

Visiting Aalst, Belgium January 19th – 24th 2025

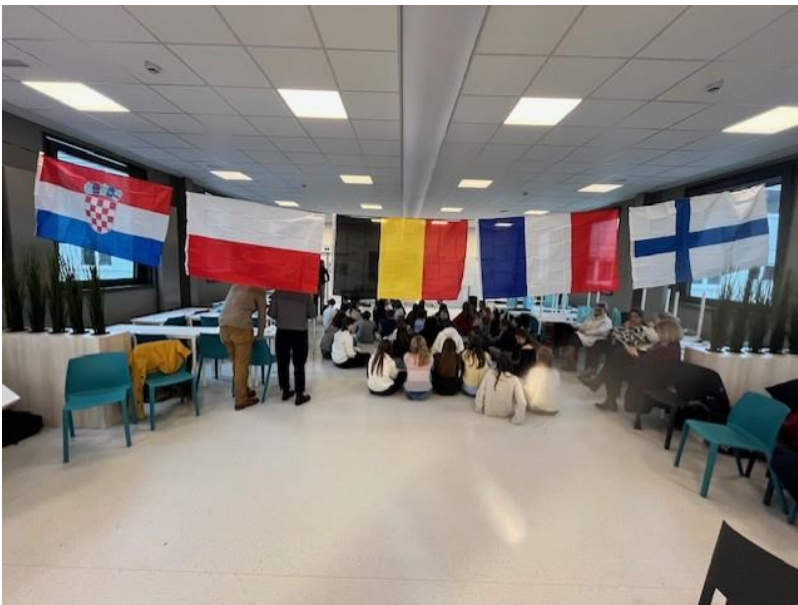
In the beginning of the semester six students and two teachers left Hyvinkää to go to Aalst Belgium. This is their travelogue written by teacher Noora Vuorenmaa.

Connections

For me the most important part of the Erasmus-projects are the connections between people. As a teacher I enjoy discussions about our European school systems, our highlights and difficulties. Our teachers from different countries have always found similarities and differences between our school cultures. I have learnt to appreciate more Finnish school, which is free of charge and the security of teacher's assignment. Our problems internationally seem to be quite the same: the lack of motivation of the students and decreasing persistence. I'm content that we have had open discussions among teachers without sugaring. Of course we all have different strengths in our schools and it has been highly educative to be able to visit different schools and see and hear what we could do differently in Finland. Abroad I have admired f.ex. murals made by students. Finnish schools are more property of city and we can't decorate ourselves except for temporary posters or drawings.

This mobility in Aalst was quite an exceptional, at least in my point of view. At the beginning of the very first day it was clear that our group of Finnish boys had already made friends with Belgian and Croatian boys.

I had known some of them had played videogames online before the mobility, but I had no idea they would already be friends. Although the whole week in Aalst was absolutely nice and interesting, still the best part of the week for me was simply seeing the students interacting and speaking English. In the previous mobilities the students have also gained new friends, but the process has been a bit slower.



My impression of Belgian people is highly positive. Everybody was superfriendly and kind, both in school and in town. My teacher colleague Meri-Tuulia and me visited a French lesson, where students asked

us questions about Finland. They made fine questions and some of them stayed to discuss with us until they had to go to their next lesson. These students were not host-students, so it is marvelous how many students benefit from international guests what Erasmus-projects can provide. One shopkeeper who we talked in Aalst happened to have a son (not in our partner DvM Humaniora, but in an another school) who was going just next week to Erasmus exchange. This father said how every school should have an Erasmus-project going on and that he is a huge Erasmus fan. I must admit I agree. Individual and group connections connect Europe.

The programme

Monday. We had arrived to Aalst the previous noon, so the students had had time to get comfortable in their home for this week. Everybody arrived in good mood and energy. We started with European hymn "Ode to joy" by Ludwig van Beethoven. Other cultural aspects were the welcoming ceremony and learning some dutch vocabulary. We also had a privilege to have the city mayor giving us welcoming speech and he also pointed out the importance of international relations and learning different customs and languages.

The students had three ice-breaking games and in the end of the morning session we learnt a medieval dance. After school lunch (which is always so interesting to have in another country!) we had town tour in small groups. Aalst is an old city with amazing churches and buildings. Nice contradiction to that worthy old culture is the carnaval, which Aalst is famous for!



The M&M's -game:

take a candy and answer to the question marked with same colour than the candy.



The first day was suitably active, but in a manner that gave us all time to get to know this group we were going to spend the week with.



The Utopia-library. The importance of reading and literacy is recognized.

Tuesday. The morning was an introduction to Belgian school system and we had a guided school tour. The DmV Humaniora is a Catholic school established by nuns. The religion wasn't obvious except for the crucifix in each classroom. The original little chapel was an amazing place to have the religion lessons! The students attended to their host's lessons. Our student Maria had taught some Finnish expressions in the Dutch lesson she participated. Meri and myself attended to French lesson, since we both have studied French. The connection between the teacher and pupils were friendly, like we have in our school too. Neither of us is a language teacher, but it seemed that the learning methods are quite the same than in Finland. The classrooms seemed to be quite small, so we were wondering do the students move around during the lessons. In the afternoon we visited a thrift shop.

Wednesday. The day was a bit shorter than the others, because in DvM Humaniora the school days are always from 8:30 am to 15:40 pm, except Wednesday when the school ends at 12 o'clock. On Wednesday we had one of the favourite activities of students: visiting the Aquatopia, swimming park. The students spent their free afternoon different ways: in the programme planned by their host families was going to Gent, visiting a trampoline park, cooking both Finnish and Belgian pancakes. Many of us teachers visited an absolutely impressive medieval city of Brugge.

Thursday. A field trip day to Brussels. Visiting the Visitors centre of European Union Parliamentarium was a experience to remember! The exhibitions were executed in most interesting way and the visit gave a lot to think about. For students it clarified the organization which makes this kind of european youth collaboration possible. For myself the visit gave a bright perception of hope. The timeline of Europe since the founding of EU made it clear that during these decades there have been many difficulties that people have faced. The Berlin wall and the cold war, for example, are the news titles I remember from my childhood. The timeline reminded that there has always been threats in the history and Europe has always survived. Our generation can face the threats of tomorrow as the previous generations have done and there are always good people to make the difference. I don't consider myself as a person who is interested in politics, but the visit EU Parliamentarium made me think otherwise.

In the afternoon we had a tour in the Brussels city center and we gained more cultural knowledge. Some of the students tasted the waffles, we saw the famous green apple of Magritte, cartoons of Tintin on the wall and admired the chocolate shops. And of course we stopped by Manneken pis! The Grand Place, Unesco world heritage site, took our breath away with it's beauty.

Friday. The last of day is always a day with mixed feelings. It is sad to leave our european friends and to end a fine week together. On the other hand, it is nice to come back home. Luckily we had a full day of experiences also in Friday. Morning started with group work in international groupes. The subject was democracy and possibilities of influence in schools students council. The discussions were very interesting to me, since I am one of supervisor teachers of Puolimatka student council. It was a huge revelation to me discover that our own students couldn't exantely tell what does the student council do. I have thought it was quite clear, but I understood this isn't the case. I have now a new ideas how to "brand" student council better, so it's actions are remembered and hopefully also participated better. After the morning's discussion, the students had eco-creativity atelier, where they made a small string puppets and a wallet of the milk cartoons. After that we gathered for a quizz of Belgian culture. A lot of we had learnt during the week, but still there was some new information left. After this session it was time for evaluation and closing ceremony. The evaluation was made in two ways: everybody got post-it notes with four different topics and also we had a survey to be done by our mobile phones. The post-il notes were to be seen by everybody and we were very united that the week was amazing experience and everybody was just so happy to be able to participate international collaboration. When we arrived home, the parents of our students told how much they appreciate this opportunity for their children.

Sustainability

The Belgian people seem to bicycle a lot. Many teachers and students came to school by bike, which is more easier and faster than using a car. We walked everywhere except of course the longer fieldtrips to Brugge and Brussels. The lifestyle of Belgia seems to be healthy and good for the environment.



In the Kringwinkel stroom, the drift shop, we saw massive stock of secondhand goods, which were

presented very professional way. The Kringwinkel stroom also hires people who may have difficulties to find work, so it is also socially sustainable business model. The visit to the drift shop encouraged to buy secondhand items and also made us think our manners of consumption. The workshop in Friday gave hopefully a new perspective to familiar items: what else can a carton box be than just a container for milk or juice. Seeing new solutions is an important skill of the future.

The visit to Aquatopia was not only for fun, but also for gaining knowledge and awoke thoughts of reuse of materials. The whole building was renewed, but the solutions consisted ecological views. For example the tiles of the old pool had been re-used to build the new one. New technical centrum had been built in the place of the old pool, where the suitable space already existed (clever architecture!) and the cleansing systems had been changed into more ecological sand cleansing, but keeping the same pipes. Nowadays many enterprises think their solutions in sustainable point of view.

Cultural sustainability could be seen almost everywhere: preserving the old statues, buildings, renovations in church and the Unesco world heritage La Grand Place in Brussels.