

**EXCHANGE REPORT****Name****Year and term for exchange**

Ella Söderberg

2021/2022 Fall

Exchange university

Ghent University

Degree programme

MSc Computer Science

A special almost 2 year long exchange

Before departure

I knew I wanted to go on multiple exchanges when I started my studies. The first one was to Taiwan. For the second time, I wanted to go to a university in Europe. My boyfriend is from Gent and wanted to move back there. Gent University is honestly not the best university to find courses in computer science; it is better for electrical engineering. That is why the spots at this university are reserved for electrical engineers. But I could apply anyway and got accepted to go. Of course, due to corona, my exchange was canceled once. But finally, I got to study at UGent. So the reason why I chose to go to UGent was honestly to live with my boyfriend, haha. Due to corona, my expectations were very low. I did not know whether the studies would be online or on-site. I did not know if social activities were going to be arranged. I did not need to do much other than send all the required documents to prepare.

Upon arrival

I arrived in the summer of 2020 and started my studies in the fall of 2021. Due to covid I took a leap of faith and hoped that I was not going to be needed on campus for the next semester. I was right! Spending a year in a new country during covid was not exciting. It was worth it only since I could live with my boyfriend. All this also made my exchange when it finally happened to be a unique experience.

When school finally started, there was a very nice welcome event for all students of UGent. We got some information, drinks and some sweets to eat. Then there was also the student organization ESN that arranged events after school for us students. They arranged pup crawls, speed friending, and karaoke nights every week. My faculty had the introduction to the campus online which was quite useless. But I am sure this will be on site again for the next semester!

Financials

I received the Erasmus scholarship for this exchange. The prices for student housing are quite like in Sweden. You can also buy an affordable lunch at the school's restaurants. Prices of buying groceries are comparable to Sweden as well. However, if you want to go to eat in a restaurant, you will have to expect to pay a lot more for food. Drinks on the other side are of course cheaper, with a beer at a normal bar costing about 3 EUR.

I had some school-related fees that I paid. The largest one was for the course in Dutch I took. As an exchange student, you need to pay about 60 EUR for your first course, and about 200 EUR per course if you want to take more language courses. Then I also joined the student union called "delta" and ESN as I mentioned earlier. To join delta costs about 8 EUR, and you get value for the money through the discount for a printing place, where you will print your course literature to be used for open book exams. The ESN membership costs 15 EUR and will give you discounts to all the ESN activities together with other good discounts, which certainly also made it worth the cost.

To save money I would recommend getting a bike, it is the only means of transportation you need in Gent. There are multiple companies, the main one called “fietsambassade”, that will rent you a bike for the duration of your stay. And get a good lock and bike lights! Bikes get stolen all the time, and you can get fined for riding without lights on your bike. Then I would also recommend making use of the discounts your student union and ESN can give you.

Accommodation

It seems like a good idea to do everything you can to get a room in the dorms or other housing through the university, a lot of people really seemed to struggle in finding a place to stay. It is very difficult to find houses or apartments to rent short term, even if it looks like there are many places available for a fair price. Most of the time you need to stay for a year when renting a place in Belgium, and exchange students are often low on the wish list of people renting out their houses and apartments.

I lived in a house me and my boyfriend started renting in 2020. The price for renting a small house in Gent (about 100 square meters) lies between 700 and 1000 EUR, without utilities (around 100 extra per month). Compared to Stockholm this is good, however nearly impossible to get for an exchange student staying only for one semester. I lived right on the edge of the Gent area (postal code 9000) which was perfect. It is a small city, so if you live inside of Gent you are close to everything. However, the campus for many of the master’s courses in engineering is located about 30 minutes by bike from the center of the city. I would still argue it is worth living closer to the city than to this campus.

University and studies

The university is big and spread out all over the city, together with a bunch of other universities. Gent is the biggest university city in all of Belgium. I experienced the courses being a bit tougher at UGent than at KTH. Part of it has to do with that a “standard” course at UGent is worth 6.0 credits, while at KTH it would be worth 7.5 credits. I also prefer the system at KTH where the semester is divided in two, so that you focus on fewer courses at once. In every course I took, we had group work and a final exam. For some courses, there were also labs or similar. On a normal day, I would go to my classes, then go to the library or go home to study. The only part that differs in this, is that most spots where you can sit and study require you to be silent. I am more used to how it is at KTH where silence is the exception rather than the rule, even in the library. I really prefer to be able to sit with your classmates and discuss what you are studying and easily take breaks and talk about something else. The main language for the master’s programs in engineering is English, with a few exceptions for courses that are taught only in Dutch.

Courses

I chose technical courses based on what I am interested in. Since I have not finished all the courses of my master’s track, I got to build an individual track. I took the following courses:

Robotics, 6 credits. Robotics was a fun and challenging course about the basics of robotics. It was broad and the main topics covered were hardware, algorithms, and software (ROS). By the end of the course, we got to build a robot of our own that was supposed to detect and analyze its environment, plan a path, and serve “drinks” to puppets placed in the room. The project was fun but very time-consuming. There was also an exam. The course was hard, but I learned a lot and it was the best course I took.

Internet of things, 6 credits. This course was massive. It covered hardware, protocols to communicate locally and via the internet on a constrained device, security, and more. It was a really in-depth course. I am not really used to that you have to read and learn a coursebook by heart, but this was kind of one of those courses. It contained a lot of theory that I would imagine I will never use again. But the course was well structured with a coursebook written by the professors leading the course, and with lectures, videos, and labs that were closely related to the literature.

Blockchain technologies, 3 credits. This course focused a lot on Bitcoin and other cryptocurrencies. I would have hoped to learn more about the technical aspects of blockchains. Once again you had to learn the material by heart. For the final exam, we got about 100 questions to study and had to answer about 15 of those in the exam. The best way to study to pass the course with a high grade would have been to just remember all the answers without understanding them. Not the way I prefer to study.

Document processing, 4 credits. This course focused on how digital documents are formatted, such as PDFs and XML, and how information can be read and retrieved from different kinds of documents. I enjoyed getting better at using regex and xpath. It was an enjoyable course, with a good professor teaching and knowledge I see myself using.

The Information Society and ICT, 3 credits. This course was very interesting and pleasant to follow. It consisted of about 7 seminars with a different theme, these were politics, economics, technology, sociology, ecology, ethics, and law. Experts in each field were invited to have a presentation and then we got to ask questions and discuss the topics. It was really interesting, and I enjoyed going to the seminars a lot. Finally, we got to create a presentation of our own. It was a really messy and unstructured assignment. It seems like this course is mostly held so that the professor leading the course gets to talk to and discuss with the interesting guests. I did not mind, it was an overall nice course.

Dutch 1 & 2, 4 credits each. I followed two intensive courses of Dutch, and they were intensive indeed. Four hours of classes every day, for a duration of a month. Every day a full chapter was covered, and in the rest of the time that day, you were supposed to study vocabulary and do other homework. I had already learned a lot since my boyfriend speaks Dutch, so for me it was manageable. But I would not recommend this course to any other exchange student just coming for a semester.

I accidentally signed up for a total of 33 credits, since I thought the Dutch classes would only give me 3 credits each. Try to not study more than you should, it is not worth it.

City and country

I love the city, and especially the size of it. No matter if you live in Gent, or a bit outside, getting around by bike is the most convenient mean of transportation. To go to the other side of the city by bike takes about 20 minutes. Despite it being small, it has everything you need. Plenty of bars, cinemas, restaurants, some parks, canals where you can go for a boat ride, museums, etc. My biggest shock was how much students drink, read more about that below. And also, how young students are in university. Coming from Sweden I am used to being among the youngest of my peers. In Belgium, I am an old master's student, at 25!

Leisure and social activities

Student life in Belgium really revolves around alcohol. Belgian students drink Monday to Thursday, and then everybody goes to their parents on the weekends, to have their laundry done and to study. If you like to get drunk and can party days in a row, weeks on end, the student life in Ghent is for you.

Regarding sports, Gent has a lot to offer. Through university, you can join all different kinds of sports. Tennis, badminton, swimming, judo, you name it. I most enjoyed the sports offered by the Artevelde hogeschool. There you could sign up for a class, pay one euro without committing to follow a class for a whole semester. I joined the skateboarding class almost every week, which was great!

There is also the Erasmus Student Network arranging a lot of activities for all exchange students in Gent. It was a good way to get to know fellow students and also students from other universities.

Sustainability

To go to Gent I actually went by train. It was okay, I took the night train to Hamburg, then a train to Köln and then a train to Brussels. The night train did not have any beds available due to covid, so it was not very comfortable. But in normal circumstances, the night train can be nice. I lived sustainably by getting second-hand furniture. The main website for this in Belgium is <https://www.2dehands.be/>. The university also sells used textbooks, however, it was difficult to find what I was looking for so I ended up buying my books new or printing them.