

Land : Belgium
Stadt : Brussels
Gasthochschule : Vrije Universiteit Brussel
Studiengang : Water Resources Engineering (Master Program)

I. Vorbereitung (Planung, Organisation und Bewerbung bei der Gasthochschule)

During the preparation, things were smoothly arranged by the Erasmus coordinator of the home university, BTU Cottbus. The required documents for applying at the host university (VUB) were also clear and I have managed to do so accordingly. To apply at the host university, the online portal of the host university was used (known as the mobility online) and it was also a convenient approach.

II. Unterkunft

My arrival to Brussels was done by road from Germany. Before coming to Brussels, I already have found a single student room (pictures below) not too far from the university area. Compared to Cottbus, the single room is 18m² for the price of double than what I pay in Cottbus. I had housemates and they were really helpful.



However, being a non-EEA student, I had problems concerning the visa during my application in the Foreign Affairs Office of Brussels. The law in Belgium is that to live there for more than 3 months, one must be registered at the local Foreign Affairs Office and must have a valid visa issued by the Belgian embassy. In my home university, I was informed that having the German residence permit and by signing the *“Additional Page to the Residency Permit Application for Students from Third Party States with Mobility Regulation according to RL2004/114/EG”* would suffice in order to be able to live there for 6 months, but it turns out that even signing that was not accepted at the commune.

I was also not informed or warned by VUB’s ERASMUS office that non-EEA Erasmus students needed an extra visa. So, when I was about to register at the local foreign affairs office (known as the commune in Brussels), they did not accept my German residence permit and claimed that I need to apply for a visa. I also couldn’t escape this procedure because when I registered at the host university, the ERASMUS office made an appointment for me with the commune as it was mandatory according to the law.

Following the rules, I had no other way than to apply for the visa at the Belgian embassy in Berlin and it was an elaborate process. If I didn’t apply, I wouldn’t be legal to take the exams and hence my

semester abroad would be invalid. In order to apply for the visa, the Belgian embassy in Berlin required the following: visa application form, proof of financial means, police clearance certificate from the past 5 years, medical health certificate, and acceptance letter from Vrije Universiteit Brussel. The most burdening was the medical health certificate, proof of financial means and police clearance certificate from the last 5 years.

To get the medical health certificate it was quite a lot of money spent (for a student's standard) due to the radiology, blood test, urine test, lab results, etc., but the expenditure on it cannot be reimbursed by my health insurance because they'd only cover the expenses if the medical check up was done due to the fact that I were ill, not for visa application purposes. It was also a challenge for me to do a medical check up there as the staff in the hospital barely speaks English.

The police clearance certificate is required from the last 5 years, which means it's from my home country (Indonesia) as well as Germany. For Germany it was not a big problem because I only needed to send a request letter to Bundesamt für Justiz and they replied me within 2 weeks. For Indonesia, it was the main burden because it's a lot of bureaucracy. I had to go back to my home country for one week to get it because it wasn't possible without the presence of the applicant. The process was the following: applying at the local police office and the national police Headquarter, then the certificate has to be certified by ministry of human rights, ministry of foreign affairs, and the Belgian embassy in Jakarta. Normally the whole process took 10 days, but I successfully talked to each department so they can speed up the process and hence it took me 5 days.

The Belgian embassy in Berlin also made the process easier for me after I managed to explain them my situation. Normally one would have to apply and wait for up to 3 months until the visa is issued. I explained my situation to the consulate and she allowed me to send every documents through e-mail and after one week, the visa was issued. I had to, therefore, go back to Berlin from Brussels to pick up the visa and submit the original documents to the embassy.

With that being achieved, I could smoothly register at the local foreign affairs office in Brussels. However, this process was not pleasant because I had to miss my classes, and really made me fall behind the schedule .

III. Studium an der Gasthochschule

The study at Vrije Universiteit Brussel was challenging, but eventually it's interesting. Compared to BTU Cottbus, the study there was much more practical. Due to the mutual agreement between BTU and VUB, I was placed at the Faculty of Engineering, Water Resources Engineering master program. This program is an interuniversity program between Belgium's Flemish universities, namely the VUB and Katholieke Universiteit Leuven. Therefore, I also had courses in KU Leuven and also University of Ghent. The other 2 partner universities are actually the top two universities of Belgium, so I am glad to get the opportunity to study there.

The courses I took in VUB are "Urban Hydrology and Hydraulics", "Social, Political, Environmental and Economical Aspects of Water Resources Management", and "Groundwater Modeling"; in KU Leuven "Irrigation Agronomy", and in University of Ghent "Marine and Lacustrine Biology".

It was however quite unexpected that the courses in VUB are all for second year master, hence they are more advanced and all students are expected to have sufficient knowledge on the courses offered in the first year. Therefore I had to actually work twice as hard to catch up with the minimum expected background knowledge. I also had to take care of the administrative procedures in the other two partner universities, which was also a time-consuming process.

The professors were also really helpful in showing me what I have to study in order to catch up. The assignments from the courses at VUB were also challenging because – as it is a modeling course – we had to use modeling softwares that I was never acquainted to. As aforementioned, the study at VUB was more practical. Instead of listening to lectures and learning theories, we were given sets of problems (taken from real life case) and had to solve it using the modeling softwares. For example in Urban Hydrology and Hydraulics, we had to solve the problem of a flood in the city of Dessel from the technical aspects, and present our proposal as if we were presenting it to the mayor of Dessel. In Social, Political, Environmental and Economical Aspects of Water Resources Engineering, we had to present a case study from our own country of birth or of choice, which is actually among my greatest interests. For Irrigation Agronomy, I was honored to be taught by a really great professor at the KU Leuven, who was also leading some projects at the Food and Agriculture Organizations. I also took a French course, which ECTS unfortunately doesn't count, but I did enjoy learning French and it was applicable living in Brussels. That being said, I really have learned a lot.

IV. Alltag und Freizeit

I love the international community of VUB and of Brussels in general. The university has several student organizations that BTU does not have, such as AIESEC, Model United Nations (MUN), etc. I wanted to join MUN but they prioritized full-time students instead of exchange students. Hence I joined AIESEC and it was one of the best experiences I've had during my stay in Brussels. I got to know friends with amazing talents through AIESEC, who were also really supportive to me when I had the problems with the visa.

Living in Brussels is really fun due to the location of the city. It's a city that is very rich in culture, arts, music, parks, natural sights, restaurants and bars, political activities, so it was never boring to be there. When you sit in a bus, you can hear conversations in at least three languages. Belgium's renowned chocolate, waffles and French fries are also indeed one of a kind. Belgium also has a lot of shops that does not exist in Germany, so it was fun to go shopping there.

My typical weekday would be going to the university and spend the rest of the day in the library for studying. Brussels is in the heart of medium-sized Belgium, so it was convenient to travel from the north to the south with a discounted price for students under 26. Belgium also lies in a strategic location, so I did get to travel to Netherlands, Italy, France and Luxembourg. The ESN (Erasmus Student Network) in Brussels also offers so many fun activities and organized trips during the weekends. I did join several and gained many new friends from all over the countries.