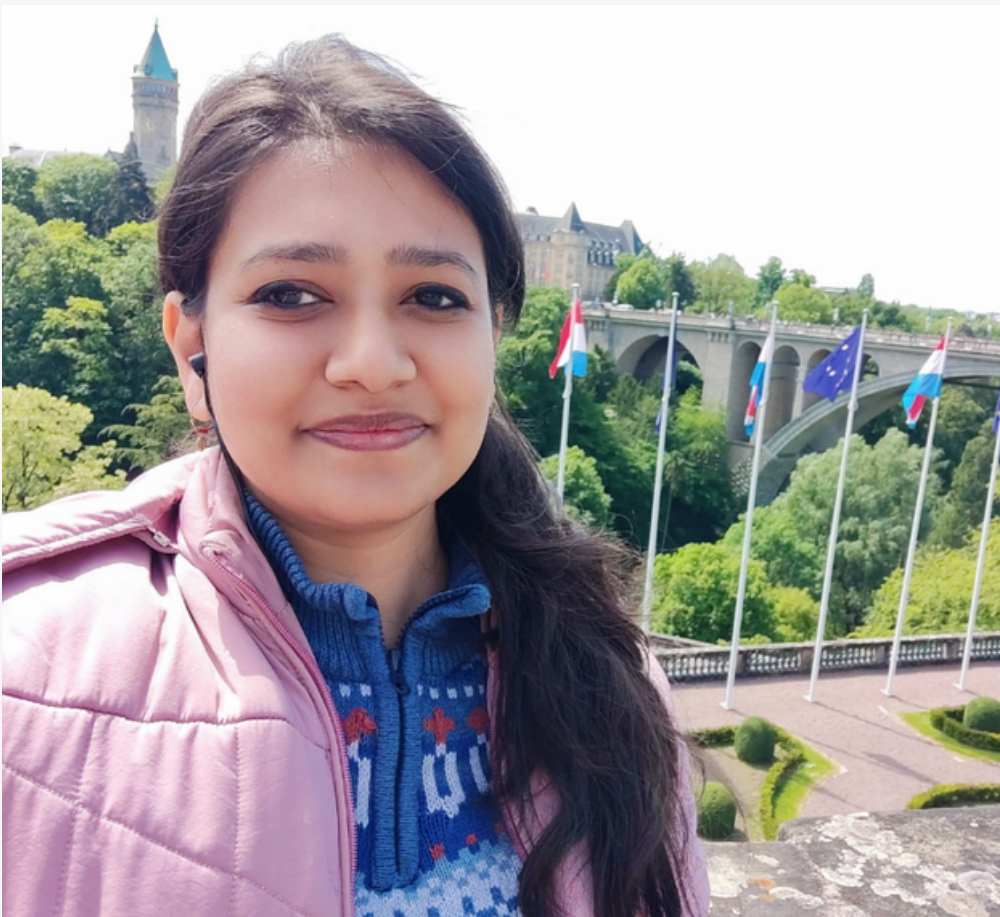


SUMMARY

I am grateful to KJSIM for giving me this opportunity to pursue a semester abroad which allowed me to experience global education while immersing myself in a new culture and setting. A successful completion of the same helped me in growing both professionally and personally, by pushing me to step out of my comfort zone and gain international exposure.

UCLL is one of the leading business schools in Europe. This vibrant campus provided one of the most nurturing environments to develop myself professionally. As a student looking to embark on a global career, I found this immensely exciting. A geographically diverse classroom helped me in gaining an understanding of various cultures as well as enhance my ability to work in multicultural groups. I got a chance to develop my flexibility and mobility, as well as open-mindedness and decisiveness. While the above benefits will help me accelerate professionally, I gained significantly out of the rich heritage of Belgium. Spending a term in the world's richest cultural site was nothing short of a dream, helping me realize the finer aspects of life.

Spending a semester abroad also made me realize how important it is to know our roots and appreciate the culture we are born in. I am confident this experience will help me later in my life, both personally and professionally.



EXCHANGE SEMESTER REPORT

FEBRUARY- JUNE 2023

UCLL, BELGIUM



PREPARED BY

SHELLY | MBA (MARKETING) | 2021-2023

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Dr Raman Ramachandran, Prof Dr Satyendra Upadhyay, Prof Ramkishan Y. and Prof Brajesh Bolia and KJSIM for providing me with an opportunity to pursue a semester at UCLL, Belgium. Their support and trust in my abilities have been invaluable. I am grateful for the opportunity to immerse myself in a new culture, expand my academic horizons, and develop lifelong connections. I am particularly thankful to my professors for their guidance and mentorship, the director for his vision, and KJSIM for fostering international experiences. This exchange program has undoubtedly enriched my education and personal growth, and I am truly honoured to represent my university in Belgium.

I would also like to thank Mr. Frank Geerkens, Consulate General of the Kingdom of Belgium who graced KJSIM with his presence and enlightened us all with the amazing Belgian culture. He was kind enough to give me his visiting card and motivated me in my endeavours abroad.

Lastly, I would like to thank my friends and my family who kept me motivated to realise my dreams abroad.

Shelly
July, 2023



PREPARATIONS

I had always wanted to spend a semester abroad and therefore, while selecting my college for pursuing my MBA, I made sure that the college I choose have an active semester exchange program.

At KJSIM, I got an opportunity to choose from a number of universities and after attending an introductory session from different schools offering semester exchange programs, I decided to go to UCLL, Belgium as it had a truly international classroom and offered courses that inspired innovation.

I expressed my desire to pursue a semester abroad to our International Relations Director, Prof. Dr Satyendra Upadhyay who guided and supported me through the entire procedure.

Applying for visa was the next step wherein Indian Students Association Leuven (ISAL) helped me a lot, along with Satyendra sir. Applying for a Schengen visa is quite a lengthy and a little expensive process and therefore, it is my advice to start as early as possible to avoid last minute hassles. Go through the Belgium embassy website multiple times in order to ensure you do not miss any point before your visa application submission appointment. Some of the things to note before the appointment are as follows:

- Duly filled and signed visa form
- Medical certificate from a Belgium embassy recognized doctor/hospital
- Health insurance
- Apostilled educational documents (degree and marksheets)
- No objection certificate from Director
- Offer letter from UCLL and so on.

After I received my confirmation from UCLL, I booked my flight tickets to Belgium in order to take early bird advantage. The next step was to book an accommodation in Leuven for which I made use of the KU Leuven portal. I booked my residence at KU Leuven residence hall, named LaForesta.

The portal of ISAL has a list of items that we can refer while planning our trip to Belgium, which came in quite handy. Since I had booked my flight tickets quite early, I got to take extra luggage at marginal high price, which proved quite beneficial.

PREPARATIONS

Another important aspect was to mentally prepare myself to live abroad, practically start from scratch in an unknown country with no known faces. For this, I read about the culture, climate, politics and history of Belgium to get an idea as to what to expect when I land there. I was lucky to have interacted with Mr Frank Geerkens, Consulate General of the Kingdom of Belgium, and also with Samir Somaiya sir and students who had gone to UCLL, who gave me valuable insights about Belgium. Also, I started following influencers on YouTube and Instagram in order to get a deeper understanding about Europe and Belgium.

As far as currency is concerned, I took a forex card from ICICI bank and cash from Make My Trip (MMT). MMT provides doorstep delivery of currency notes in denominations desired by customers in the shortest possible time with guarantee of authenticity. I would recommend not to carry higher denomination currency notes as it can get very difficult to use. Carry the money in the multiples of 5s, 110s, 20s, rare 50s and very rare 100s. Avoid exchanging at the airport as the exchange rates can be exorbitantly high there.

While it was important to tie up all loose ends at the home institution, it was equally important to know what needs to be done after landing in Belgium. My residence hall at Leuven was kind enough to lay down all the formalities that needed to be completed such as enrolling at the town hall and opening a bank account.

Also, after getting a confirmation from UCLL, I was sent an email to opt for a sports card, cultural card and bus pass. I would recommend getting a bus pass beforehand through UCLL as it becomes very convenient after reaching the city. It is also recommended to search for leading mobile network companies and their plans and pre-book the sim to be delivered to your residence. Since I had gone through the city hall registration site before landing in Belgium, I was carrying a set of passport size photographs as per the requirements mentioned on the website, which otherwise could get difficult and expensive to procure.

With my bags packed and after saying some very difficult goodbyes to my family and friends, I was ready to take on the adventure of my life.

STUDYING AT UCLL

Before the start of semester, there was an entire week dedicated to ice breaking, called as Welcome week which had several activities namely, city tour, ice breaking session, pub visits etc. It helped international students to really get familiarized with the city, its culture and their would-be classmates.

My first day of the spring semester at UCLL was full of excitement and nervousness. We were duly briefed by the faculty who helped us prepare our timetable for the semester and gave us a brochure to refer to for any doubts regarding the coursework.

I took up 8 courses accounting to 30 credits, namely:

- Business english
- Strategic marketing
- Business management
- Financial management
- Cross-cultural management
- Digital marketing
- Product and brand management
- International marketing



STUDYING AT UCLL

The coursework was similar in rigour and content to the coursework at KJSIM. However, I found that the assignments were more practical and application based. I got a chance to work with 3 companies on their real time business challenges which gave me valuable insights about how businesses actually operate. Also, in the coursework, there was no/minimum use of case studies and live projects were actually used for discussion.

The examination pattern was different from what we are accustomed to as it had components of MCQs, application based questions, oral examination and computer based test. The focus was more on testing the understanding of theoretical concepts by students. There even was negative marking for wrong answers which motivated students to really work hard.

The classroom was very international as it had students from all continents (except of course Antarctica!). In each class, there were nearly 30 students and the classrooms were well equipped with all study aids. UCLL has its own digital learning environment of the KU Leuven association, called Toledo. Via this digital learning environment, teachers can make teaching material (presentations, audiovisual material) available, communicate via announcements, offer tests and tasks.



STUDYING AT UCLL

The coursework was similar to that at KJSIM and the professors shared their industry experiences to help me in understanding the challenges working professionals face in the industry in real-time and how to find solutions for it. I especially enjoyed my lessons in cross cultural management course, taken by Professor Bleri Lleshi Gjonpalaj who encouraged students to portray their culture and facilitated peer to peer learning. This is a course which cannot be realized to its full potential unless and until it is in a true international setting and the professor appreciates and encourages diversity.

I also got a chance to participate in International marketing week where students from all over Europe participated. The week was highly challenging and fun at the same time wherein we got a chance to visit a 100 year old brewery, explore the ancient city of Mechelin, a sumptuous dinner at the town hall, ice skating while competing with each other in finding solution for the business problem posed to us.



LIVING IN LEUVEN

The cultural difference between India and Belgium is quite stark as the former is high context while the latter is low context. It was difficult for me to make friends in the beginning of the semester as I could not understand my classmates' well-defined boundaries between friends and colleagues and how to navigate this boundary without overstepping.

It is, therefore, very important to be mentally strong to deal with the loneliness that comes as a major shock, especially in the early days. It is also important to have a strong support system of family and friends who can keep you motivated. After a while, it all becomes part of life and does not bother so much.

Apart from this, there is a difference in how Europeans travel as they heavily use bicycles. It is important to own a bicycle in Belgium which can be done easily from Velo, an economical bicycle renting space which also provides discounts to UCLL and KU Leuven students. Additionally, Belgians love to walk and run and use walking as a means of transport along with buses and trams. Leuven does not have trams but other bigger cities have it. It is important to get a bus pass as otherwise, the travel can get quite expensive.

The next cultural shock was the absence of MRP on products across Europe. Rather, there are grocery store chains which offer products in different price ranges. I used Aldi and Del Haize majorly for grocery shopping and Action for shopping for other household items.

When coming to live in Belgium, it is very important to plan all your activities as the market closes at 6 pm from Monday to Saturday and on Sundays, the entire market is closed.



TRAVEL

While living in Belgium, I made use of the 2 week long Easter holidays and other long weekends to travel extensively within Europe. I bought a Eurorail pass, which gives non-Europeans an access to the entire rail network in Europe. The only difference is, in Europe, the ticket and reservation are different. For some trains, you do not require seat reservation while in others it is mandatory. There is a Eurorail app which can be used for planning the trips in a budget.

Through Eurorail, I got to travel to 13 countries and 17+ cities in under 1000 euros. Here, I would like to thank Mr Harsh Gupta, who was my travel partner, without whom, this could not have been possible. We used Hostelworld to book all our hostel stays which also helped us in keeping our travel budget in control. Also, for travelling in the city, we purchased day passes which gave us access to their entire local transportation network. We also booked free walking tours to get immersed in the culture of the city we were visiting and tried to interact as much as possible with the locals to learn more about their culture, their lives, what it means to be living in their city/country and so on. The trip, as challenging as it sounded , was equally enriching.



RECOMMENDATIONS

Some of the recommendations that I would like to give a few recommendations from my own experience are as follows:

- Apply for visa as soon as possible
- Book your flights 2-3 months in advance
- Learn basic cooking and other life skills
- Travel as much as possible
- Make a habit of planning
- Try to socialize and make network

TAKE AWAY

Semester exchange programs provide valuable takeaways for students. It promoted cultural understanding and global awareness by immersing me in a truly global classroom. It offered me an opportunity to learn from international faculty and gain a broader academic perspective. Additionally, exchange program fostered independence and resilience as I navigated new environments and overcame challenges on my own. The networking opportunities during these programs created a global network of contacts that I will cherish for life. It contributed to my personal growth, helped me in developing a stronger sense of self, enhanced my problem-solving skills, and helped me become a more adaptable and confident individual, ready to thrive in a globalized world. I am really grateful to KJSIM for providing me with this opportunity to add an international component to my education.

