

## **Ruby Thompson**

Studying abroad for a year is a dynamic undertaking, particularly in 2021. I have found that my preparation has been characterised by three main challenges: the uncertainty of making travel decisions within a pandemic, maintaining my mental wellbeing, and accustoming to life in a new city.

COVID-19 has threatened my opportunity to study abroad for a year, to the extent of the University of Amsterdam cancelling my placement in April 2021. The placement was reinstated three weeks later, and I was given just 24 hours to decide whether or not to accept the offer. This illustrates the tumultuous nature of preparing to study abroad within a pandemic. I have faced accelerated deadlines for accommodation, immigration procedures, and student finance, which impractically also coincided with my exam season. The difficulties associated with moving abroad and registering at a new university have been exacerbated unquantifiably by the pandemic. I have had to overcome this through careful management of my deadline schedule, by compiling every action and the date it requires completion onto my 'Noteplan' app so that I can stay on track. I am using the FCDO website as my primary source of travel advice.

While this entire cohort will be facing similar complications to the year abroad mid-pandemic, it has presented a unique challenge in light of my personal circumstances. I have a history of mental health issues, which has affected my academic life since secondary school. In 2018, I sat my A-levels in a psychiatric hospital rather than an exam hall because I had been detained under the Mental Health Act. This continues at the University of Birmingham, where I am reliant on accommodations to my study programme through a Reasonable Adjustment Plan. While I am currently healthy, my difficulties are exacerbated by stress, and these months of preparation have been understandably stressful. This means that I am acutely aware of the need to maintain my mental wellbeing when accustoming to a new academic institution. I have prepared for this by familiarising myself with welfare contacts in the Netherlands. I am also investigating the possibility of moving in early to ease my transition, thereby reducing my stress levels wherever possible.

Aside from the pandemic, I am preparing for the challenge of adapting to a new city. I am learning what I can about Amsterdam before I travel, which is as exciting as it is daunting. Websites such as MoveHub and DutchReview have proved useful to outline some cultural differences between Britain and the Netherlands. I do not expect these to be overwhelming, as Amsterdam appears to be a liberal, open, and welcoming city. I am also using Duolingo to learn some basic Dutch before I travel, and connecting with other exchange students through the Universitas 21 scheme.

To summarise, preparing to go on a year abroad has been a challenging endeavour but I am confident that it will be worthwhile. I will continue to overcome challenges once I reach the Netherlands.