

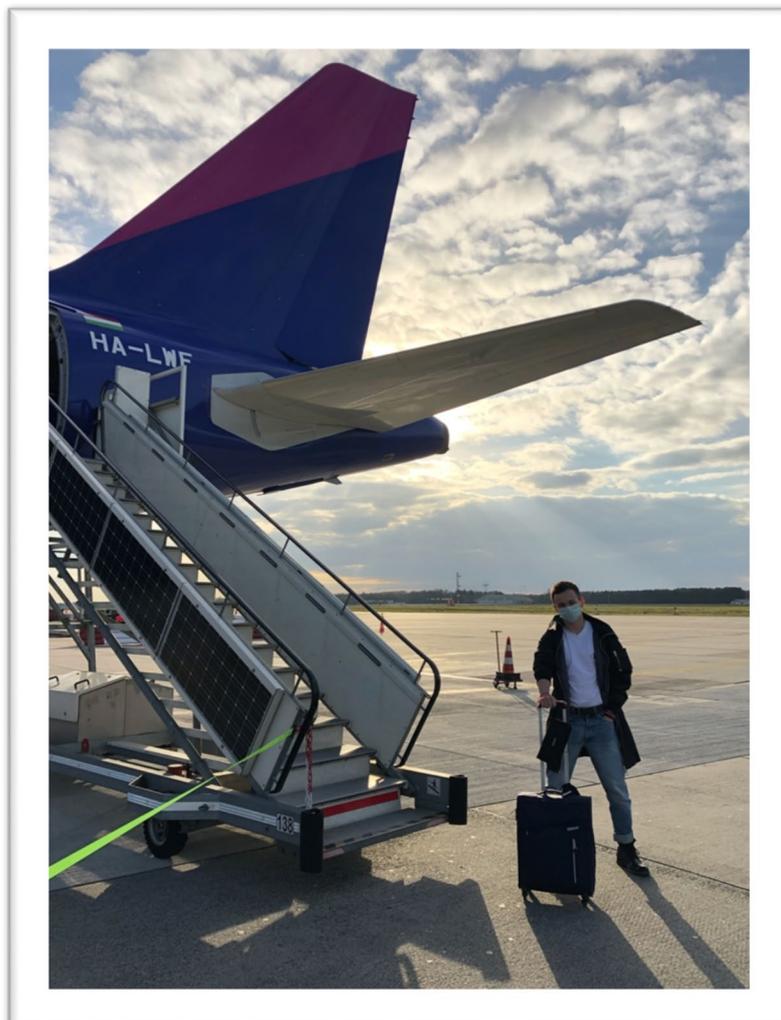
EXCHANGE REPORT

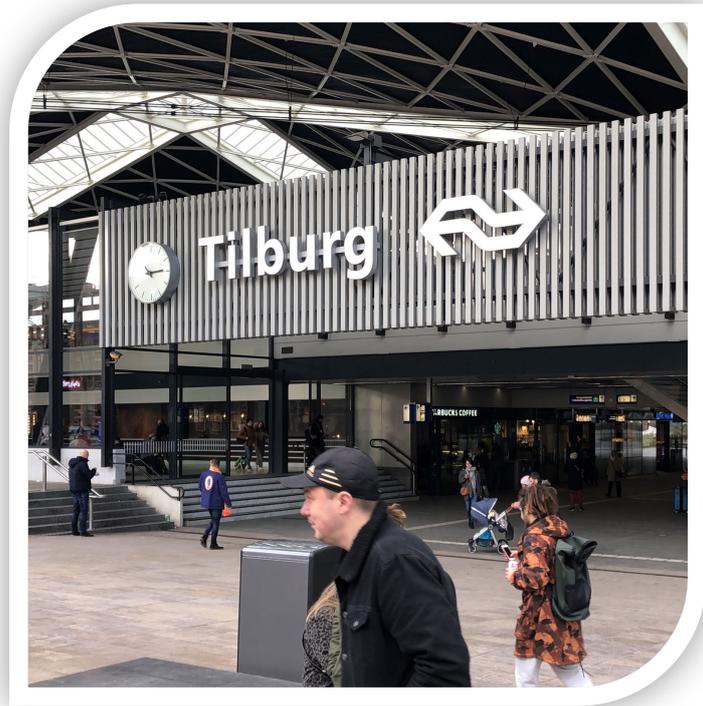
KEA x Fontys

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INTRODUCTION

In this report, you are going to read about my experience as an exchange student at the Fontys Academy for Creative Industries (ACI), based in the town of Tilburg, the Netherlands. I must note that it was a quite challenging semester for my mobility was affected by the global coronavirus pandemic we faced in early 2020.

About me

As you could see on the front page of this report, my name is Mario, and I am a full-time Brand Design student at the Copenhagen School of Design and Technology. I come from Bulgaria and Fontys happened to be the fourth university I have gone to throughout my bachelor studies. Prior to studying at KEA, I did an Academic Professional degree in Design, Technology, and Business at the University College of Northern Denmark (2017-2019), as well as an exchange semester at EINA, Barcelona (spring semester of 2018-2019).

It was back when I graduated high school that I decided to study abroad, and learn as much throughout my studies, as possible. And I mean not only academically, but also culturally, as I am a foreign student even at my “home university” in Copenhagen. Professionally, I have a passion for graphic design, advertising, and brand management.

Why I decided to go on exchange (again)?

As I mentioned earlier, to me exchange is a one-time opportunity which should not be missed. I was already used to changing places and did not really worry about settling down. My only priority was to find a university where I could study subjects different from the ones offered at KEA. I chose to apply at Fontys because their Advanced Courses exchange program offered a wide variety of subjects from the creative industries. Unlike most countries, in the Netherlands the semester is divided in two “periods”, which means that you have one set of subjects in the first half of the semester, and another in the second half (period). I, for instance, took a total of ten courses during the exchange (five per period). And it was interesting, though quite challenging to follow so many subjects at the same time. But you can read about these in the following sections of this report.

EXPERIENCES AT THE HOST UNIVERSITY

As I previously mentioned, I took 10 subjects at Fontys, which equal a total of 32 ECTS credits. I will now comment on my experience with each one of them in regard to the relevance of the subject, teacher, and study flow.

1. E-commerce with Laura Slavenburg (3 ECTS)

The subject was quite interesting and relevant for me as a brand designer as it tapped into B2B (Business to business), B2C (business to customer) customer journey, as well as online marketing and e-commerce trends. However, I do not recommend taking this subject with this teacher. Both I and other Erasmus students I met who followed this class were not very satisfied with the teaching of Laura. She did not provide us with enough requirements for the final project of the course and we ended up failing the subject.

2. Creativity and Personality (4 ECTS)

In Creativity and Personality, we had to develop a creative concept based on a personal fascination we have. For instance, I did mine on *writing from my own perspective*. I was supposed to take the course with Monique Zijp who used to teach this subject for many years. However, Monique had a car accident in the first week of the semester, so my group had to change teachers three times during the period. That was quite confusing not only for our learning process as students, but also for the teachers. I managed to pass the subject, but I heard complaints also from students who took the subject in the last period of the semester.

3. Digital Marketing (3 ECTS)

Probably one of the subjects I would recommend the most. The teacher managed to introduce us to the basics of digital marketing. Me and my group developed a WordPress website and ran actual Google and social media advertising campaigns. A mandatory part of the course is to take a Google Certificate, which I believe was also something useful for the future. The Digital Marketing AC (Advanced Course) really helped me understand various online tools and trends. I actually happened to successfully apply the website development skills from the course on a personal project.

4. Futures Research (3 ECTS)

In this subject, I was introduced to several methods of futures research. There are two teachers who teach this class together and both of them are very well-prepared and helpful. I find the Futures Research class very relevant for myself as it taught me how to analyze current trends and create scenarios for the future of a company or organization, and develop strategic advice based on the potential future scenarios.

5. Event (3 ECTS)

For this class I had the chance to work on a group project with a real client – the famous LocHal library in the city of Tilburg. The class was about the event industry. I liked that the teacher let us share our interests and leaning goals, so he could form groups of students with similar interests as the event industry is quite broad. At the end, we had to pitch our strategic advice to the client's team and deliver a written strategic advice report.

6. Strategic Communication Management (4 ECTS)

The teacher Gaby Hendrickx was very good at involving the students in the classes, even though we were all at home because of the coronavirus pandemic. I found this course pretty interesting and very relevant as we had to work on a strategic communication campaign and prepare a 5-minute pitch for the end of the period. Gaby gave all the groups several chances to get feedback on their progress during the tutorials. Some of the requirements for the project were to choose an issue that is relevant for a company and create a campaign that will contribute not only to a client's reputation, but also to one of the UN Sustainable Development Goals. I definitely recommend taking this course. 😊

7. Brand Management and Product Marketing (3 ECTS)

The content of theory for this subject was primarily based on Keller's book "Strategic Brand Management" which I was previously familiar with from the 5th semester at KEA. The tutorials are quite interactive. The teacher gave weekly homework assignments as a way to encourage us to practice the theory, which I found useful. He then commented our homework at the beginning of class. Normally there is an exam for this subject but due to the coronavirus, I had to make a strategic brand export report. Meaning I had to pick a strictly local brand of my home country and develop a strategy for exporting the brand to a foreign market. I had not done such a project before, and I found it quite useful for my future working experience.

8. Deep Creativity (3 ECTS)

The core subject of this course was Creative Leadership, as part of Creative Problem Solving. I found the teacher Ank Lambers very positive and encouraging the students to be creative leaders. I studied various divergent and convergent creative techniques and practiced my creative leadership skills while facilitating one creative session with friends, and another in week seven of the period. Moreover, I had to work on a *vision document* and present my unique leadership signature as part of the final project. I recommend taking this subject as it allows you to also have fun and bond with your fellow students while learning.

9. Leadership (3 ECTS)

In Leadership class the teacher introduced us to various leadership theories which we then had to use as basis of a strategic advice to a company or organization. The tutorials were very interactive, we talked about the role of leadership in different contexts both professionally and personally. I do recommend this course as I believe having knowledge on leadership can be of good use to anyone, regardless of their bachelor specialization.

10. Ethics (3 ECTS)

I chose this course because I thought it would be interesting to study a topic different from what I had previously covered during my studies. I expected the course to be related to the creative industries. However, in Ethics I was introduced to the basics of ethics: from metaphysics to normative ethics. The course was super dynamic and interesting to follow. In terms of examination, I had to take two separate elements in order to pass the class:

- 1) An open question online open-book exam
- 2) An ethics essay based on a normative statement of my interest

I found the preparation for the exam and writing the essay were very challenging for me but ethics turned out to be one of the most inspiring courses I took at Fontys.

If you are interested in more information about the subjects offered at Fontys, take a look at their course catalogue. It contains pretty detailed information about each course, its structure and academic requirements/exams.

SOCIAL AND CULTURAL EXPERIENCES

Although I had to leave the Netherlands earlier than expected because of the coronavirus pandemic, I managed to gain some experience from a couple of places around the country, try some local food and observe the local people and some of their traditions.

Accommodation

My first interaction with the Netherlands was when I arrived and had to settle in my accommodation. Although I had moved in and out of places quite a lot in the past few years, nothing can compare to the conditions of the accommodation I was offered in Tilburg. It turned out the average standard for student houses is quite low, meaning it is not the cleanest, most comfortable or newest place you could imagine. However, thanks to the support of the international coordinator of Fontys, I and my Erasmus housemates managed to get a cleaning service from the housing agency and organize the house. A benefit of the house I stayed in was the low price for the room – 380 euros per month and its location – 15 minutes walking distance from campus and 15 from the city center of Tilburg.

Social & cultural experiences

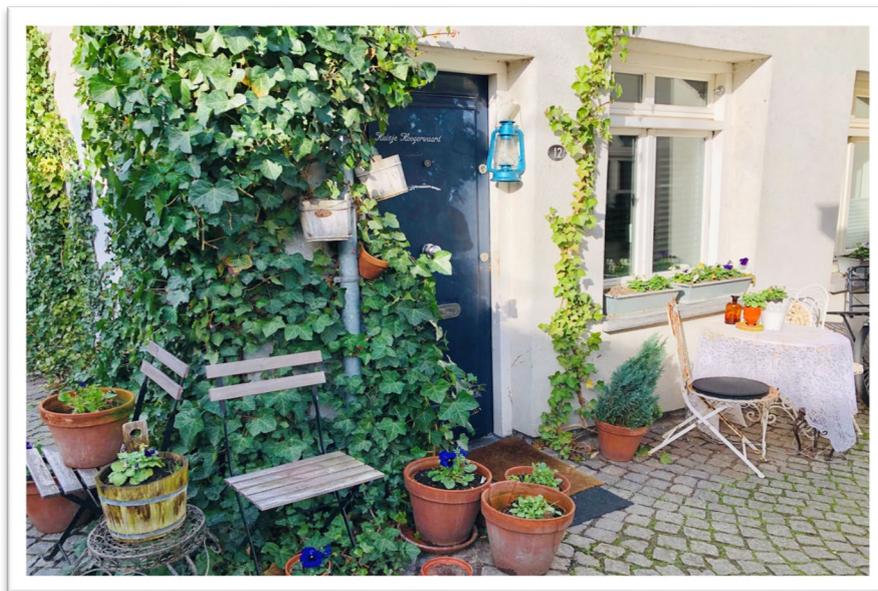
On the introduction day at Fontys, some of the teachers explained their teaching method and communication style so we as exchange students would not be surprised once the semester started. Generally speaking, the Dutch teaching methodology is quite similar to what I have experienced in Denmark. You get some theoretical classes, group work and some time for preparation at home. It was also the same in terms of communication with the professors and university staff. You can expect using your teachers' first name in class. I also felt super comfortable when I had to ask for guidance.

I would describe the local people as cheerful, communicative, very honest and willing to help you as if you were their friend. And yes, honesty turns out to be something typical for the Dutch people. I was told their Belgian neighbors do not like that aspect of their personality, but I personally find it to be quite positive. At the end of the day, it is always better to know how the other person really feels, rather than always getting their kind but not necessarily honest behavior. I think in a way this is also a similarity with the Danish people and another reason why I feel comfortable communicating with both nations 😊.

As any other nationality, the Dutch have their traditions, which not everybody would understand or like. Such an example I personally experienced is the carnival. Carnival is a very big event in the Southern and Eastern parts of the country. It consists in several days of festivities, including a very beautiful parade, for which locals prepare the entire year. During the days of carnival everyone, literally everyone, dresses up in weird costumes and drink, and dance day and night. During the week of carnival people have two options – you either celebrate with everybody else, or leave that region of the country and explore the rest of Netherlands, or abroad 😊.

In terms of other social activities, I cannot provide you with a lot of recommendations. As I am not a clubbing type of person, I did not go out that often. Instead, I socialized with a few of the Erasmus students and met them at a café, or at home.

I wanted to invest some time into exploring the Netherlands, but I only managed to visit two other cities before the pandemic – Eindhoven and Maastricht. And I personally fell in love with Maastricht. Maastricht is quite old compared to other cities in the country. It has a big city center with a lot of squares and shopping streets. What I find the most beautiful about the town is the area around the river Maas. The town has quite a youthful spirit due to the many students at the local universities. So when you go to the Netherlands on Erasmus, or for any other reason – do not miss visiting Maastricht☺.



Practical experiences

Getting to and around the country is super easy as the majority of local people speak English freely. I personally relied on Google Maps for navigating and the NS app for buying train tickets. In terms of city transport, I recommend renting a bike from Swapfiets, for instance, even though I did not even need one thanks to the nice location of my accommodation.

In terms of food, I am used to cooking for myself, so I did not eat out that much. For grocery shopping I recommend

1. Jumbo – wide product range and average prices
2. Aldi – smaller product range, low prices
3. Albert Heijn – probably the biggest product range and the highest prices, compared to the other two

And one last tip from me – if you want to avoid headaches, open a Dutch bank account. Often, local shops, bars and restaurants do not accept Visa, MasterCard, or even cash. For instance, I could not get coffee on campus because I only used my Bulgarian MasterCard (which I also use in Denmark), and cash. Albert Heijn is another example where Visa and MasterCard are not among the payment methods. However, one can pay cash at their supermarkets.

Conclusion

I am very grateful for the experiences I gained throughout the past semester. As it would have been anywhere else, there have been both positive and some negative aspects to my mobility at Fontys, the Netherlands. I believe that despite the extraordinary obstacles the world faced and is still facing in 2020, this opportunity enriched me both on a personal, and on a professional level. I met and studied with a lot of new people from different cultures and educational backgrounds. I studied subjects some of which I would not have studied back home. I got to know a new country, its culture and working methods. In fact, I might have found a place I would like to visit again 😊.



Thank you KEA and Fontys for this opportunity!

Good luck to you who is reading this report and probably applying to study at Fontys!