Exchange Report

I studied abroad at the University of Leeds in England from January to June 2015 for one semester, taking English Literature modules. This exchange was one of the scariest, yet best decisions I have ever made and I could not be more thankful to have been given this amazing, life-changing opportunity.

Preparing for my exchange was mostly a lot of paperwork. Apart from the application and housing process to the university itself, the visa application was probably the most important but also very tedious. Making sure that I gave myself enough time to apply for the visa and for it to be processed and sent back to me before leaving was crucial.

As I was going to be away from home for five months and only bringing one big suitcase, ensuring that only the essentials were packed was key. Weather was important to keep in mind, as clothes made up the bulk of my packing. Leeds is in Northern England, so the weather can be quite similar to Vancouver, but a bit colder and definitely much windier. Although I stayed till mid-June, summer clothes were not worn much in Leeds, but was a good idea to bring as I ended up travelling to places in a much warmer climate. I only packed enough toiletries to last the first week (keeping the mini toiletry containers for later travelling was a very smart decision). An important thing to bring would be adaptors for electronics and certain electronics, like hairdryers and straighteners, need to be dual voltage in order to work in England.

Travelling to Leeds from Vancouver took almost a full day, as there were no direct flights and I had to do a few transfers. Always bring a spare change of clothes and essentials you would need for a night in your carry-on with you, as I almost got stuck in Heathrow airport on the way there. Leeds was having a snowstorm the day I arrived, and although we ended up making it there only with a delay, my flight was still nearly cancelled.

The residence I stayed at was the main Oxley house, and although it was not what I wanted at first—I was initially going to transfer out—I ended up loving it there. It was the farthest residence from the university—a 20 minute bus ride away. However, the distance ended up being an advantage, not a disadvantage, as Leeds transport was extremely efficient, and I was able to see much more of the city simply because I was further out. The residence itself was in a quiet suburban area with lots of greenery, so it was also situated in the best location in comparison to all the other university accommodation.

University of Leeds was amazing with their orientation and welcome program, as they not only kept me very busy the first weekend I was there, but it was also through their program that I was able to meet a lot of new friends very quickly. They also continued to organize some school trips to nearby cities, which I participated in a few times as well.

Classes began immediately after the initial orientation, and I was taking three third year English modules. Maybe it was because I was taking high-level classes (third year is the last year
of undergrad for Leeds students), but rumours that studying would be easier when you’re abroad are unfortunately completely false. Having said that, I still really enjoyed my academic experience at Leeds, even though juggling living alone, travelling and the workload proved to be quite difficult at times. I took two core modules and one option module; class structure and assessment differed between these two types of classes. For core modules, lectures were typically twice a week with an additional seminar (the equivalent of tutorials at SFU) once a week. Option modules, at least the one I took, only had one seminar a week. I’m not sure if this was just because I was taking third year English modules, or if all seminars at Leeds are like this, but seminars were held in one of the professor’s office (for core modules, there were generally more than one professor and they would take turns lecturing the class) and you discuss that week’s reading with a group of classmates. I personally really enjoyed my seminars. All my seminar instructors were very approachable and led really interesting discussions. Having them in the instructor’s office also made it seem much more intimate and I liked how it felt like we were all just sitting in a circle discussing that week’s texts, instead of a more structured classroom setting. As for modes of assessment, my core modules had an essay and exam each, the former being worth a third of my mark and the latter two thirds. My option module had two essays, the shorter one was a third and the longer one was two thirds of my mark as well. This was another notable difference from SFU, as I was used to my grade being distributed over more assignments, instead of just over two. However, despite less graded work, the reading load was much heavier than literature classes at SFU. I had to read a text a week for each of my classes and most of these were full-length novels so I would end up having to read three novels in one week.

Probably the highlight of my exchange would be all of the travelling that I got to do. I went on school trips to Liverpool and Durham; it was nice for my first trips to be school-organized, as it allowed me to travel more easily and settle in better. I continued to travel to cities within England, as the train system is very convenient, and ended up going to the Dales, York, London, Norwich, Oxford and Brighton as well. I was also incredibly lucky and won festival passes to Parklife in Manchester. Furthermore, as Leeds had a one month Easter break from mid-March to mid-April, and most exchange students took full advantage of this to travel to the rest of Europe. My friend and I ended up going on a three week trip, going to Paris, Amsterdam, Brussels, and several Italian cities (Venice, Rome, Florence and Naples). This was the most surreal and incredible experience, and arguably one of the best parts of my whole exchange.

Being abroad for five months truly opened my eyes up to how big the world is and how much there is to offer. Although the five months sped by for me, I feel like I did a lot of growing within the time I was abroad and came out of this experience a changed person. Studying abroad was definitely a tremendous learning experience, but the learning was not just contained within the classroom. Through this exchange, I have learned so much more about the rest of the world through being exposed to so many different cultures and in doing so, I learned even more about myself. The travel bug has truly bitten and this exchange has inspired in me a passion for travelling, as I hope to continue to broaden my experience of the world.
Oxley House: where I lived

One of the School of English houses: where professors’ offices are and seminars are held
Roger Stevens building: where all my lectures were

London Eye and Big Ben: when I visited London during the Easter break