Exchange Report

I participated in the SFU Study Abroad Program for the summer semester of 2015. I was given the opportunity to study anywhere across the world, but I chose Hong Kong. Having a family originally from this country, I felt it was important to better understand their culture and beliefs. I studied at the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) from late June to early August. Although it was a relatively short semester, I left the institution with knowledge that will be applicable in the future.

Preparing for exchange may be stressful if you do not plan ahead. Packing for my exchange term was significantly different in comparison to my other packing experiences. Aside from packing for the purpose of travelling, you must also take in consideration all required documents for studying in a different country. Prior to arriving at your host country, you must carefully research all necessary International Student permits and visas. The process of applying for my student visa was much longer than I anticipated. I suggest all Study Abroad students to apply as early as possible, to reduce the stress that will build up as you come closer to the departure date.

Transportation was one aspect of my exchange term that I found difficult to predict. Hong Kong did not have a monthly public transportation pass, which complicated my calculations regarding transportation costs. One major advice I have for future students is to not underestimate the cost of transportation on weekends, or on days that you do not have classes. That was one of my main mistake when calculating my costs, which resulted in a shortage of my transportation budget.

Many restaurants in Hong Kong do not accept credit cards, which lead to a shortage of cash by the end of my semester. Given that my stay was only 6 weeks long, I did not open a bank account in Hong Kong, which played a major role in determining the amount of cash I brought. Being a non-cash user in Vancouver, I took a quick assumption that I could operate my payments in similar ways. As time went by in Hong Kong, I realized I was wrong. By the fourth week of my exchange, I concluded that I had to search for an alternative. Luckily I was able to withdraw cash from my Vancouver bank account from banks in Hong Kong. Although I had to pay additional fees, it was the first time I was gratified to pay the extra charges.

Upon arrival in Hong Kong, we attended an orientation which clearly explained our schedule, activities, and resources that were available at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. All staff members at the institution were approachable and helpful, which made my experience enjoyable. Aside from information regarding the academic aspect of the exchange program, CUHK also educated us with their country’s information. We were given recommendations for activities, restaurants, and the “must-sees” of Hong Kong. The setup of the orientation was very informative, and got me excited to start exploring this unique country.

I did not live on campus when I was studying at CHUK. A friend of mine had an empty house in Hong Kong, and I took this opportunity to really understand the difficulties of living independently. Although I did not experience the on-campus residence life, I still spent a large amount of time in the residential area. Most friends that I made from the exchange program live on campus, and therefore we would spend most of our breaks in the residential area. My favourite element of CUHK’s accommodations is the beautiful view every room has when they look out the windows.
The subway system, which they call MTR, is the most popular form of transportation in Hong Kong. According to the official MTR website, their entire system consists of 87 stations running across their country. Although the MTR system is already built enormous in size, their stations are constantly busy with individuals running to and from the trains. Two distinct difference that I noticed between Hong Kong and Vancouver is the density of people and their attitude towards the efficiency of daily activities. People in Vancouver are more laid back, whereas people in Hong Kong tend to lean towards a fast-pace lifestyle. Using the MTR system during rush hour has really allowed me to experience the significant differences. Now that I am back in Vancouver, I am relieved that I no longer have to be rushed and clustered going their public transportation, but surprisingly, some part of me also misses the fast-paced lifestyle that I adopted to in Hong Kong.

The International Exchange Program at the Chinese University of Hong Kong has increased my adaptability skills drastically. I have always been a risk adverse person, and studying in Hong Kong was my attempt in completing something outside of my comfort zone. From this experience, I have learned to take necessary risks to increase available opportunities. As a young adult, I should take advantage of all opportunities that come my way. It is something that I have always wanted to improve in, and this exchange program has allowed me to take my first step.

One thing I wish I knew prior to my departure from Vancouver would be the activities my host institution organizes. Because we were not given this information before we arrived at CUHK, I made plans to attend most of these activities prior to the first day of classes. With that being said, I found it unnecessary to go to the same place multiple times, and therefore did not attend many school-organized activities.

One key advice I have for future exchange students is to arrive at your host country with an open mind. It is important to understand that others around you are all from different countries around the world, and that everyone is experiencing the same cultural shock as you. Keeping an open mind will ease up the stress of fitting in with others. It will be difficult at the beginning, given that your peers all have different cultural backgrounds, but your perspective will slowly change as determine more similarities between you and your classmates.
Exchange Photos:

Fig 1: Classroom Activities

Fig 2: The Peak
Fig 3: Hong Kong Victoria Harbour

Fig 4: Getting ready for Farewell Dinner – CUHK view