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From across the world

International students find experience of a lifetime at Flemish universities



Senne Starckx
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Every year, some 10,000 international students enrol in local universities as part of a study abroad programme. We asked some of them: Why Flanders?

Every year, Flemish colleges and universities welcome thousands of foreign exchange students. Most of them come to the region as part of the Erasmus+ programme, the EU's student mobility project that has served some one million students since 1987.

According to recent statistics, Flanders is one of the most popular destinations for Erasmus students in Europe. With almost 10,000 arrivals per year, the region occupies the 10th

spot, leaving behind all the Scandinavian countries and all of Eastern Europe.

What motivates these students to trade their halls of residence in London, Barcelona, Berlin, Rome or Paris for a semester, or even an entire year, in Ghent, Brussels, Antwerp or Hasselt? Now that the academic year has come to an end, we set out to ask the question.

Epos, the Flemish government agency that co-ordinates student mobility and internationalisation, doesn't really keep track of incoming students; it only takes into account Flemish students going abroad. But the universities and colleges do keep track.

"We had 521 incoming exchange students this year," says Tim Berckmans, from the international relations office at Antwerp University. "These are both Erasmus students and those from outside Europe and on other exchange programmes."

Most of the foreign students in Antwerp came from Italy, Spain, Germany, Poland and the Czech Republic. The top five hasn't changed all that much over the past few years. "We have noticed, however, an increase in the number of Italian students applying to our university," says Berckmans. Before they leave Antwerp, Berckmans give the international students a questionnaire, which asks them to



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From left: Lis Lemos from Brazil and Anastasiya Samsonova of Russia spent a year at Ghent University; Joanna Wojtkowiak from Poland opted for Antwerp

From across the world

Quality education draw thousands of student globetrotters to Flanders

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explain why they chose to come to the city. Apart from the high quality of education, the school's reputation and its international rankings, Berckmans says, most choose Antwerp for its geographical location.

"This is certainly the case for students from Germany and the Netherlands, who seem to prefer a nearby destination that is in the heart of Europe. Our foreign students also appreciate that Antwerp is a relatively small, liveable and beautiful city."

The close proximity to the political heart of Europe may have also won over the four students from Australia who spent a year in Antwerp. For the 16 students from Wallonia, who took part in the Erasmus Belgica programme, the opportunity to brush up their Dutch was the main reason to head north.

But questionnaires can't reveal the whole story, so we asked some students to shed some light on the attraction of Flanders.

Joanna Wojtkowiak is a 23-year-old law student from Gdan'sk, Poland. She spent her last year of university studies in Antwerp and her story is illustrative of the impact the Erasmus programme has had on the European student population since its founding almost 30 years ago.

"I chose Antwerp because the university has a very good reputation at my home university," she says. "My professor in Poland had also gone to Antwerp University before obtaining his PhD. He convinced me that it was the best possible choice."

And he was right, she adds. "Unlike other people whose Erasmus experience is more about partying, I've actually learned a lot, and the teachers – who all lectured in English – were really demanding. I don't regret anything because the entire programme was perfectly organised."

Wojtkowiak, who is now back home in Poland, is one of those students who doesn't like to stray too far away from home. "There are cheap and direct flights from Gdan'sk to Brussels, and this also had an impact on my decision."

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The more I researched this country, the more amazed I was by its language opportunities

But was it all work and no play? "I'd be lying if I said I never took part in any of the wild parties, but it was the day-to-day life that made my time in Antwerp the best experience of my entire university life," she says. "I've met wonderful, inspiring and warm-hearted people, not only from Flanders, and I went on many delightful trips around the Benelux."

Last but not least, she adds, "I had a cheap room in a beautiful, vintage apartment in the centre. All those elements make me long for Antwerp, and I will definitely come back."

Over to Ghent University (UGent).

The school welcomed 614 international students this year, mainly from Spain, but its reputation seems to have spread beyond the old continent as well. Many students arrive from Brazil, China, Taiwan, South Africa, Japan, Russia and even Mongolia. What makes the university so popular abroad is unclear, at least to UGent spokesperson Stephanie Lenoir, who admits that their international recruitment campaigns are minimal; the students arrive regardless.

Let's ask a student from, let's say,

moving temporarily to Flanders came as a bit of a surprise to her friends in Brazil. "It's not a big destination for studying abroad, so my choice was seen by some as completely random, like I threw a dart at a map of the world."

Luckily, she says, the dart landed on the right spot. "I'm definitely going to miss Ghent. It's such a lovely city, and every day I discover something surprising and new."

Ghent's particular quirks – such as its obsession with cycling – didn't go unnoticed. "I really enjoy being able to go anywhere on a bike," says Lemos. "Ghent is also a very safe town, especially compared to cities in Brazil. I don't have to worry about walking around alone, even at night. In Brazil, it's becoming increasingly difficult because of the lack of security and the high level of violence."

As her time in Ghent is coming to an end, what advice does she have for the next group of international students? "Never forget that you can ask for help, even if it's just for small things like getting a bank card or how to pronounce a word you've just learned," she says. "You are here to learn, and while you may be here all by yourself, you will never feel lonely."

The chance to brush up on language skills is arguably one of the biggest benefits of spending time abroad. For someone like Anastasiya Samsonova, who's passionate about language, studying in a different country was a must.

The 21-year-old from Novosibirsk, in the heart of Siberia, spent a year

in Ghent improving her French and English. Samsonova, who is also learning Spanish and Portuguese in her free time and wants to be a teacher, opted for studying languages in Ghent, rather than signing-up for a traditional teaching programme.

"When I started thinking about studying abroad, my first thought was Germany, France and maybe the UK, but definitely not Belgium," she says. "Why would I choose this hidden country? What could it offer me?"

For Russians, moving to Belgium to study, she says, remains a novel idea. But the more research she did, she says, "the more amazed I was by the language opportunities. Everyone speaks English and can understand some French. What I really admire about the culture here is the total absence of dubbing in cinema and on television. That, I think, explains the high level of languages."

Samsonova also admired the endless range of cultural activities on offer in Ghent. "In Novosibirsk, a city with a population of 1.5 million, there are fewer concerts, events and things to see, do and experience," she says. "I will miss that for sure, on top of the opportunity to practise all the languages."

And what advice does the polyglot have for students who will come to Flanders in the future? "Don't put off the things you want to do and see," she says. "The year will end before you know it, and you'll find yourself rushing, afraid of missing out on all the unique sights and experiences."