

DAAD INVITE - International Networking for Virtually Improved Teacher Education

A gezelliges & lekkeres semester abroad with an insight into the Dutch school system



(Copyright: Carla Wenz)

In the winter semester 2023/24, Carla, a prospective primary school teacher, went to Nijmegen (NL) with the INVITE project scholarship.

There, she was able to gain experience for her future career at our partner university, the HAN University for Applied Sciences, and at a bilingual Jena Plan school.

In an exclusive interview, she reports on her time in our neighboring country so far, the culture, especially Sinterklaas, and also on what she's learned at university and at school.

INVITE team: Hello Carla! How long have you been in Nijmegen and how was your arrival?

Carla: Hello! I've been in Nijmegen since mid-August. The time so far has been very exciting for me. In the first week we were able to arrive in peace. There we had an introductory week with a buddy and took part in the university's sports and arts day in small groups. This helped me to get to know the people, the university and the

surrounding area. The next week, university started. Since October I have been working at school alongside the university - I do this twice a week, on Mondays and Fridays. I spend a lot of time with the other exchange students on the weekend. We are a very close group here, in which we go on excursions, for example. You also get to know people through many different places, such as in the dormitory or through mutual friends. Otherwise, the Dutch people I have already gotten to know are very helpful, both at university and privately.



INVITE team: Have you already gotten an insight into the culture?

Carla: Yes. There are of course many similarities to Germany. But a lot of Dutch culture is noticeable in the language. Words like *gezellig*, *lekker* or *leuk* are often used 😊 Otherwise, the Dutch are very open and direct, which can often come as a shock to other cultures - but you shouldn't take this negatively or personally. What also surprised me was the cycling culture. I never rode a bike much before, but that quickly changed here. I now hope that I can maintain this in Germany. A Dutchman explained to me that everything can be done by bike after a 7-minute walk.

What I have to mention are the bicycle cellars, which look like small garages and are used to store bicycles, and also special bicycle traffic lights. (Image: Gezelligkeit in summer)



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INVITE Team: The Dutch, for example, celebrate Christmas very differently - they celebrate it on December 5th and 6th and call it “Sinterklaas”. Did you get to know that too?

Carla: Yes, Sinterklaas is celebrated very big here and is an important festival, especially for the children. At the beginning of November, Sinterklaas arrived by boat from Spain, which traditionally marks the beginning of the Christmas season - then the children know that they have to behave particularly well. There are also parades through the big cities, such as Nijmegen, during November.

Sinterklaas also came to our school and the children prepared a big program for him. Otherwise, the Dutch celebrate this holiday more than the Christmas holidays (basically December 24th, 25th & 26th), as is usual here in Germany. It is very interesting how differently a neighboring country can celebrate the festival.
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INVITE team: Since you study at HAN University and work at a bilingual school, it would be interesting to know what the **practical part** is like for you.

Carla: Exactly. I work at school 2 days a week. Since I had already worked in schools as part of the Tailwind program, this wasn't a big change for me. This practical part helps me to gain a better insight into the lives of children and Dutch culture, as I am in direct contact with Dutch people.

However, there are a few differences to German schools. In the Jena Plan School, **the kindergarten and the school are linked to each other** - grades 1 & 2 are basically kindergarten years. Children go to school here from the age of 4. What was unusual at the beginning was that the children would come to school during the school year when they turned 4 and not, as is usual in Germany, start school for the school year. Working with younger children was initially unusual, but you can quickly adapt to it if you show openness and flexibility.

The children learn primarily from each other - this applies to both everyday behavior and situations. For example, if children need help getting dressed, they first ask the other children before finally asking the adults.

There are also a lot of **play times**, the children spend a lot of time outside and there is often **"circle time"**, in which the children sit in a circle and learn new things together, such as counting to 10 in English.

The doors to the classroom are also always open, there is a very large window front, so there is a lot of light. The children learn a lot together with others.



INVITE team: What is the Dutch **university system** like for you - is the university different from the PH?

Carla: There are a few primary differences - the semester in the Netherlands is divided into **2 periods**. The first period lasts until mid-October and the second period lasts from mid-October to mid-January. Most of the courses you have chosen take place in the first period, while the others take place in the second. The **length of the courses is also different** - they usually last 2 - 2.5 hours, which was

unusual at first. But you get in quickly. You also have fewer university days, although you can arrange them very flexibly at the PH. Contact with the environment takes place on a much more flexible level, the courses are much smaller (10-15 students) and the **lecturers** build a **very personal relationship** with the students. For example, there was a lecturer who always did a **check-in** at the beginning and end of the session in which he asked about the needs and interests of the students. In general, we had much more say in the content of the seminars because the lecture concept does not exist. The **seminar tasks are also not complex**. We often had to give presentations or create a logbook and still had a lot of free time to explore the surroundings. (Picture above: HAN University building; Copyright: Carla Wenz)

INVITE team: What do the coming weeks in Nijmegen look like for you?

Carla: These are my last days of the week - the days are numbered. I'm going home for Christmas and have two more weeks of university in January. There is also a joint graduation ceremony in the last week, which is also a nice way to end. You still do a lot with friends, especially going on excursions. The half year went by so quickly that I still want to enjoy the last few weeks.

INVITE team: Do you have any tips for students who are thinking about completing a semester abroad?

Carla: Even if you're just thinking about doing it, do it! It will be the best time of your life. It could be a country that interests you even if you have never been to it before.

You have to have a lot of **courage** and, above all, decide based on your **interests**. Above all, it is important to find out more about the university's programs. Studying abroad helps you grow personally, too - be it through small obstacles in everyday life that you have to overcome, or through unfamiliar places and people. However, you get into it quickly and will learn a lot about yourself.

There are lots of opportunities at PH that you should definitely take advantage of.

INVITE-Team: Thank you for your insights! We wish you a pleasant stay for the last few weeks in Nijmegen!

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