at my home university, nothing is impossible and one can adapt to anything with time. After few weeks of living here, I have started to feel like I'm at home. Amsterdam is very multicultural, people are always outside and they smile a lot.

University has been great. Even though my course here, Communication Science is a bit different than what I study at Charles University, I enjoy the positive environment a lot. I'm grateful that I can take courses we don't even have back home and that I can learn something new each day. Since lectures are not attended by Erasmus students only, but rather by local people or international students from different continents, it adds many different perspectives on the teaching and it always amazes me how many various points of view are presented in the class. There is just one thing that I regret doing – only taking one semester instead of a year. Time in Amsterdam flies by so fast and when you are studying throughout the day and enjoying the city at night, you don't really have the time to think about anything else. That's probably why I'm not homesick yet. Having an opportunity to be here still feels unreal to me, and I feel very blessed. Thanks to my family and my home university, I'm able to experience studying abroad and make everlasting friendships and memories. I could not recommend this opportunity enough.



TWIN CITY TALE A STORY FOR THE MINORITIES

STEVEN, RAMUNÉ AND MARIE

On the 7th of April Cultural Exchange Ambassador programme held a day trip to the University of Birmingham with the opportunity to learn about the city, and its history and gain new knowledge about equality, diversity, and inclusion from a different perspective. The day started with a tour of Birmingham cemeteries where we got to explore queer history. Afterwards, we got to experience the multicultural people's history and struggles in Birmingham and the UK through photographs and films in the library of Birmingham. Later, we got a look at the University of Birmingham archives, which had pictures, newspapers, religious works, and other similar pieces of historical memoirs. Lastly, we had an opportunity to network and make connections with people working at the University of Birmingham, and gain more insights into their work, experiences and knowledge, alongside - sharing our perspectives about the world, history and other similar topics.

The queer history tour in two of Birmingham's most well-known cemeteries was something that touched us all on an individual level. This is because, coincidentally, all three of us are part of the LGBTQIA+ society. Therefore, we felt it necessary to talk about our different experiences and perspectives on this topic.



Steven

"As a queer person myself, I grew up in a relatively conservative country, though not illegal, it was rough. The queer people's history is a history of oppression - where this walk in the cemetery provided a dissection of the lives of the queer people living in the Victorian era. I appreciate that this tour did not overtly emphasize the suffering, but rather a celebration of their life. This perspective is important as it sowed the seed of hope, rather than one that is born from spite."

Ramuné

"As an individual that had a very long journey of trying to figure out their sexuality and gender, the tour of queer history was very eye-opening. Growing up, I never could learn about queer people, as my country, during the Soviet Union, made it illegal to be part of the LGBTQ+ community and all of the writings and knowledge were deleted from our history. It was nice to see people who went through the things that they did, so we could have more inclusive and accepting living conditions, and to learn what I and other queer people in my country could do to create change."

Marie

"I was brought up in a very accepting environment, compared to most other families and countries, when it comes to being queer. As a result of that I never myself experienced any issue with coming out as bisexual or saw people being harassed for expressing themselves as being queer. I think that led to me being blind to the fact that it is still very much a group of our society that is being discriminated against and has been for a very long time. The tour reminded me of where we, as queer people, come from and the journey that was made to come to a place where I could live in such ignorant bliss. These kinds of reminders, therefore, seem crucial in my eyes to keep people aware of what has happened and is still happening when it comes to discrimination, towards all kinds of minorities, not just queer people."

To educate us about the multicultural city that is Birmingham, we got a tour of a photo exhibit in the library of Birmingham that depicts how the multicultural society there came about and evolved. The origin lies in colonialism and slavery, as to be expected in the United Kingdom, which was the most far-reaching colonizer. What was astounding to us is how you could see the evolution of non-Caucasian descendants as being perceived and depicted as animals or objects from the start to being perceived as actual human beings towards the end of the exhibit. The first photographs were solely descriptive of their appearances, it was as if you were watching National Geographic. In the later images, you can see more family portraits, graduation videos etc. of these non-Caucasian descendants, a much more humane and respectful depiction of them and their cultures. It was clear that they also chose to be in these later images and were even proud to pose. It was shocking to have a visualization of where these people came from, concerning their rights and respect towards them, even after slavery was abolished. And even though they have come far in that fight, we see that their descendants today are still fighting for equal treatment and the end of institutionalized racism, which to some Caucasians can seem invisible or nonexistent. For these latter Caucasians, it is so important to be made aware of what racism looks like in pictures, then and now, so that they cannot claim that it is nonexistent and to see with their own eyes the difference between the two time periods, but also the difference between the depiction of Caucasians and non-Caucasians throughout history and still, in modern-day media. Education and visualization about these issues are so important and all universities should work towards this in seminars, exhibitions etc. because they are forming the next generations and their education should touch on as many social issues and their history as possible, as to prevent history from repeating itself.

he archive shed some insight on the importance of retaining historical material for

for history: regardless of the perception of those materials. These are important as these materials provide a channel for the future generation - ourselves included to be included in the process. These materials allow us to have the space to confront our past so that we would not have the same mistake as before, digitalisation effort has been made to improve the accessibility of the database.

In the middle of our tour and at the end we got an amazing opportunity to speak with the representatives of the University of Birmingham and the people who were giving us the tours. This gave us a chance to discuss what we saw during the day and the things we learned and go more in-depth into each topic of the trip. We got a possibility to have a talk with the historians that were researching the history of queer peers of Birmingham and hear about how they decided to explore this topic, how they learned about it and why it is important. Besides, we got to meet students and lecturers from the University of Birmingham and learn about them, the university, and how it is different from UvA.

We learned a lot throughout this day and just in general by educating ourselves about the history and stories of minorities, intercultural relations etc. This leads us to believe that allowing others to educate themselves about this is so relevant. One idea we had to come to this is a communal database of archives across different universities with different translations available. It feels so important for students to not only be able to access the history of their country or environment, but also that of others. Another suggestion we would make is to give free seminars about, for example, queer historic figures. It would be especially interesting to know this hidden side of well-known figures that are portrayed as straight or not part of queer history in any way, even though they were. Representation in modern-day media, but also history is so important for ethnic and other minorities to feel comfortable and accepted in this society.



TORONTO TESTIMONIAL

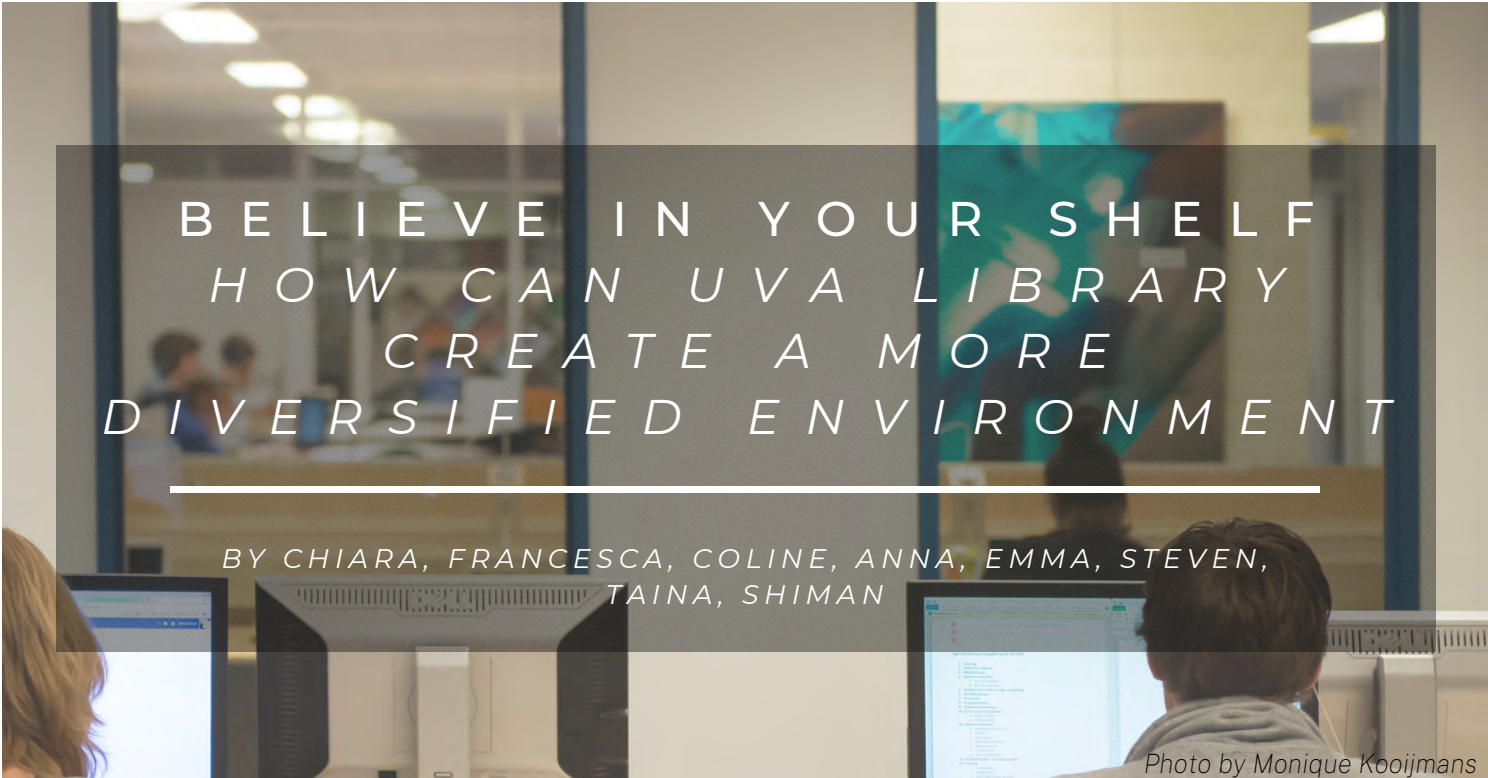
JERZY ULEWICZ

"Allegedly, the University of Toronto pretends to be Harvard in various films. It appears natural when you first arrive in Canada and everything seems American. You swiftly realize to what degree your brain is programmed by global culture to perceive patterns of North American landscape as archetypical, in a sense like ideas from above the Plato's Cave. Houses, streets, cars, everything seems to perfectly embody its essence. Then, your eyes adjust, and you see Canada – a country very vocal about its distinctness from The United States.

Throughout my life, I was moving around a lot, and I stopped linking home with a certain point in space. I know, however, that in Canada I felt at home. This second biggest country in the world becomes small and cozy thanks to the kindness of Canadians. Meeting them, I found it amazing how they engage, how each interaction matters to them. It is an open society that wants everyone to belong and inspires with its agenda of inclusion and positivity. At the same time, I got to see the terrible reality of almost polar class inequalities between the ones prospering within the grandeur of North American capital, and the ones left behind - millions of homeless and poor that try to survive in cities that are too dynamic.

This carte blanche that an exchange gives one truly makes one do a lot. There is a new world to explore and a new microcosm to create. I studied Economics of Conflict, Inequalities, Labor, Environment, and Health at a university filled with fantastic staff and infrastructure. It was a lot to take on, but it allowed me to establish a sketch of a plan for my further academic career. The schedule was tight and satisfying not only when it comes to school. I saw the sublime Niagara Falls, hitch-hiked to Québec attempting to speak French, spent Christmas in a cottage by a lake up north, took a bus to New York, spent the NYE in quarantine, and above all met genuine people from all around the world. One Canadian, that later became important in my life, invited me to the first Thanksgiving I have ever celebrated, after meeting me briefly in Montréal. When I was asked what I was grateful for I responded that I was grateful for the blood of Jesus Christ. Today, I am grateful for this exchange."





BELIEVE IN YOUR SHELF HOW CAN UVA LIBRARY CREATE A MORE DIVERSIFIED ENVIRONMENT

BY CHIARA, FRANCESCA, COLINE, ANNA, EMMA, STEVEN,
TAINA, SHIMAN

Photo by Monique Kooijmans

We started off thinking what is the University Library for UVA, located in different parts of the city. Most of the time, it is an effort to come to the library, therefore the question is who are we catering to, the people who come to the library, or the people for whichever reason that chose not to? UVA library has a long history and one of its main issues is disrepairment. However, infrastructure aside, how can the library as an institution, become a better space for all its users? We have listed a few suggestions, they may not be groundbreaking, but it is personal.

Accessibility

Accessibility means having the conditions in place to reduce or eliminate barriers to the active and effective participation of people living with disabilities on an equal basis with others.

In essence, the library is for all students. However, due to varying degrees of accessibility, not all students have access to the library in the same way. We believe that there is always room for improvement in making the library more accessible and it's our mission.

The first two solutions we could put into practice are directed at people with physical disabilities.

We think that improving and working on access ramps to balance a large number of existing steps could make a huge difference in making the UvA library more accessible. This could be a more economical solution than installing a lift.

Another option would be to create a working space directly on the ground floor by reducing the cafeteria or the hallway for example. This would make the creation of a lift less necessary while providing a suitable workspace for people living with disabilities.

A third solution is about timing. We think that a library should have a time when it closes and opens because not everyone studies or works at the same time. In fact, through our Erasmus, we met people that prefer to study during the night or very early. A library open 24/7 and also on the weekend can make a huge difference in the accessibility of the library for many students or workers. Accessibility is about this: making it possible for everyone to reach that place and at what time they want.

A fourth suggestion to make the library more accessible is creating (more) individual working spaces for people who have neurodevelopmental disorders like ADHD or are on the autism spectrum. These people could greatly benefit from studying in quieter and smaller study areas with fewer distractions. The UvA already has a wonderful system in place which allows students to book empty classrooms, called 'MapIQ'. Unfortunately, not (enough) students know this service exists. We suggest raising awareness of this service to especially aforementioned groups of students. In addition, preferential treatment could be given to them by giving them access to book those rooms for a longer period of time than the usual timeframe.

A final proposal could focus on the physical environment itself: environments, spaces, timetables, signage and materials, furniture and above all services should be designed from the inclusive perspective of Universal Design, i.e. the design methodology that aims to design products and environments that are, as far as possible, usable by all people, without the need for adaptation or specialized design.



Art

Natural light through large glass fronts is arguably one of the most crucial aspects of a library to ensure a peaceful and non-distracting environment, leaving little space for artistic displays, images, paintings etc. Nevertheless, Art states a unique opportunity for visual representation, inspiration and diversity, creating a more welcoming place. One location which is almost unavoidable is the bathrooms, however, are often neglected or very simplistic in their design. We propose that each semester students and staff are given the chance to submit their favourite poem, song lyric, quotes or saying of their family, country, culture etc. to the UvA library. A bottom-up approach to accumulating ideas will strengthen the sense of authentic representation rather than a top-down approach for students. Therefore, students will probably feel more representative and are more likely to identify with the UvA community. The submissions can be anonymous to ensure low entrance obstacles. Colour and font can also be chosen by the participant, otherwise, the library representative should ensure a large variety. A crucial aspect is to have the quotes both in English as well as in the original language to value and respect different cultural backgrounds while bridging disconnections between them.

Therapy Dogs

University students are living a fast-paced life nowadays and it is easy for us to get stressed with plenty of assignments and exams. It is no surprise that the most common effects of stress are related to students feeling mentally unwell, overwhelmed and struggling with all sorts of anxiety or even depression.

There are many studies showing that therapy dogs can be of great help for students' well-being. To be specific, spending time with puppies can, on one hand, decrease our levels of cortisol (a stress-related hormone) and lower blood pressure, and on the other hand, reduce sense of loneliness and improve our social engagement (Wein & Hicklin, 2018), which is also one way to improve equity, diversity and inclusivity. The practice of the Wharton School Undergraduate Division brought therapy dogs to campus during exam times in 2021 further shows that therapy dogs can distract students from the high level of stress and experience joy.

This suggests that the library of the University of Amsterdam could, for instance, implement therapy dog programs for students, helping those struggling mentally. The preferred practice site can be a garden or turf, where there is fresh air and spaces for interactive activities.

However, if Singel is the specific location for the implementation, we then suggest reserving a space on the ground floor with sofas and windows, providing students and the dogs with a comfortable and relaxing environment. Imagine a scenario where after a whole morning of study, the students are mentally exhausted. If the tense nerves do not relax, their working efficiency will eventually drop and it is likely that they will suffer from mental illness in the long run. Luckily, with the therapy dogs program, they can just grab a cup of coffee instead during the break and play with these caring puppies and promisingly, their mental health can be restored very soon. Initially, the library can experiment with the program during exam periods. If it turns out to be successful, the implementations can be applied to other timeframes and spaces.



STUDY TRIP TO MONTRÉAL

STUDY ASSOCIATION SFEER



This year, our Study Trip Committee organized a study trip to Montréal (Canada). During this study trip, we wanted to introduce our members to Canadian taxation and culture. Furthermore, we also wanted to make contact with other students and employees of tax offices. Below we explain what we did during this trip to achieve our goals.

One of the places we visited was Mazars Montreal, a global accounting firm and one of the top 10 largest accounting firms in the world. During the visit to Mazars, we met several employees from different tax departments. This visit was concluded with a lunch where we had a nice chat with Mazars employees.

Later that day we visited Deloitte Montreal. Deloitte is also a global accounting firm and belongs to the well known 'bigfour'. Deloitte gave us a masterclass on the Canadian tax system, during which several Deloitte employees spoke.

The next day we visited DLA Piper. DLA Piper is a global law firm. They gave us a lecture on Canadian income and corporate taxation. Furthermore, a few of our students gave a short presentation on the Dutch corporate income tax so that the Canadian staff also had an idea of what the Dutch tax system on corporations entails.

Later that day, we went to the McGill University Faculty of Law. We got a lecture from Professor Allison Christians. She is the head of tax law at McGill University. Within McGill University, Professor Allison Christians is part of the H.Heward Stikeman Chair in Tax Law.

We visited BDO Montreal a few days later. During this visit, the discussion between the culture in the Netherlands and Canada, among others, was central. The head of the fiscal department of BDO Montreal had studied in The Netherlands. This way we could have a good discussion about the differences in The Netherlands and Canada. BDO had also invited a number of students and a professor from the University of Sherbrooke.



During our trip, we also had our get-together with the law society LSA from McGill University. This way we could exchange ideas with Canadian students.

We can say that we achieved our objective through this study trip. It introduced us to a different tax system, which was certainly an added value for us in relation to our studies. We were able to make a comparison between the Dutch and Canadian tax systems.

Furthermore, we have certainly expanded our network. We spoke to many employees of the tax offices, but also to professors of McGill University and of the University of Sherbrooke. We also had contact with (tax) law students from McGill University.



EDI FESTIVAL PHOTO COMPETITION

To celebrate the EDI Festival, where students and staff members are brought together, the FSR-FdR is organizing a photo competition for all University of Amsterdam and University of Birmingham students. This year's theme is 'Somewhere to Belong'.

With this theme, we gave students the opportunity to share pictures depicting spaces, people, or even ideas that represent 'Somewhere to Belong.' As your student council(s), we work throughout the year to try to make the university a space where all students feel they belong. By sharing spaces, people or ideas that are important to you, we can better understand how to change and adapt our university to assure all students feel safe and comfortable; somewhere they belong.

A jury of peers have awarded prizes to the images that best capture the theme and genuine feelings of belonging. The selection of the photos will be hung in a UvA building with the winner's names and descriptions.

Pictured below is our previous year's winner. This year's winners can be found on the next pages.



FIRST PLACE

MARTIN VISSER

Hello! My name is Martin Visser. I'm a 22 year old South African student of Media and Culture at UvA but prior had spent my late teens as a safari guide and lead photographer for various lodges in South Africa, Botswana, and Zambia to name a few. My submission is an image from my stint in Zambia. I believe it is a prima example of EDI's theme as it projects the hidden beauty of Zambia's people.

This is an image of a ceremonial Tonga dance performed by members of the village adjacent to the lodge I had worked at. The image details the art of the performance, with the open shutter I had used to showcase the wild yet precise nature of the dance.



SECOND PLACE

XIZHI HUANG

On the plateau in northwest China, a shepherd and his flock are on their way to the next pasture.





THIRD PLACE

JIN WAN

February 27th, 2022, Amsterdam, Dam Square. People rallied to protest against Russia's invasion in Ukraine and appealed for peace. The most cruel thing about the war is witnessing the collapse of the things that bring you belongingness.