

Report Exchange Semester Bangkok Fall 2023

At the beginning of 2023, I applied for three possible exchange destinations outside of Europe with the Marco Polo exchange system and got selected for a semester abroad at Thammasat University in Bangkok, Thailand. The following report can be used as an example for a five-month exchange semester, beginning in August of 2023. During the exchange, I had the opportunity to get a deep understanding of Thai culture which was especially valuable to me as I had never been in any Asian country before; thus, having the opportunity to get to know a completely different style and sense of living than what I am used to in most European cities.

Study Program

As an exchange student at Thammasat University, I was able to choose from a multitude of courses which however become only officially signed-off two weeks before the begin of the semester which made conducting a learning agreement for RUG quite stressful. I would recommend emailing the exchange office in advance to let them know that you need the LA earlier than that date as they will generally be helpful and understanding. In order to reach the necessary 30 ECTS required for exchange, I had to choose six courses each of which worth 5 ECTS. Though this may seem like a lot compared to the two courses per quarter in Groningen, the workload is significantly lower than what I was used to, especially at the beginning and in the middle of the semester. Lectures generally take place once a week and last 3 hours, there are no working groups or additional seminars and the compulsory reading for classes is usually relatively low. Still, the amount of work for different courses varies greatly. While I had to do less than what we have to do in Groningen in order to keep up and get decent grades, one of my friends had to do significantly less for her courses. At the beginning of the exchange semester, I looked at the courses and decided to choose those which sounded more interesting to me, taking into consideration but also accepting that they would potentially be more challenging and would require a lot more work than some of the other courses. I picked the courses “International Investment Law”, “Law on Mass Communication and Telecommunications Business”, “International Trade law”, “Business Crime”, “Comparative Business Law”, and “Drafting Contracts and Legal Documents”.

Overall, I would not necessarily recommend the courses to future students. Even though I picked the courses in the hope that they would be more interesting than easier ones and because the topics appealed more to me, the way of teaching led to the courses being quite boring, often repetitive of what I had learned in Groningen or even within themselves but nonetheless often achieving to remain somewhat incomprehensible. The level of teaching rarely matched what was expected of the students in the midterm, papers, or final exams, exceedingly how the class was taught and what was covered in the lectures. However, during the first week of classes, students are allowed to participate in any class and only finalize their decisions afterwards. I would recommend being quite flexible on your previous choices and really paying attention whether or not you like the teaching style and method of a class before finalizing your enrolment. I do not believe that I made sufficient use of this opportunity provided by the university as I had already made up my mind on which classes I wanted to take.

Though, I would not recommend every single course, I did greatly enjoy classes taught by Assistant Professor Adam Reekie, namely “Drafting Contracts and Legal Documents” and “Comparative Business Law”.

The former course is quite practical and focuses, as suggested by the name on drawing up contracts. Every class will focus on a specific language used in contracts and students are required to apply this language in a contract, making the contract understandable and well-constructed. The lecture thus feels like an extensive working group, combining theoretical and practical elements. Professor Reekie is a very patient and understanding teacher who is always willing to answer students' questions to the best of his abilities and to make the classes engaging. I particularly enjoyed this class because Professor Reekie showed how the learned skills can be useful in our future careers. The grade for this course was conducted based on attendance (10%), questionnaires to be filled in after watching one short video per week on the different drafting languages (30%) and the final take-home exam (60%). You will receive all grades combined into your final grade after the final exam has been graded.

The latter course explains business models and rules surrounding the establishment and maintaining, as well as liquidation of businesses in three major jurisdictions, namely the US, the UK, and Germany. The course starts with the basics of business law and moves into more detailed and complex structures. The way Professor Reekie teaches this course is highly interesting due to his extensive background knowledge and experience in the field. Almost every lecture was mainly based on theory but had a (couple) questions at the end, either theory-based or a case-study which served almost like a shortened working group and helped to understand the previously covered material better. The grade for this course was based on two summaries of academic texts on the topics discussed, one essay and the final sit-in exam, which was mainly knowledge-based. As in his other course, Professor Reekie will publish all grades at the same time at the end of the semester, meaning one does not receive any grades back throughout the course.

Lastly, I would also like to recommend "Business Crime" taught by Professor Lasse Schuldt who teaches very well. His class focused on criminal law in the realm of businesses and combined theoretical, practical and ethical issues. The course load for this course, as well as for professor Reekie's, is a bit higher than for the other classes but is still well manageable and supports students in understanding the class better. Professor Schuldt's exam is, as usually done for criminal law, mainly based on case studies. Though a lot of theory is covered in the classes, the professor will include preparations for the midterm and the final exam in three classes prior to the examination. These sessions show quite well what is expected in the exams and how to receive a satisfactory grade. The class has one midterm and one final exam, both of which are sit-in and amount to 50% of the grade each.

Language

All university classes are taught in English, even if no exchange students are present as this is an internationally focused program. Outside of university, it is somewhat difficult to communicate well with elderly people as older generations do not speak English very well. However, it suffices to buy things or to get to places where you need to go etc in case you need to ask somebody. Students, at least at Thammasat, speak very good English, often times better than the exchange students, which makes it easy to talk to them, especially since Thai people are very friendly and helpful. Though, one gets through with English, I would still recommend learning a couple Thai phrases like saying hello or thank you as this is greatly appreciated by the locals and goes a long way.

Finance

Thailand and its surrounding countries are quite inexpensive, especially when compared to the Netherlands. I found my accommodation through the info on the university website and paid around 290€ per month on rent including AC and water. Food is also quite cheap when bought as a meal in one of the local restaurants or at a street food stand. Grocery shopping on the other hand can become relatively expensive which is why I would recommend taking a room/apartment without a kitchen as one rarely uses it. However, though everything is less expensive than in the Netherlands, it is important to note that an exchange semester is an experience and costs will likely accumulate when you regularly go out to restaurants, bars, night markets etc with friends as you will likely do. Consequently, monthly costs are usually around € 800, including travel costs but one can definitely live comfortably on a lower budget as well.

Additionally, there are some fixed costs which will need to be paid before or during your stay in Thailand. For example, vaccinations will be around € 170 if you need them, € 70 for the visa and € 50 for visa extension, applicable around half-way of your stay. I also had to get a new passport, which cost around € 60.

However, some expected costs may fall away. For example, through the university website one gets the impression that one needs to buy a uniform. However, this is not the case. Rarely any students wear uniforms and generally everyone wears what they want, meaning there is no dress code except for when exams take place.

Preparations and Contacts with the faculty abroad

The exchange office of Thammasat University will reach out relatively quickly after you get accepted to study at Thammasat and will provide you with some basic information as well as the supporting documents for the visa. Though you might get an answer to emails only after a couple of days, the exchange office is very helpful and eager to be of good assistance to you as an exchange student.

Housing

Finding accommodation in Thailand as an exchange student is very easy as the university lists multiple housing corporations which offer different kinds of room in the surrounding areas of university. I personally stayed at Amarin Mansion which is an 8-storey building with four different types of rooms one can rent. Though there is the option to rent a room like a hotel room for a couple of nights, almost every room was occupied by an exchange student who would stay at least five months. The house was therefore a perfect way to connect to other people as most of the exchange students also went to Thammasat University.

As mentioned above, I paid around € 290 – 320 per month depending on my water and electricity usage. Though you could get to university relatively quickly when looking at how big the city is, the neighbourhood was definitely not the best as it is quite far from the city centre and there is not that much to do in the area. The university is on the other side of the main river that runs through the city and down town is also on the side of the river Thammasat is located on. I walked to school, which took me around 25 minutes while other people took taxis, or a bike which can take 16 to 30 minutes depending on the traffic.

Overall, the house is very good to get to know people and I would say that it is not too far from university. However, if you want to explore the city and go into the city centre regularly, it

might be good to look for accommodation which on the same side as Thammasat, best would be Sukhumvit but that neighbourhood is very costly.

Guidance/Reception at host university

The university will let you know via Line (similar to WhatsApp) which events will be held for exchange students. In the beginning there was a quick get together and tour of the campus for exchange students which included free snacks. Furthermore, there was a Thai language course to learn some basic Thai phrases and understand the language. I personally found this quite helpful and a nice opportunity to learn more about the language. Otherwise, there are not that many events for exchange students of the law faculty as most exchange students are enrolled in the business faculty since Thammasat is a university focused on business. Thus, while a lot of people I knew took part in some introduction events, the law exchange students did not.

There are some other social events which you will be informed about via line or the Thammasat Instagram page such as basketball or soccer games as well as fundraisers or business fairs.

If you are confused about the schedule or other parts of the program, the international exchange office of the law faculty is almost always open and willing to help you.

Culture, free time and travelling

Thailand has a very rich culture, which to explore is exciting and fun. The locals are open to share cultural aspects with you and like it when you are interested and ask questions. Generally, I would say that the culture is more pronounced on the islands or in the rural areas of Thailand compared to in Bangkok as this is a buzzing city with people from all nationalities, meaning that the culture has become a bit more mixed.

Travelling around Thailand is quite easy and accessible as the means of transportation are cheap but still mostly reliable. Some islands such as Koh Samet are easily reachable by bus (around a 4-hour ride), meaning one can easily go there on a weekend trip. Other places might require you to fly but this is also affordable and is definitely worth it as Thailand's nature, such as national parks and beaches are very impressive and show a rich diversity.

If you plan correctly, it is manageable to go travel at least once a month, as attendance in lectures is not mandatory. If you skip classes to go travel do try to do the necessary work in order to keep up with your classes. Generally, Thai students will be understanding and will sometimes give you their notes but this is not always necessary as the reading and lecture slides will offer the needed information. Do still try to show up to most classes as it is also a form of respect to attend the lectures held by professors.

I also travelled a bit outside of Thailand, which I would recommend to everyone as long as you find the time. This too is very affordable, especially Vietnam, Laos and Malaysia but also other places are interesting and compared to buying a ticket from Europe still very inexpensive to reach from Thailand.

Overall, doing my exchange in Thailand was one of the best decisions I have ever made in my life as it allowed me to get to know a completely new culture and a different form of living. I also had the opportunity to explore new countries and made very good friends in the process. Through the study program, I learned to be appreciative of the way we are taught in Groningen.

All of this made me very grateful to have had the opportunity to take part in an exchange and to study in a different part of the world.