

About Leiden:

The university is one of Europe's best law schools, and many of its other faculties are highly regarded. Leiden itself is a small town between Amsterdam and The Hague which, like Dunedin, is focused around the university (hence living in Leiden is in many ways similar to living in Dunedin as it's very much a student city). Leiden itself is your typical Dutch town filled with dozens of canals and windmills! The university is spread between two "campuses": Leiden and The Hague so when choosing courses just be aware of where you're living as commuting between the two, whilst easy enough can get expensive if doing so daily.

Housing

The first thing that must be mentioned about Leiden is accommodation. The most common and easiest way to arrange housing is to go through the university housing office but be aware that it is on a first come- first served basis and accommodation is provided both in Leiden itself and in The Hague (a 12 minute train ride/ 45 min bike ride away) hence you should apply for housing as soon as you receive confirmation from Otago that you are heading to Leiden so as to ensure you have the best chance of receiving the housing option you want. Note that Leiden is far more popular for exchange students than The Hague. Both myself and the other Otago student on exchange were not aware of this and were assigned to live in The Hague not Leiden which was not our preference as most exchange students (especially for Law) live in Leiden and does add an extra hurdle in meeting up with people and going out. Despite this I really enjoyed living in The Hague as it is a lot bigger than Leiden and there is more to do in terms of sightseeing, shopping, going out, going to the beach etc but mates living in Leiden itself really enjoyed that experience and definitely were able to hang out more easily than we were. Housing through the university is expensive (minimum 450€ for an Otago hall of residence type room) but note it isn't much cheaper to try and sort a room in a flat yourself. You also have to pay a partially refundable deposit on your room (500€ and you get back 150€ if you stay less than 6 months) as well as a non-refundable 300€ housing fee. These fees aren't cheap but also can't be avoided so keep this in mind before you commit to student housing (you can reject a housing offer made to you but only the deposit will be refunded not the fee). Flatting in Leiden doesn't incur the same costs but as explained below it is quite a hassle to organise and a lot more trouble than at Otago.

Several friends did manage to rent rooms in flats but they had to spend weeks trawling through Leiden housing Facebook groups and had to conduct Skype interviews for rooms. Note too that most of these types of deals also specify that they only want girls to fill rooms, not guys (the exchange students I knew flatting for only one semester were all girls).

In short, your best bet is to go through the university but do so as soon as you know you're heading to Leiden, be aware of where your faculty is (Leiden or The Hague) and recognise that the Cost of accommodation will likely be more than you are used to paying to flat in Dunedin.

Courses

Upon arriving in Leiden we were informed it is the second-best law faculty in continental

Europe which is both impressive and slightly alarming as you might think the papers you'll take will be really hard but don't let this stop you from going - the papers you take on exchange are not part of the Dutch curriculum and are predominately meant for exchange students. This means about 2/3rds of the papers are "softer" options in that they are more a blend of humanities and law. The other 1/3 of papers looked more "law-focused" as such but from mates taking these the exams were also relatively easy. As an aside, and I can't speak for the other faculties but the Law faculty has so many exchange students each semester that they are able to have exchange-student only papers. You're not obliged to take these but it may be a factor for deciding if you want to go to Leiden based on how much interaction you hope to have with local students. For exchange students There are 20 or so papers available to choose from each semester and whilst, when applying, you will only be "approved" for a few papers (which will stress you out as you will likely arrive with fewer approved papers than you may need/ want to take in exchange for full Otago credit) it is easy enough to change these once you arrive (papers are again on a first-come first served basis and spots open up in O-week so changing in and out of papers is largely as easy as it is at Otago. Be aware that class sizes are usually capped at 40 people however so some papers simply won't be available due to being at full capacity. Unlike Otago there are also re-sits on all your exams! (Not that you'll need them)

Costs of living

Housing is variable at Leiden, mates who flatbed paid between 400€-500€ per month whilst uni housing was 450-700€ per month depending on whether you wanted a dorm room or a studio apartment.

Food is largely cheaper than in Dunedin, but to be safe expect to spend not much less than you would back home as you will likely end up cooking alone rather than as a group (and get a mini fridge/ freezer for your room if you're in uni housing!)

Alcohol is about the same price for beers and wines in bars as in Dunedin but is far, far cheaper in supermarkets than Dunedin. A half pint in a bar will set you back 2.50-3€ and a pint about 5€. Smaller beers (180ml) are the most common types of beers drunk in bars/cafes and cost about 1.80-2.20€. Beer at supermarkets is about 9€ for a 24 pack of general lager (Amstel/Heineken) whilst craft beers cost about 1-2.50€ each. Wine starts at about 2€ for a bottle at a supermarket but the range isn't as large as at home. Spirits are cheaper at about 1/2 the price as back home.

Trains in the Netherlands are quite expensive. One-way from Leiden to Amsterdam is 10€ (about 6€ with a discount card) and is about 3.5€ between Leiden and The Hague. Getting to other cities in The Netherlands (Utrecht, Maastricht etc) will set you back about 15-20€ one way. Buses can be quite cheap (flixbus goes between the big cities) and costs about 5€ each way.

You'll certainly end up getting a bike in Leiden and the main decision will be to rent or buy. Most common is to buy although it can be hard at the start as all other exchange students are competing for the same bikes as you during Oweek. Prices will be higher and plenty of people end up having to pay for things to be fixed which they weren't told of when buying (and you'll almost certainly need to fix at least one puncture during your exchange!). Buying

a bike costs between 50-70€ second hand (and bank on spending another 30€ on fixing it/ needing new parts.) The other benefit of buying is that you are able to make some money back at the end if you can sell it on but be aware that most other people will be trying to seek bikes at this time and new exchange students don't arrive until September.

I chose to instead rent my bike from a student business and paid 80€ for my 5 months at Leiden but this got me a better bike than most second hand bikes and included a warranty for the time I had the bike (unlimited free repairs on the bike and a new bike if mine was stolen or broke beyond repair). A lot of exchange students now rent bikes from this business Easyfiets as it is generally more most effective and saves you the hassle of trying to find someone to buy your bike at the end of semester when most people are leaving.

Travel

One of the best aspects of Leiden or the Netherlands in general is its accessibility to the rest of Europe. Schipol airport is halfway between Amsterdam and Leiden and takes about fifteen mins on the train. Eindhoven in the south of the Netherlands is a hub for a number of budget airlines and whilst a train fare to Eindhoven can be 20€ the cost of the flights can be dirt cheap. Flying anywhere in Europe or Eastern Europe from the Netherlands is no more than three hours!

Ease of living

A common fact but one that is underrated is the fact that all Dutch people speak English and often do so better than we do! This makes getting around a lot easier than exchanges in other countries whilst also allowing you the chance to experience a culture that is significantly different from NZ. For people whom their exchange will be their first time living or spending any prolonged period of time overseas this can make the process much less daunting! Note too that not only will all the other exchange students speak English given exchange papers are taught in English but that all the Dutch students will too which may allow for more interaction with local students than in other countries where exchanges are possible.

Banking

In order to get a train discount card, or to apply for the Dutch government housing subsidy (available to foreign students) or even just to be able to use a debit or credit card at grocery stores in the Netherlands you'll need to get a Dutch bank account . The two most common are ING and Rabobank - not much separates them except Rabobank charges no account fees (ING is 4€ every 3 months) but ING do walk-in appointments whereas Rabobank requires making appointments in advance and having to bring authorised copies for documents from NZ etc and is generally more of a hassle.

Overall, I had a great time in exchange at Leiden and would easily recommend it to others - especially those looking to travel a fair bit during their exchange as the proximity to schipol makes this very easy! Whilst I enjoyed The Hague I likely would have chosen to live in Leiden itself had I been able to. The papers I took were interesting and far different from those available to us at Otago but equally were not strenuous. More than anything, once you've chosen Leiden ensure you applying for housing (even before classes) so as to best ensure the accommodation you most want!