

Introduction:

In September 2024, I packed up my life in India and flew to Belgium to begin my university education at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB). It was the start of something new, exciting, and deeply uncertain. I was leaving behind the only home I had ever known, one that thrived on chaos, color, and constant movement, for something quieter and unknown. This was not just a physical relocation, but the beginning of an immersive internationalization journey. One that has redefined how I see myself, the world, and my future place in it.

At the time, I didn't know what internationalisation really meant in practice. I saw it in movies: students smiling under flags, attending workshops abroad, networking over coffee. But what I have experienced since then is far deeper. Through academic exchanges, intercultural dialogue, student engagement, and language learning, I have lived a year filled with challenges, self-discovery, friendships, and transformation. This is the story of how I became not just a student in Brussels, but a global citizen.

Adapting to a New Life

My arrival in Belgium on September 1, 2024, marked the start of a cultural shift I had long anticipated but wasn't fully prepared for. While my father had moved to Belgium a year earlier for work, my mother and I stayed behind until I completed my final year of school in India. I visited Belgium briefly in December 2023, but that short, touristy week didn't prepare me for the daily realities of life abroad.

Initially, I lived in a guest house by the European quarter, navigating life between two homes; my father's place and temporary accommodation closer to campus. By mid-September, we moved to Hoeilaart, a quiet, green suburb just outside Brussels. The location was ideal in terms of quality of life, but I quickly realized that Hoeilaart wasn't just a new neighborhood, but it belonged to the Flemish region, and my high school French would only get me so far. Here, public transport had a different operator (De Lijn), and my Brussels STIB pass was suddenly useless. I found myself researching train timetables, standing at a bus stop 1.2 km from my house (tiring uphill walk to it) , trying to adjust to a system I barely understood.

But in that discomfort, something started to shift. I was learning. Learning how different Belgium's regions are, and not just linguistically but in the way they function. Learning how to live with uncertainty. Learning to appreciate the silence of Hoeilaart after years of constant noise in India. It was all part of the transformation.

University, Loneliness, and Community

University life started on September 23rd, and it brought both relief and anxiety. I remember the first day vividly; sitting in a large auditorium for orientation, meeting a classmate at the door who

would later become a close friend. I had enrolled in Business Economics, and while the academic structure felt familiar, the social and cultural setting was entirely new. The class was full of international students, but breaking into social circles took time. I often felt isolated, especially living in a suburb where I didn't know anyone, and where everything—from weather to street signs—felt foreign.

Coming from a country of 1.5 billion people, I was used to density, noise, and near-constant interaction. Belgium's calm, particularly in suburban areas, was a cultural shock in itself. I had never experienced such quiet. The first winter was especially difficult—grey skies, early sunsets, and biting cold weren't things I had ever needed to adapt to before. But amidst the gloom, there was growth. I began to explore the city, understand its architecture, its political layers, its multilingualism. Brussels fascinated me: a blend of French and Dutch, its streets alternating between looking like Amsterdam or Paris. The city slowly revealed itself to me, one tram ride and street corner at a time.

Joining Clubs: VUB Racing and IAESTE Brussels

A major turning point came when I decided to join student organizations. I became a member of VUB Racing as part of the business team. This was my first deep dive into a Flemish-majority environment. Most of my teammates were Dutch-speaking engineering students. Initially, I felt out of place. Language barriers, inside jokes I didn't get, and a culture that was new to me. But slowly, I found my rhythm. I built rapport with my teammates, especially during a team-building go-karting event at a place called Burny's, one of our team sponsors.

We carpooled, shared fries after racing, and started having real conversations. One of the teammates, AD, even became a close friend, and he happened to be the president of another club: IAESTE Brussels.

Through AD, I discovered IAESTE, an international student organization focused on global internships, cultural exchange, and professional development. I joined as a Corporate Relations Manager and soon found myself part of a small but incredibly diverse and dynamic team. Our weekly meetings, brainstorming sessions, and social events gave me a sense of belonging. The team included members from multiple countries and backgrounds, and every conversation became a mini-cultural exchange. Today, I am the Vice President of this small team, and am very proud of all the work we have done, and very happy with the memories we have made.

Mobility Experiences That Shaped Me

 **EUTOPIA Innovation Challenge – Paris (November 2024)**

I had the honor of representing VUB at the EUTOPIA Innovation Challenge 2.0 held at CY Cergy in Paris. The event brought together students from ten different universities across Europe to tackle real-world business problems presented by startup founders. Working in a cross-cultural team taught me how to adapt quickly to different working styles and perspectives. We weren't just collaborating, but also co-creating.

Beyond the competition, I got to know participants from across Europe, share my Indian cultural background, and even introduced some new friends to Indian food. We explored Paris, enjoyed the nightlife, and bonded over shared experiences. It was my first academic trip abroad, and it helped me feel like I was truly settling into life in Europe, and it was not just as a student, but as an active participant in its academic and cultural ecosystem.



IAESTE CoCon – Ghent (March 2025)

As a member of IAESTE Brussels, I attended the annual Connect Conference (CoCon), co-hosted with IAESTE Ghent. Delegates from over a dozen countries attended, from France and Spain to Czechia and Norway. During the four-day event, we participated in workshops, discussions, and cultural celebrations. The International Night was a highlight, where each team set up a stall representing their home country with food, drinks, and music. As someone who loves trying cuisines and learning about cultures, I was in a global haven.

I also shared a room with two of my teammates during the event, which strengthened our bond. These moments—sharing breakfast, rushing to workshops, laughing over inside jokes—were simple but deeply meaningful. I was no longer just learning about interculturalism in theory; I was living it.



🇫🇷 Twinning with IAESTE Marseille (April 2025)

This trip was initiated by our connection with IAESTE France during CoCon. Five of us from Brussels traveled to Marseille to engage in a cultural and organizational exchange. We stayed in an Airbnb, cooked together, held meetings on the beach, and learned about how IAESTE functions in France. The trip was filled with small, meaningful moments: practicing French with locals, visiting historic churches, trying Egyptian food with new friends, and getting to know our French counterparts on a personal level.

This was also my first Ryanair flight and my first time flying out of Charleroi (a must-have Belgium experience according to the locals) a reminder of how every small logistical detail can teach me so much.



Languages! (It is Belgium afterall)

I studied French from Grade 3 to 12 in India, but my speaking skills were underdeveloped. Moving to Belgium forced me to activate that dormant knowledge. In Brussels, I often found myself reading French signage, menus, and public transport information. But it wasn't until I started spending time with native speakers, especially during the Marseille trip, that I truly began to gain confidence in spoken French.

Simultaneously, I enrolled in Dutch language classes and completed two levels. Living in Hoeilaart, a Flemish region, gave me constant exposure to Dutch, and I began to pick up phrases, understand conversations, and feel more comfortable in both official languages of the country. Language became more than a tool, it became a bridge to deeper cultural understanding, as well as a step closer for me to integrate better into Belgian life.

Networking: Volunteering at the Digital Finance Summit

In addition to student life and travel, I volunteered at Fintech Belgium's Digital Finance Summit, where I met professionals from across the financial and technology sectors. I worked alongside fellow students from KU Leuven and VUB and expanded my network significantly. This experience introduced me to the professional side of Belgium's international community and reaffirmed my interest in working in global business environments.

Reflections on Growth: Identity, Belonging, and the Bigger Picture

This past year has been nothing short of transformative. What began as a relocation turned into a full-blown journey of personal reinvention. I learned how to be alone and how to find community. I learned how to ask for help, navigate new systems, and adapt to change. I began to see myself not just as an Indian living abroad, but as part of a global movement of young people creating new connections across borders.

More than anything, I learned that internationalisation is not a checklist, but a mindset. It's about listening, adapting, sharing, and staying curious. Whether it was speaking French at a bakery, dancing with Norwegians in Ghent, or explaining Indian street food to a Belgian friend, every moment taught me something about culture, empathy, and perspective.

Looking Forward: My Place in a Global Future

As I look ahead, I feel more ready than ever to pursue a globally oriented career. I hope to take part in an Erasmus exchange, pursue internships in other countries, and continue contributing to student networks like IAESTE. My goal is to work in international business or consulting, where I can bring people and ideas together across borders.

My year in Belgium has not just been about adapting to a new country, it's been about expanding my world. I can't wait to keep going and see what the future holds for me!