



UvA Study Abroad

# Cultural Exchange Express



Equity,  
diversity and  
inclusion in  
student  
mobility



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# EDITORIAL REFLECTION

The Cultural Ambassadors program was a phenomenal way to take a world, the one we all share, inside of a classroom. The first half of the program revolved around deepening our professional skills and engagement with each other, while the second half allowed us to explore different cultural and social communities and organizations in Amsterdam using the knowledge we gained

From the first day, we got to collectively pick a team name. We decided on “The Hardshells” because it fit our initial introduction to each other. Simply put we all felt closed off and struggled with vulnerability. It was beautiful to see how the combined effort of each week's topic and the leadership of Guido brought us closer to ourselves, all of our team members, our city, and our community.

From the different fashions of an introduction in the very first meeting to deep democracy in the last, we learned how to open ourselves up to each other and create a safe, fun, loving environment.

When entering any unfamiliar group we as humans socially rank ourselves, and generally that ranking has a low esteem attached to it. That lesson on social ranking brought an entirely new perspective to our minds- we are all human and all share these social tactics no matter where we go. To rip off that bandage and accept discomfort and uncertainty in each new place you take yourself, you are granting an experience that could take you in a direction you've never seen before and build a life with it. Whether that be another city, country, university, job, or family, we will take our ever-improved cultural competence, resilience, and adaptability with us in our back pocket.

## The Hardshells

Written by Evan Fox & Eva Palombi



# EDITORIAL REFLECTION

**DJ GANG**

**WRITTEN BY:  
JOHANNA WIESER**

Participating in the Cultural Exchange Ambassadors Programme has been an enriching experience that has enhanced my intercultural competence and personal growth. This journey provided me with practical tools to navigate cultural differences, adapt my communication style, and foster meaningful connections across diverse settings.

One of the highlights of the programme was my XL Assignment, where I joined a Bracelet Making Workshop organized by ESN Amsterdam. This event demonstrated how creativity can bridge cultural gaps. While crafting bracelets, participants shared stories from their diverse backgrounds, fostering connection and understanding. Analyzing the event also taught me about inclusivity, particularly the importance of strategic planning and promotion to attract diverse audiences.



Beyond this assignment, the programme encouraged stepping out of my comfort zone by engaging with a vibrant, multicultural community. Through shared stories and collaborative projects, I gained a broader perspective on the world and developed valuable teamwork and leadership skills. These experiences reinforced the importance of empathy, active listening, and adaptability in fostering inclusivity.

This programme has been transformative, giving me the confidence to lead, connect, and thrive in global environments. It has inspired me to continue building bridges across cultures and applying these valuable lessons in all aspects of my life. I am deeply grateful for this opportunity and proud of the growth it has brought me.



After having the opportunity to be a part of the Cultural Exchange Ambassadors, my perspective has widened and my leadership skills have broadened. In particular, the privilege/favorite place assignment stood out to me as the most impactful assignment in the Cultural Ambassador's Programme. During our first Cultural Ambassador's session, we were put into groups of 5-7 students that would remain until the end of the programme. Being divided into smaller groups encouraged conversation that helped my groupmates and I become close friends. Through these conversations, I was able to learn about cultural differences in many countries, including England, Australia, and China.

For the privilege/favorite place assignment, each group was tasked with visiting their favorite monument in Amsterdam that represents diversity and inclusion. At the monument, the group was told to put together a "privilege pyramid", ranking the identities of a person in order of advantage in participating in a student mobility programme. Our group chose the Homomonument and went into a restaurant to share a meal while discussing our privilege pyramid ranking. This assignment considered how different cultures perceive privilege, and how social hierarchy is defined in each of our home countries. I was extremely interested in hearing each group member's perspective while sharing my own, and the conversation was a reminder to keep an open mind when speaking to others.

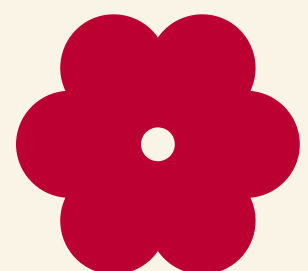
Another aspect of the programme that I enjoyed was the leadership session. During the session, I learned about different leadership styles and how to apply leadership practices in a cultural setting. The importance of cultural inclusivity was emphasized as well. It was an opportunity to develop personal skills that translate to school, personal relationships, and my professional career.

The Cultural Exchange Ambassadors Programme introduced me to wonderful people from all around the world. I am grateful for the opportunity to meet new friends while discussing impactful topics that taught me to broaden my perspective, be aware of cultural differences, and discover my leadership style.

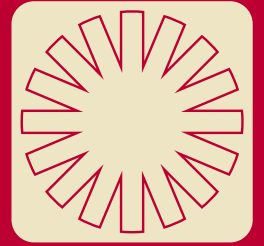
By Mia Faddah

# Editorial reflection —

*Very demure, very mindful*



# EDITORIAL REFLECTION - DE UNIEKE MUIZEN



Written by Megan  
De Unieke Muizen: Uma, Akiva, Shuyan, Chevronie,  
Karoline, and Megan

As my study abroad term wraps up, the past four months have felt like both the longest and shortest of my life. Long, because of the incredible experiences and people I've encountered. Short, because time flew by with all the fun I had. One memory that stands out is my time in the Cultural Exchange Ambassador Program.

Meeting just once a week with brief and engaging group assignments, the program was a fantastic way to connect with others—UVA students who've studied abroad or exchange students from around the world like me. It brought together people passionate about travel, sharing stories, and learning from one another. Beyond the friendships, it gave me the chance to develop valuable soft skills like presentation, networking, and storytelling in a supportive environment. These skills will undoubtedly benefit me back in Canada.

The program wasn't just about meetings; it was filled with meaningful experiences. Volunteering at the study abroad fair helped me practice storytelling while connecting with UVA students interested in exchanging to North America. A highlight of the program for me was the boat tour, where we bonded as a group, solidifying friendships beyond assignments. My team included students from Asia, Europe, and North America, which brought diverse perspectives and enriched our conversations.

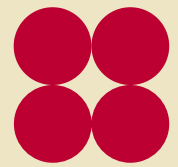
The assignments were reflective and manageable, encouraging personal insights about studying abroad and the privileges it entails. Their flexibility made them meaningful yet easy to complete within the term.

Serving as a leader presented challenges but was rewarding. My team's strong communication and collaboration made the experience enjoyable, and their trust in my leadership boosted my confidence. I gained practical experience leading a group through multiple tasks, something I might not have attempted at my home university.

Joining the Cultural Exchange Ambassador Program was one of the best decisions I made during my exchange. From learning new skills to making lifelong connections, it became a cornerstone of my time in Amsterdam—an experience I'll cherish forever.



# EDITORIAL REFLECTION GROUP 6



By Sarah & Lamia  
Strangers (not anymore)

This journey as exchange ambassadors started from a place of sheer curiosity and a longing to form new connections with people who could have a similar outlook on life. But very soon it turned into a safe place where we could have difficult conversations, share ideas and explore different creative avenues. Be it facilitating plenary sessions for the study abroad fair or the behind the scenes of the privilege assignment, we were more often than not put in uncomfortable positions where we had to balance putting forward our own ideas and opinions while also hearing others out and validating theirs. Being group leaders meant we had to make sure everyone had a say in all the decisions we made and that also included us. We learnt it the hard way that taking everyone into account is not easy and we cannot please everyone in the process of making decisions.

What was equally difficult was taking our own thoughts into account and being assertive as sometimes the most convenient thing to do is to go with the majority even if you know in your gut that there are better ways to go about something.

Therefore, we learnt a lot more than what we imagined we would through the process of being group leaders, leading a group of similarly aged, motivated students with out of the box ideas. Although we took part in many different activities that were extremely valuable to us as students and in our growth as future leaders, the most precious thing we found was each other. The friendship we share now could not have started without this. Looking back it is so funny to think that we all met in a lecture hall in ABC building just a few months ago and now we're already planning trips to each other's countries for the next semester when we would not see each other anymore.

Exchange is possibly the most beautiful and equally painful experience. You meet people you perhaps never would have and in a very short span of time become closer than friends you grew up with and just as the friendships are progressing to the next level, it's time to leave. It breaks our heart to know it is coming to an end but more grateful that it happened.





# RENEE THIERRY

**My name is Renee Thierry, and I am an exchange student from the University of Melbourne in Australia, currently studying at the University of Amsterdam. As a person with Dutch heritage, majoring in History and Politics, this experience is particularly meaningful to me.**

My paternal grandparents emigrated from the Netherlands to Australia in the 1950s, following World War II. They were part of a wave of Dutch immigrants who came to Australia, during a period when Australia's immigration policies were governed by the White Australia Policy, which restricted non-European immigration and reflected the racial prejudices of the time.

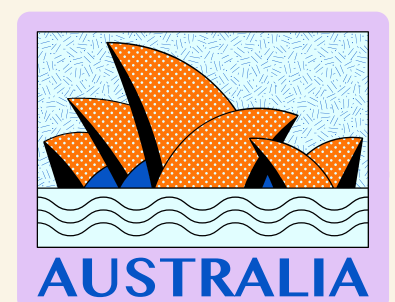
This intercultural experience is an opportunity for me to reflect on my privilege as a descendant of the White Australia Policy and to engage thoughtfully with Australia's complex history of colonization and immigration.

Upon arriving in Amsterdam, I was struck by a blend of nostalgia and excitement. I was raised within the Dutch Christian Reformed Church of Australia and was deeply influenced by the traditions and values of my Dutch heritage. As a queer person, this upbringing was both a source of cultural connection and challenge. The Dutch Reformed Church, while a cornerstone of my heritage, often presented complex dynamics for LGBTQ+ individuals.

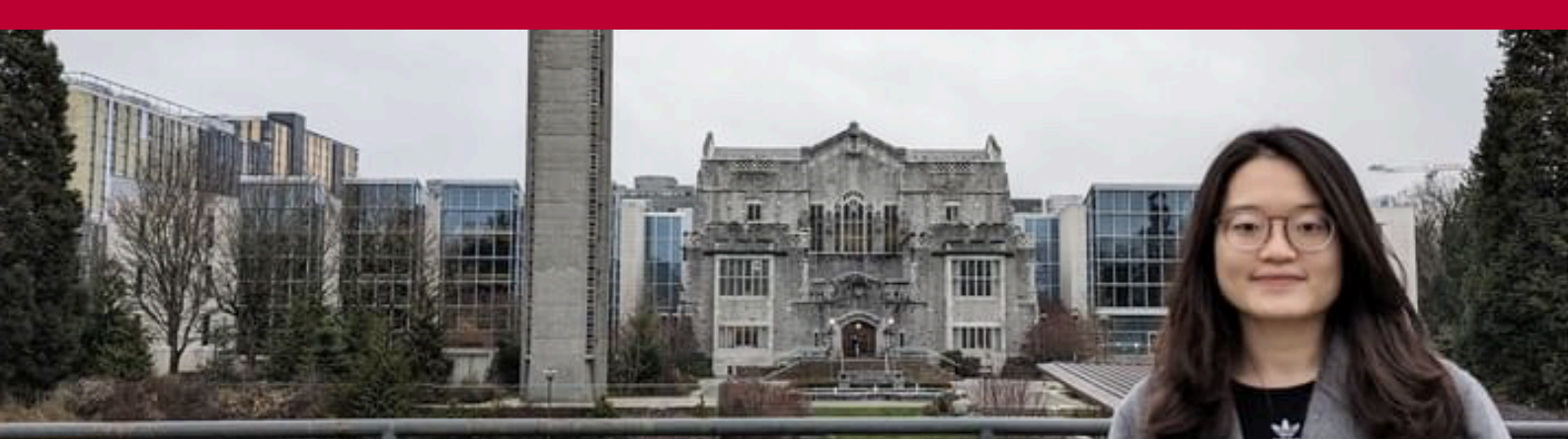
Navigating this space was difficult, but it also shaped my resilience and commitment to understanding the intersections of faith, identity, and culture.

**My studies at the University of Amsterdam offer me a unique opportunity to explore Dutch religious history from a new perspective and to grapple with the Netherlands' global narrative of progressivism.**

Beyond academics, this exchange is broadening my perspectives on diversity and inclusion. Interacting with local students and experiencing Dutch daily life have enriched my understanding of different cultural contexts and improved my adaptability and cross-cultural communication skills. In summary, my exchange at the University of Amsterdam is a transformative journey, intertwining academic pursuits with personal heritage and identity, offering both personal and professional growth.







# TRANG NGUYEN

Unique Story by Trang Nguyen  
Photograph at the University of British  
Columbia, Vancouver, Canada



**My experience as an international student in the Netherlands and as an exchange student in Canada has been transformative, both personally and professionally.**

The Dutch educational system was a significant shift from what I was used to. The student-centred teaching approach and the less formal relationship between students and professors initially felt intimidating. However, by practising observation and interpretation skills, I gradually adapted to this new environment while developing a strong sense of resilience and confidence. I especially valued the focus on global topics, such as climate change and sustainability, which were woven into courses and discussed at student association events.

One of the highlights of my studies was the course Analytics for a Better World with Professor Dick den Hertog and Joaquim Gromicho. Learning about their work in developing a toolbox to improve access to hospitals in Timor-Leste and stroke centres in Vietnam deeply resonated with me, especially as a Vietnamese student. Their efforts reinforced my belief that analytics can go beyond business applications to solve global challenges and improve lives.

My exchange semester in Canada was another enriching journey. Moving across continents for just four months, I was nervous about fitting in. While it was easy to bond with fellow exchange students who shared my excitement to explore, it was more challenging to connect with local students.

I learned to take the initiative to break the ice. In the process, I honed my listening skills and learned to navigate misunderstandings caused by cultural differences.

Not every attempt went as intended, but I became more comfortable with setbacks over time and used them as opportunities for growth. During this semester, I also enrolled in courses across different disciplines, including one in Creative Writing, which helped me discover a creative side that I was previously unfamiliar with.

These intercultural experiences have not only enhanced my academic foundation but also provided me with lifelong skills and friendships that I deeply treasure.



# UNIQUE STORY: UMA VAN DER VLIET

Never in my wildest dreams did I imagine myself strolling through Tokyo's enchanting cherry blossom-filled streets at the end of march. I am proud to have called this vibrant city my home for 5 months. When I first thought of moving to the other side of the world it made me excited, but I was also secretly freaked out. I had never lived on my own, let alone in a city that was a 14 hour flight from my hometown. But I am so incredibly grateful I took a leap of faith, because living in Tokyo has taught me so much about myself.

Arriving in a city where I barely knew the language was daunting. As I first sat in the taxi, staring at the unfamiliar Japanese signs, I couldn't help but feel a mix of anxiety and excitement. It was an opportunity to immerse myself in a completely new culture and language. The cultural differences between Amsterdam and Tokyo were stark. Tokyo's residents are very mindful of taking up space, both physically and socially. There are a lot of unwritten social rules, which can be challenging to all catch up on in the first weeks.

I will never forget this cute Hello Kitty poster at Shinjuku Station, called 'Hello Tokyo,' which gave me the lowdown on Tokyo etiquette, like keeping quiet and avoiding outside food and drinks. It was a fun and helpful way to learn about the city.

At Sophia University I mostly followed subjects that were focused on Japanese culture, society, art and literature. This helped me a lot in gaining a deeper understanding about Japanese society

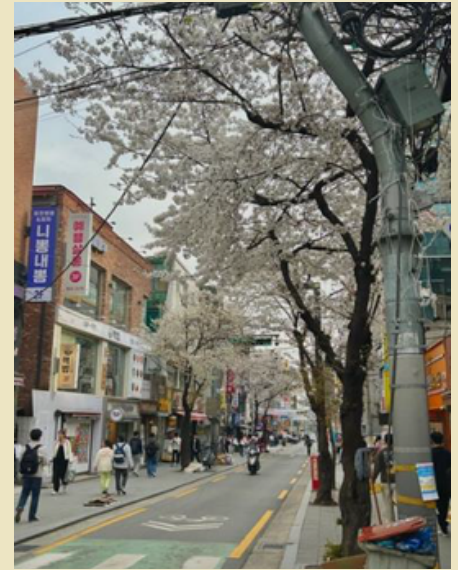
Tokyo being the biggest city in the world, I had a lot to discover and I still cannot say that I have seen it all. From eating the most incredible food in izakayas and sushi restaurants to walking through the small charming streets of my neighborhood setagaya, Tokyo really is such a rich city to explore. Especially a fashion lover, Tokyo is a goldmine for inspiration. I'll be back before Japan even realizes I'm gone.



# TOKYO



# Unique Story: Gina Nescholta



Many friends and family thought it was crazy to go to South Korea, a country so far away with a difficult language. However, attending Korea University was truly a once-in-a-lifetime experience and remains one of my proudest achievements.

Having visited Seoul a few years before, I thought nothing could surprise me anymore, but the Korean study culture taught me otherwise. Are Koreans shy and unapproachable? Wait until they go out drinking Soju every night. Those countless student night-outs near campus showed me how fun and lively people can be, and how much I could learn about community and solidarity.

These drinking nights weren't just about having fun—they were about building close relationships with fellow students beyond university life. Because during the day, studying is Koreans' top priority!

The biggest step out of my comfort zone turned out to be the luckiest part of my exchange. I decided to live in the Korea University dorms, where I shared a room with a stranger. Coming from an individualistic culture like Germany, I was nervous about losing my private space.

However, my roommate became my best friend, and I am so fortunate to have shared this experience with her.

I learned that having someone to come home to and share your deepest stories with is incredibly comforting, and it made me feel at home, even on another continent.

Seoul is more than just a vibrant megacity. It has stories hidden in every corner and offers endless opportunities—to drink coffee, sing at karaoke bars, go clubbing, eat amazing food, and get beauty treatments. One particularly odd experience was when elderly Korean men made it their hobby to stare at foreigners on the metro, recklessly and shamelessly. It made me question my whole existence! But all of these moments together made me leave a piece of my heart in Seoul.

# UNIQUE STORY: ISABELLA PARISI

Instagram: @\_isbellaparisi\_

I first met C. at a UvA-organized event for soon-to-be exchange students a month and a half before we were both supposed to start our exchange semester at the University of Toronto. As we started talking, I soon realized that, for some reason, we weren't clicking. As I left the event slightly disappointed, I decided I would not have reached out to her in Canada, and I was sure our paths would not have crossed.



Little did I know that C. would be one of the best things of my exchange in Canada. Fast forward to a couple of months after the event, C. and I became roommates.

As I was still stuck with my initial first impression of her, convinced that sure, she was nice, but probably not someone I would see myself becoming friends with, I initially resisted all her roommate-bonding attempts, but not for long. Soon enough, I realized that I had been wrong about her. My narrow-mindedness on the importance of first impressions almost prevented me from making a great friend. During one of our first proper talks on a snowy Saturday night, C. and I discussed what home means to us. And after that, we never stopped talking and sharing our different yet compatible ways of seeing the world. From talking about the movies that had changed our lives, teasing each other about our funny obsessions, sharing hugs and laughter, and establishing our little rituals, a beautiful friendship blossomed during the icy-cold Canadian winter.

Befriending C. was not only something that made my exchange infinitely more memorable, but it was, first and foremost, a growth experience.

I learned – surprise, surprise – that first impressions can often be deceiving. As I marveled at C.'s ability to ask thoughtful, in-depth questions to understand her interlocutor's perspective, I became a better conversationalist. I learned to be more open-minded when meeting new people because you never know how important the person standing in front of you might become to you. But most importantly, I realized that the people you meet make your experience unforgettable. As I'll always cherish the memories I made in Canada with C. and our friend A. – also a fundamental component of my exchange – I wish everyone had the chance to make the best study abroad friendships they could wish for.



# UNIQUE STORY: CAMILLE DE RIPAINSEL

Arriving to my exchange program At Reed College (Portland, Oregon), I was full of excitement and anticipation. Little did I know that an unexpected snow storm would change everything. Indeed, the snow caused the traffic to come to a standstill as roads were blocked, my flights were delayed, and classes were canceled for an entire week with students advised not to leave their dorms unless absolutely necessary. It wasn't exactly the beginning I had imagined—starting your exchange being isolated in a new place, far from friends, and unable to explore the city or attend classes was for sure not quite the “American Dream”.

I had to quickly adjust, and in doing so, I had to find my ways, even with limited opportunities, to get out and meet people. However, even breaking the ice (literally) and introducing myself in this new environment was harder than I would have expected. The patience I had to use during the storm actually showed me that setting up during your exchange is only a matter of time, and that I just had to take things as they would come and enjoy what I would discover in the meanwhile.

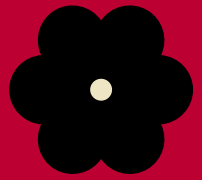
Hence, the snowstorm actually forced me to push beyond my comfort zone, realizing that adapting to new environments is not just about navigating new spaces and finding ways to connect with people despite the obstacles— but also to find yourself. This unpredictable start to my exchange taught me that sometimes, growth happens when you least expect it, and that challenges are often opportunities in disguise.

Looking back, the snowstorm, the delays, and the isolation were maybe one of the best ways to teach me resilience and remind me that I have more resources—internally and externally—than I had ever imagined before my exchange. Even tho It wasn't the beginning I had envisioned, it turned into something even better. Indeed, as one day I slipped on the ice outside and someone rushed over to help, that moment of embarrassment actually turned into an introduction: to one of my now closest friends.



# Oregon

# Equity, Diversity & Inclusivity - Privilege activity



## Group 1

Knowing that the cultural exchange ambassadors play an important role in raise students' awareness and promoting student mobility, what group of students deserve extra attention? Given the disparities in power and privilege identified by the wheel of power and privilege, students who are often marginalized or from less privileged backgrounds deserve extra attention. These students might face financial constraints, lack of information or support networks, cultural and language barriers, or may not see themselves represented in international contexts. These challenges can significantly limit their ability to participate in student mobility programs, which are valuable for personal and academic growth.

### What can the student ambassadors do to better support these students?

1. Outreach and Information Sessions: Conduct targeted outreach to communities and schools that traditionally have lower participation rates in international programs. Hold information sessions that not only inform about the opportunities available but also address common concerns and barriers these students might face.
2. Mentorship Programs: Develop mentorship programs where students who have successfully participated in mobility programs can guide and support prospective students through the application process, preparation, and adjustment phases.
3. Advocacy for Inclusive Policies: Work with university administration and program coordinators to advocate for policies that increase financial aid, provide language support, and design more inclusive programs that consider various cultural and educational backgrounds.



# EQUITY, DIVERSITY & INCLUSIVITY - PRIVILEGE ACTIVITY GROUP 2



For this assignment, we all met in the multicultural neighborhood of the Indische Buurt in East. We then chose to complete the task at Studio/K, the student-run cinema that also serves as a vibrant cultural center and welcoming queer hub.

Knowing that the cultural exchange ambassadors play an important role in raising students' awareness and promoting student mobility, what group of students deserves extra attention?

After completing our assignment and forming our pyramid, we noticed a recurring trend related to financial barriers. This thus led us to believe that students with limited financial resources should be a group receiving additional support, because due to this factor, in our view, these students often perceive studying abroad or participating in exchange programs as financially unattainable.

Indeed, while many students that face financial difficulties do not always have the chance to travel or explore outside their home country, financial constraints should therefore, especially in this case, not stand in the way of their objectives of going on exchange and discovering the world. Furthermore, we firmly believe that financial means should never be a deciding factor when considering opportunities to study abroad and that this group should receive extra attention.

What can the student ambassadors do to better support these students?

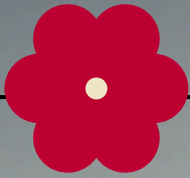
As cultural exchange ambassadors, we believe that we could better support these students by providing them guidance on the financial options available to them, such as scholarships, grants, and other funding opportunities. We believe that there is currently not enough emphasis on the wide range of financial support available, and this should be promoted more effectively. By informing and advising students about these resources, we think that we could help them overcome financial barriers and worries, making them realize that studying abroad is also an experience available to them.





# Equity, Diversity & Inclusivity - Privilege activity

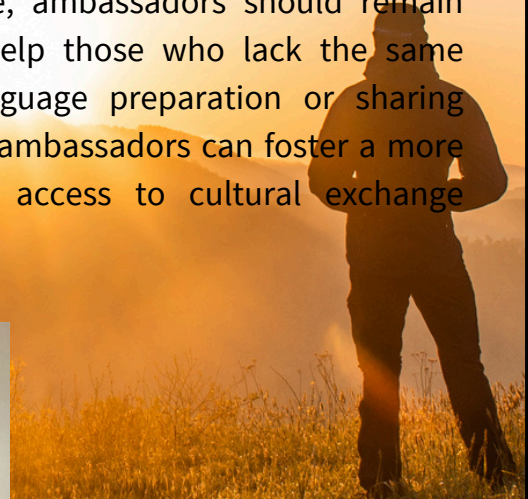
## Group 3



Cultural exchange ambassadors play a key role in raising awareness and promoting student mobility, but some groups of students face additional challenges and deserve extra attention. First-generation students, those who are the first in their families to attend university, often struggle with a lack of information and support in navigating study abroad opportunities.

Students with disabilities may encounter barriers to accessibility, such as the lack of wheelchair-friendly accommodations or other necessary adjustments. Additionally, students who lack confidence in their English-speaking abilities may feel intimidated and avoid applying for these programs. Finally, students from low-income families may view studying abroad as financially out of reach, limiting their mobility.

To better support these students, ambassadors can regularly check in with them to ensure they are receiving the guidance and resources they need. They can also advocate for better accommodations and financial support for students with disabilities or limited economic means. Furthermore, ambassadors should remain mindful of their own privileges and use them to help those who lack the same advantages, such as offering peer support for language preparation or sharing knowledge about available scholarships. By doing so, ambassadors can foster a more inclusive environment, ensuring all students have access to cultural exchange opportunities.





# Equity, Diversity & Inclusivity - Privilege activity Group 4



## Homomonument Amsterdam

**Knowing that the cultural exchange ambassadors play an important role in raise students' awareness and promoting student mobility, what group of students deserves extra attention?**

A group that deserves extra attention includes disadvantaged students with limited opportunities, as they often face additional challenges in accessing these programs. This includes less wealthy, disabled, neurodiverse, non-English speaking, and less educated students. These students have limits that make their day-to-day in a student mobility program harder, requiring extra attention and support in various ways.

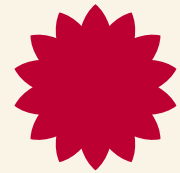


**What can the student ambassadors do to better support these students?**

Student ambassadors can better support disadvantaged students by keeping an open mind and trying to understand their unique situations. This can be achieved by listening closely, offering assistance when needed, and simply being a friend. Additionally, we can direct these students to school resources tailored to their needs, such as website links with information, disability offices, and learning programs.



# Equity, Diversity & Inclusivity - Privilege activity Group 5



Students with the intersectionality of marginalized identities, such as those with less education, housing insecurity, neurodivergence, undocumented status, trans or intersex identities, lower social class, disabilities, and vulnerable mental, cognitive, and physical health, deserve extra attention. These students face increased vulnerability and scrutiny in everyday activities by existing as themselves.

Student ambassadors can better support these students by offering and showcasing available support, reaching out to all communities, and asking what would be most helpful for their situation. This could involve a simple conversation or a post highlighting support services that might be beneficial. By understanding individual needs, student ambassadors can guide students to the relevant resources and help them engage in said support systems.





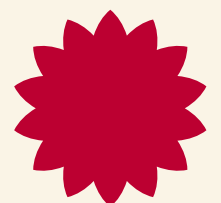
# Equity, Diversity & Inclusivity - Privilege activity Group 6



Our team agrees that students who are financially disadvantaged, neuroatypical, or have disabilities need extra support. Cultural exchange ambassadors can help support these students by taking several actions. First, during the application process, neuroatypical students may require additional support in completing the application process such as providing supporting documents.

Secondly, ambassadors should regularly check in with the students by emails or personal messages during the exchange term. This consistent communication can help students stay aware of available resources and provide a reliable point of contact for any concerns they may have.

Thirdly, ambassadors should work to ensure that incoming students have a clear understanding of the accessibility features of the host universities. This includes details about physical accessibility features, as well as any special services for neuroatypical students and those with disabilities. Sharing this information can help students make informed choices about participating and ensure they know about the available support. These efforts would greatly improve the inclusivity and accessibility of cultural exchange programs.





# Study Abroad Fair

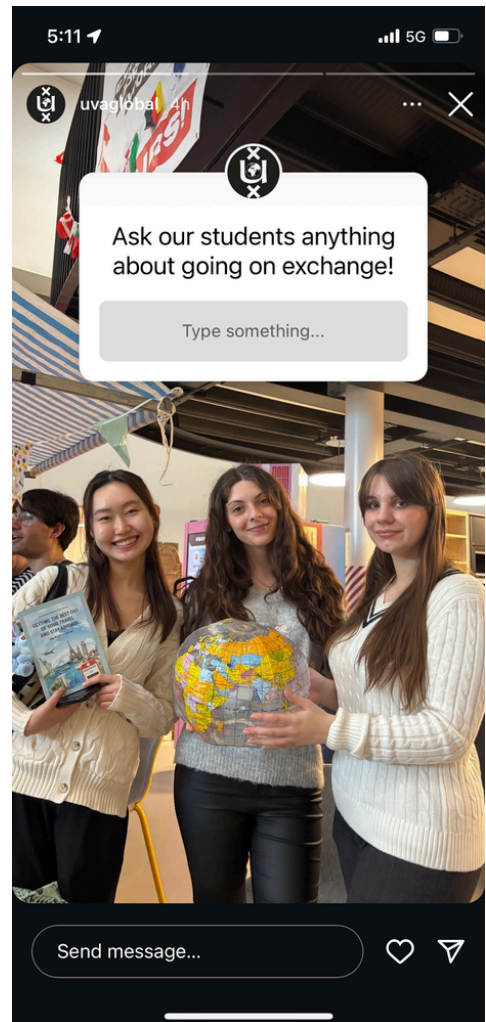
## 2 November 2024

Being an ambassador at the study abroad fair wasn't just about sharing info—it was about sparking the courage in others to leap into the unknown. It was a busy Saturday on campus, and I represented both the Ambassador booth, where we played 'Spin the Globe' to help students explore different study abroad destinations, and the Asia booth, where many students showed a strong interest in studying in Asia. Students came prepared with questions, and you could feel their curiosity and excitement about studying abroad.

Most students were eager to know more about what life is really like when studying abroad. They asked questions about everything from the cost of living and adjusting to cultural differences to managing language barriers and finding accommodation. I tried my best to share insights from my own experiences, hoping to encourage and reassure them. Even though I answered similar questions repeatedly, each conversation allowed me to connect with them and make the exchange meaningful.

At the Spin the Globe booth, we prepared questions from various countries where students could potentially study abroad. Many students enjoyed learning about different cultures and exchanging destinations through this interactive activity. While organizing it, we faced a few challenges, such as a lack of decorations and not having enough people to assist with the questions. Despite these obstacles, we completed and set up the activity in time for the study abroad fair, making it a fun and engaging experience for everyone.

The study abroad fair was an incredible experience—both exciting and rewarding. We wrapped up the day with a small gathering for drinks with our group of ambassadors, celebrating our efforts. Being an ambassador has been fulfilling, as I love sharing my experiences and helping students find answers to their questions. I hope that through this event, more students will consider studying abroad, embracing the fun, new perspectives, and opportunities it brings.





# Mezrab: Where Stories Unite and Cultures Connect



In the heart of Amsterdam, Mezrab functions as the center of the storytelling community, attracting audiences from many cultural backgrounds, from all ages. Different senses of humor resonate with different parts of the crowd, creating an atmosphere where each story was valued and appreciated. Mezrab ensures that all voices, whether regular performers or first-time participants, are equally listened to and celebrated. This platform celebrates storytelling as an art and fosters intercultural understanding, yet still feeling like home. With Persian decor and the smell of hot soup, Mezrab offers a unique and inclusive experience for everyone who walks through its doors.

Let's talk about our experience!

## **Inclusivity and Engagement**

From the moment you step foot into Mezrab, the cozy ambiance makes you feel welcomed. The setting with wooden furniture and books in multiple languages invites people to connect with strangers over a shared love of stories. The seating, ranging from cushions to couches, encourages conversation and sets the stage for a fruitful interaction. The host plays a crucial role in creating an inclusive environment. That evening a cheerful Irish storyteller set the tone with her tale about blind love, uniting the audience in a shared human experience. Her loud, energetic demeanor and joking about her occasional missteps helped ease any nerves among storytellers. Whether encouraging first-timers to step onto the stage or playfully preparing the audience with reactions like “aww”/“wow,” the host kept everyone engaged. The energy was mirrored by the audience, which presented compassion for one another. This led to many feeling comfortable to share their stories about “the craziest thing done for love”, fostering vulnerability.

## **Promoting Intercultural Understanding**

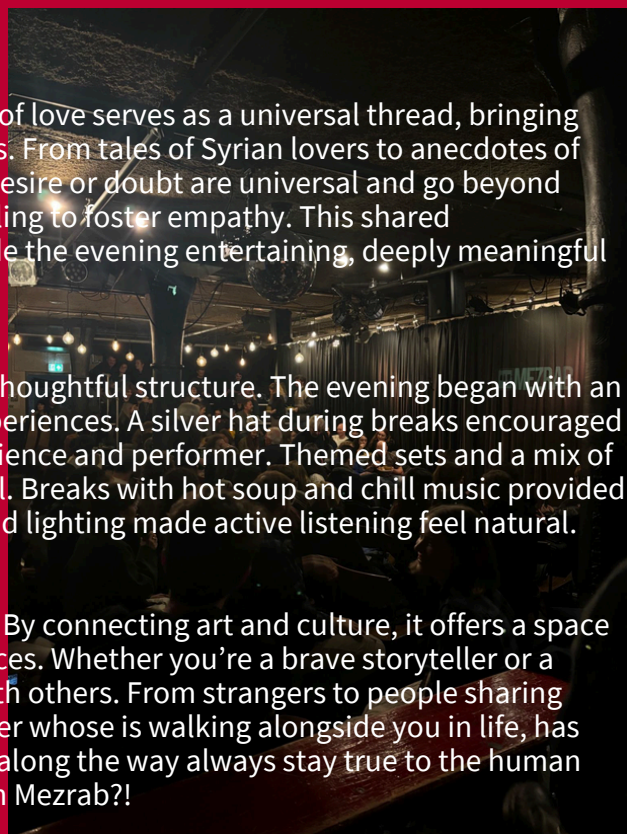
Mezrab isn't limited to any country's borders. The popular theme of love serves as a universal thread, bringing together personal experiences from diverse cultural backgrounds. From tales of Syrian lovers to anecdotes of first crushes, the stories remind the audience that emotions like desire or doubt are universal and go beyond cultural boundaries. The reactions reflected the power of storytelling to foster empathy. This shared understanding, reinforced by the diversity of the storytellers, made the evening entertaining, deeply meaningful and transforming.

## **Engagement Strategies**

It was clear throughout the night that Mezrab's success lies in its thoughtful structure. The evening began with an icebreaker, inviting audience members to reflect on their own experiences. A silver hat during breaks encouraged everyone to share their story, removing any barriers between audience and performer. Themed sets and a mix of storytelling, music, and interaction kept the energy on a high level. Breaks with hot soup and chill music provided a relaxed atmosphere, while the decor (including a mirrorball!) and lighting made active listening feel natural.

## **Final Thoughts from the Authors**

Mezrab isn't just a Dutch venue—it's an international community. By connecting art and culture, it offers a space where storytelling becomes a bridge across cultures and experiences. Whether you're a brave storyteller or a curious listener, Mezrab leaves you feeling inspired and united with others. From strangers to people sharing similar past experiences. It reminds you that every passing stranger whose is walking alongside you in life, has taken a different path to get there, but the feelings and emotions along the way always stay true to the human experience. What better place to do that than the “gezelligheid” in Mezrab?!





# Not married to the current social media strategy, so how do we improve engagement?

Communication with outward and inward-bound abroad students is vital. Especially with an audience who tends to source information through social media, there is an opportunity to form a meaningful community of trust and guidance for students wanting to study abroad. The main topics of discussion for improving social media engagement were a) strategies to effectively capture students' attention, b) how to leverage the Student Ambassadors in Semester two and what their roles would be, and c) how to increase the number of followers on the @UVAGLOBAL Instagram.



Firstly, we started with a group brainstorm on student social media use: how often do we use it, what kind of information do we source from it, and how do we prefer to be interacted with? From this discussion, certain patterns emerged. Namely, Instagram is used by the vast majority of students daily and is mostly used to gain insights into social events and people's personal experiences. Another pattern we found was how people preferred to interact with each other on social media: with short-form content that is direct, interactive, and relevant.

After the group brainstorming, we formed two groups to discuss specific strategies the social media account could leverage. The first group came up with five different ideas on how we can better engage with students. The first idea, in line with the group brainstorm, was interactive stories and posts, such as Q&As, "day in my life" content from people who've studied abroad, "Why become an ambassador" from current exchange ambassadors, and including more video content like event recaps and highlights. Their second idea was to do interviews with past UVA students who studied abroad 5-10 years ago and have them talk about how it impacted their lives. The third idea was to include experiences from local students, as this is the main demographic for the account – UVA students looking to study abroad more than students from abroad studying at UVA. The group's fourth idea was to consider using Instagram ads to reach a wider audience and get in front of as many people as possible. Using Instagram's sophisticated ad settings to determine who sees the ad, @UVAGLOBAL can effectively target its desired audience. Finally, the last idea the group brainstormed together was better quality and designed posts on Instagram. One possible way to achieve this is by seeing if any exchange ambassadors in the second semester have an interest in graphic design and are willing to help out.

The other group had a similar yet distinct brainstorming session. Firstly, the second group suggested leveraging photo dumps more on Instagram. The photo dumps could highlight specific international universities or personal stories from current exchange ambassadors discussing their experiences abroad. The photo dumps should prioritize keeping the caption succinct and captivating, as well as ensuring the first slide effectively introduces the topic of the post. This strategy can help boost engagement as people scrolling on Instagram avoid reading lengthy captions. This should be implemented in all areas of Instagram, reducing caption lengths and adding "title cards" for each post for followers scrolling through the account to easily source information. Additionally, the group suggested the use of a content calendar. A content calendar can allow the social media manager to make posts in advance to allow for posting consistency and flexibility.

Through these brainstorming sessions, exchange ambassadors came together to provide insight into how people studying abroad prefer to be interacted with on social media, as well as provide realistic suggestions on how @UVAGLOBAL can improve engagement with its followers more effectively.

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# Bridging Cultures with Craft

## Student-Led Initiatives Enhance Inclusion at ESN Amsterdam

As ambassadors, we went to the “Bracelet Making Workshop,” organized by ESN. Their President, Ella Berstad, was at the door, pleasantly welcoming each person. She mentioned, “The good thing about these workshops is actually being able to talk to each other while being creative instead of just being in a noisy bar or club.” It seems intuitive that such a workshop would be full of people wanting to connect. The key issue we found at this event—though it may not apply to all events—was the demographics. All participants and committee members present were women. This might be due to lack of promotion or the nature of the event itself. When asked about the diversity of their events, the Activity Coordinator, Floor, said, “It really depends on the event itself. Social events like crafting and bracelet making are usually only attended by girls. Pub quizzes are very mixed. Sports events are more focused, so they usually attract mixed genders but people with less diverse interests.”

Moving deeper into the event, we found ourselves in a cozy, candle-lit room with a wide selection of materials for making unique designs. Half an hour in, everyone was focused on their bracelets, putting creativity into action while sharing experiences from their countries or cultures. The ESN committee members asked questions about our universities and if we’d experienced culture shocks, helping people at the tables get to know each other. Some people arrived with their friend groups and stayed in a corner. A way to prevent this could be to randomly assign seating, which would encourage people to meet new people. However, not letting people stay with their friends could backfire, resulting in lower attendance at ESN events.

At the end, we did a small questionnaire. Our results showed attendees were from Dutch, Portuguese, Spanish, Italian, German, Canadian, Austrian, and Australian backgrounds (one of our fellow ambassadors was there too), and 40% of participants said they had made new friends. When asked if they felt included on a scale from 1 to 10 (ten being the most included), most answered 8, with the lowest being a 6, reported by only one person. Regarding improvements for the workshop, most people suggested none, while some mentioned that more materials would be useful—something easy to fix for future events. People praised the workshop, with comments ranging from “Took my mind off studying and was lovely to have some social interaction” to “It was a good and safe environment.” Attendees appreciated the bead colors, ambiance, and the opportunity to be creative and relax.

Regarding diversity at ESN events, we asked the President her thoughts. “The target group is very clear: exchange/international students – who end up having fundamental things in common.” She explained that ESN offers a variety of events aimed at different interests and that exchange students are usually openminded and comfortable attending events alone. ESN also tries to include more introverted people by organizing smaller events like the one we attended and accommodates specific needs if requested. The President’s warm personality, as we saw firsthand with her goodbyes and information about future events, reflects ESN’s welcoming approach.

In conclusion, ESN seems to have a good starting point for diversity, as its target group includes people from around the world and there are activities for different interests. The only point to note is the lack of male presence in more social events, which seems more a reflection of social norms than an issue within the organization. ESN is aware of this and working to address it. Our advice would be to enhance promotion—not necessarily in quantity, since they announce every event on their community group and social media, but by branding events in a way that targets a more diverse audience.

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# Studying abroad in Amsterdam: a journey of growth and discovery

Ever since I started my bachelor's degree, I knew that I wanted to be an exchange student at least once during my study years. Before I applied for an Erasmus mobility, I had spoken many times with other students about their experience during the exchange program and I developed high expectations about studying abroad. Little did I know that I wouldn't be disappointed.

Although I am currently on exchange here, at the University of Amsterdam, this experience has changed me a lot already: it didn't only make me perceive in a different manner the local culture and the one from back home, but it also made me change my career aspirations.

Growing up in Romania, I have been told by my relatives, who live or have lived abroad, stories about the more developed countries and how different the lifestyle is there compared to the one I am used to. So, in theory, I shouldn't have been surprised when I arrived in the Netherlands, as I already knew what to expect. However, experiencing some of the stories I was once told feels completely different. I am always amazed by every little detail I discover while walking in Amsterdam and while travelling to other beautiful cities in the Netherlands and the neighboring countries. I am also glad I have the chance to see for myself how these cities are decorated for the winter season and for Christmas, and to discover the traditions specific to this time of the year, such as the ones regarding Sinterklaas.

Studying abroad had an impact on my career path as well. Back home, I study Business Administration, and I had decided even before starting my bachelor's studies that I wanted to become an entrepreneur. At UvA, I am enrolled in courses that are part of the Economics and Business Economics program. I viewed this as an opportunity to broaden my understanding of different branches of economics and now, since I discovered what I truly enjoy learning more about, I decided to make a career transition. Taking the "Behavioral Economics" and the "International Trade and Investment" courses, as well as participating to the "Cultural Exchange Ambassadors" program, shaped my new goal, which is to make an impact in my home country by developing impactful projects with other countries, as I am determined to do my best to help my country form and maintain good international relations that would lead to an increase in welfare.

Until now, I have lived many good times (such as meeting new people and forming meaningful connections, discovering a new lifestyle and new traditions, learning to be independent and take care of myself), but also stressful ones (experiencing homesickness and having to learn how to overcome it, encountering bureaucracy issues when I first came to Amsterdam as I had to wait for a while to get my BSN). I am sure more meaningful moments are yet to come, both good and bad, but overall, this experience is unquestionably worth it.

I am forever grateful for the chance I was given to study in the Netherlands. I had the opportunity to improve myself both professionally and personally, and so I will have to adapt my "old life" to my new views and beliefs. Now my only worry is that, after the semester is over and I will be back home, I will terribly miss the life that I've been building here for the past months.

*Sabina Cangea*





# How did open communication at Cultural Ambassadors change my mindset and interaction with others?



This year, during the programme of Cultural Ambassadors I have experienced different approaches to communication than the ones I was used to before. It has allowed me and my peers to express ourselves without worrying to be criticised or judged.

Every Tuesday, after warm greetings and welcoming to the room for a Tuesday session, coordinator of the programme- Guido de Wilde- asked us to show with our thumbs, how do we feel at particular moment, and if there is anything he can do to help ease the negative emotions. This transparency and openness with each other made me realize that I do not have to force enthusiasm in the group settings at all costs. It is, in fact, totally fine to admit that I might have a worse day. At the end of the day, everyone is just a human trying their best.

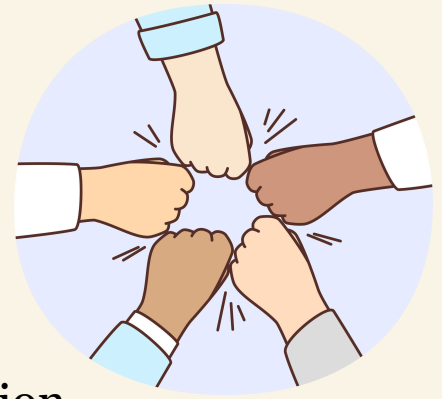
I noticed, that day by day, I feel more at ease while interacting with strangers from different backgrounds than mine. I believe that it has been caused by the programme, since it gave me various opportunities to work and brainstorm on tasks raising awareness with my fellow ambassadors. A safe space ensured on the meetings decreased my social anxiety and inner feelings of “I am not enough” or “My voice is not relevant”. People were there to listen to both similar and opposite views of team members. This led to continuous process of learning about new cultures and their traditions.

A memorable activity was a team exercise with pyramid ranking of privileges. This assignment demonstrated possible factors that ease the process of moving out and studying abroad, such as financial security or fluency in English. My group has come to realisation that there are also many factors that can prevent from fulfilling dreams of pursuing education in a different country, that we do not necessarily think on a daily basis- disabilities or language barrier. This is not an easy conversation- it takes a lot to admit that, even though we can celebrate a big step of independence and stepping out of our origin countries, it is usually possible because we are lucky enough to have money support, sufficient educational background and physical and mental condition. This has deepened my feelings of humbleness and gratitude for my beneficial circumstances and my strong network support of my parents and friends.

In conclusion, for me personally, the programme has served as a tool of intercultural communication and raising my own voice of my uniqueness. However, this journey has also allowed me to dive into my own thoughts, to reflect on the reality around us, and made me realize how much my path was shaped by my determination and openness, but also- luck.

## Thank you for taking the time to read the 2024 Fall Edition of the Exchange Express!

A warm thank you goes to all the exchange ambassadors who made the creation of this edition possible, as well as to Guido, Jurgen, Anouk, and Esther for their support, motivation, and for creating this program.



*Together we crossed borders, built bridges, and shared stories - this is just the beginning of our global journey.*