MY YEAR ABROAD AT THE UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

Images of the University of Leeds Campus
Part 1: Preparation for Exchange

PACKING
When I began packing for my yearlong exchange the only thing I could think was “I’m packing for a whole year, how on earth am I going to do that?”. First, ask yourself, am I going to go shopping while I am away? What is the exchange rate like? Well I knew I was going to be shopping in the UK especially when stores like Primark exist. I basically only tried to bring essential items of clothing that served more than one purpose, and that way I eliminated other items that I thought would be nice to bring, but not that necessary. Also, I had booked my flight through Air Transat and bought an “option plus” ticket which gave me 40 extra pounds (another suitcase essentially) to bring. I would also recommend bringing shoes that might be a little older that you will be okay with throwing out or giving away at the end of your exchange. Make sure you bring a good rain coat, waterproof shoes and running shoes; the weather in England and especially Northern England is much like Vancouver. I didn’t bother bringing any sheets or duvets with me as they took up too much room and I knew that I could get a set of sheets and duvet cover for £18 at Primark and pillows for £8 (I checked online ahead of time). I also ordered a kitchen pack through the university accommodation website which gave me all the cooking utensils, cook ware, and cutlery that I needed for the year. I did however bring most of the toiletries I would need for the whole year. Toiletries are much more expensive in England and it was much easier to pack those smaller (but expensive) items. I also used vacuum sealable bags which made much more room in my suitcases and were handy for future travels. I would recommend bringing a backpacker’s backpack (40-50L) if you plan on travelling while on exchange, I bought mine while I was in England but it would have been much cheaper for me if I had bought one before I left for exchange. I would also recommend getting a money belt, sleeping bag liner, and quick dry towel in Canada as it will be cheaper for you and these items are much needed when travelling around Europe.

FLYING TO THE UK + TRANSPORTATION
As I mentioned I travelled from Vancouver to London by Air Transat which is a very affordable airline. You will fly into Gatwick airport where you can take the train into London (the Gatwick Express) for £18 or you can take a National Express Coach for £10. I was travelling up to Leeds from London and the first transit related decision I made was getting both a 16-25 Coach Card (£10) and 16-25 Train Card (£30). These cards last for 1 year and discount 1/3 of your train and coach fare every time you use them. You can get both of these online, but in case you don’t know your permanent exchange address, just be sure to bring a couple of passport sized photos of yourself with you and you can get a train card from any major train station (like Kings Cross) or you can look up National Express coach stations online for the closest
one to you. Getting taxis in Leeds is quite easy as they have Uber where you can simply download an app to book taxis and is charged to your credit card. Uber is very safe as you can share your ETA with your friends, split fare, and check your drivers rating before getting in the car.

Another thing you should do in preparation for your arrival, is unlock your phone. Fortunately, my phone was already unlocked so when I arrived in the UK, I simply removed my SIM card and bought a new one from 02 (they have the best mobile coverage in the UK). Unlike in Canada, there are many mobile providers in the UK and they are all very cheap. I paid £10/month for unlimited text and calling and 500 MB of data, but there are also £15-£20/month pay as you go plans that give you 1gb to unlimited data.

**BANKING & COST OF LIVING**

As I have an account with HSBC I was able to open a UK HSBC account and link both accounts together. This allowed for free transfers from CAD to GBP whenever I needed. There are also other banks like Santander and Barclays which may give you some student perks like a free train card or discounts so check those out online. Living in the UK is much more expensive then Vancouver, expect most things to look like the same price but in pounds making it that much more expensive. Tickets to nights out range from £5-20 and sell out quickly and drinks start at £5. Save money by buying tickets early, never buying coffee when you are out (you will be become a tea lover anyway), looking out for student discounts with your student ID, and try shopping at Lidl or Aldi (the cheap supermarkets) they actually have some great products and definitely great deals. You can also save money on groceries by doing an online shop at Morrisons, Sainsburys, or Ocado. This allows you to set yourself a budget and also to purchase heavier items and bulk products without having to worry about carrying them home. I made an order every month and would spend about £50 and a couple of times I shared with some of my flatmates in order to have free delivery. It’s a great service, they bring all of your groceries right to your door and save you a lot of time and hassle.
Part 2: During My Exchange

**ORIENTATION/FEAR/FUN**

Be warned, you might think you are completely prepared when you arrive but not everything will go according to plan when arriving in a new place. Even though I have lived in London for years of my life, Leeds was an entirely new city and culture and was certainly a big adjustment. Remember if you are confused about something, that is okay! Students and volunteers are always around to help during the first few weeks of classes. When I first arrived in my dorm room I did not like it at all, I ended up spending a lot of my time focusing on the fact that I hated being on the ground floor, but once I started decorating my room it started to feel much more home-like and I realized it wasn’t so bad after all. Weirdly enough, it also helped me to have a special show I could watch when I was feeling a bit homesick, this happened to be the show “Friends” for me. It is helpful to have something like a book or music, film or tv to take your mind of things when you are homesick.

When I first started socializing with new flatmates and students I kept reminding myself to be open! Talk to as many people as you can, British people are great at making conversation! Also, I did go to all the orientation programs, as much as they can be a bit boring, you will meet people that are in the same position as you and that can really make a difference. Also, the easiest way I made friends was to go out with my flatmates during Freshers week. For British students it’s expected to go out with your flatmates during the first few weeks of university and while you might not be best friends with all of your flatmates you will often meet people along the way that may become your best friends. If you are at the University of Leeds go to a “Get Out Get Active!” event, they plan lots of trips around the UK and are a great way to meet people and see England. Finally, join a society! Societies are very official in the UK and the Leeds University Union is rated number 1 in the UK! They plan lots of great socials and events for you to get to know one another and there are a range of “give it a go” days which allow you to try out different societies. I joined Leeds Student Radio which lead to me becoming one of the lead news presenters on their news program, making some great friends, attending fantastic events, and an internship at the BBC!

Side note, unlike in Canada where most orientation activities are mandatory, in the UK they are not, so choose activities that you believe would be right for you, often the events that I was most comfortable going to allowed me to meet the most people; above all just be yourself, and if something doesn’t feel right for you that’s okay!
ACCOMMODATION

I was lucky enough to stay at Devonshire Hall, a particularly social residence hall known for having a great community. When I applied for accommodation, I tailored my application to make sure it most closely matched to that residence hall as I had read some great reviews online about it. It is very expensive, but worth it for the experience. Devonshire Hall also plans more events than any other residence halls and is in a great location and just a 20-minute walk from campus. The main building also looks a lot like Hogwarts, and they host formal dinners every two months to honour the history of the residence hall. I was in a newer building (Grosvenor block) and was lucky to have an en suite bathroom which was a treat! All of the halls at Leeds also host Christmas Balls at hotels around Leeds. As Devonshire Hall had about 500 students our ball was at a huge hotel and was certainly a night to remember. I joined the Devonshire Hall drama society where I was one of the lead dancers and had a solo part in a production of “Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dream Coat”. I met so many great friends through these rehearsals and by the end of the year the whole residence began to feel like one big family.

LECTURES/SEMINARS

In the UK classes are much shorter than you would expect for final year courses, most lectures or seminars are 2 hours and the tutorial will be 1 hour. Also a full course load is 3 classes which also
decreases the amount of time you may be in class. During my first semester I had class 3 days per week which I did plan as I wanted to have time to travel, and in my second semester I had class 2 days per week (also planned to have time to travel). Make sure you check the timetable for each class you want to take (called modules in the UK). Unlike SFU’s online system which can tell you if a class will clash the University of Leeds handle everything manually for exchange students, so I had to check that all of the classes I wanted worked together before requesting them. Also, don’t worry if your classes are not organized when you arrive in the UK, you can talk to someone in your faculty when you arrive and they are very helpful.

**GRADING**
The University of Leeds grades assignments on a scale from 40%-90%. It’s quite confusing, but if you are in the 60-69% range you have 2:1 classification which is considered like a B+/A-, while anything about 70% and above is considered similarly to an A or A+. I tried to interpret my grades by adding 20% to each of them to know roughly what my grade would be at SFU. I didn’t find it very difficult to get grades that I would normally receive at SFU so I think the education level is comparable.

**MY FAVOURITE PLACES TO VISIT IN LEEDS**
Leeds is full of so much history, great museums and shopping and there is a lot to see. My top places to visit are:
- Leeds Corn Exchange
- Leeds Kirkgate Market (home of the original Marks & Spencer)
- Victoria Arcade
- Thornton’s Arcade
- Hyde Park (located beside the university of Leeds)
- Headingly (some accommodations are located here)
- York is only a 28-minute train journey and it’s also another extremely historic place. You can visit York Minister and the Castle plus indulge at the famous Betty’s Tea House, renowned for its fantastic tea, food and service.
I also visited Liverpool and Manchester while I was in Leeds for day trips by taking a coach or train to these places.

**LONDON**

London can feel like an entirely different country compared to the rest of Britain and is truly a global city. My family lives in London so I was able to watch many amazing shows, and visit art galleries, and museums while I was staying there at Christmas time and after the semester had ended.

Here is a list of some of the museums and art galleries which are all free:
- Victoria & Albert Museum (known for its great fashion exhibits, its jewellery floor, and collection of ancient art)
- British Museum
- National Portrait Gallery
- Tate Modern
- Royal Academy of Art

These are the top three best department stores that I visited in London:
- Harrods
- Fortnum & Mason
- Selfridges

Other must see's:
- London Bridge
- Walk up the Monument (£2, a lot of steps, and amazing views of London)
- Covent Garden (see a show if you can! National Theatre Shows are usually cheaper)
- Leicester Square (see what premieres are on while you are there, I happened to see the one and only Leonard DiCaprio at the premiere for the Revenant)
- Piccadilly Circus
- Topshop and H&M at Oxford Circus (the biggest of these stores you will ever see)
- Shoreditch (go to the markets)

TRAVEL IN EUROPE
This year was a scary year to travel but I made sure to be aware of any travel advisory announcements in the countries I was travelling to and warned people where I was and what I would be doing; it didn’t stop me from seeing the cultures and countries I have wanted to experience for a long time. There are some amazing deals to visit places throughout Europe from the UK. I decided to do most of my travelling through Europe during Easter break which is a month long in the UK. About 2 months prior to this I bought my Interailing Pass (called Eurail if you are not an EU citizen). I bought a 15-day pass to be used within a month. It cost $450 and was very much worth it. I travelled with four friends. We first flew to Amsterdam (as you cannot use the pass within your country of origin). We spent 4 days in Amsterdam, took a train to Berlin, spent 2 nights there, 2 nights in Prague, 3 nights in Budapest, 1 day in Vienna, 1 night in Venice, 3 nights in Florence, 2 nights in Milan, 1 day in Bern, and 4 nights in Paris. I could write pages and pages about places to visit in these countries but I will just give you some advice about planning this trip. Once you have purchased your pass (do this 2 months in advance) start booking your train reservations. You can take overnight trains for longer train journeys to save money on accommodation and you must do this ahead of time. If you use the Interail website to make your reservations, do this 1 month in advance as a lot of these reservations must be sent to you rather then emailed. Also, plan your trip
around how expensive hostels and hotels are. Most of the places we stayed for a longer amount of time had cheaper hostels and hotels.
I also took a £20 flight from Leeds Airport to Faro Portugal and took a train to Lagos, Portugal, it was a lovely trip and I then travelled to Barcelona for £20 and then £20 back to Manchester Airport. Be sure to check all the airports in England for the cheapest fares, (I used Skyscanner on private mode to find most of my flights).

**UNIQUE EXPERIENCES**

Some of my favourite memories of my exchange trip are because they were truly unique to the UK. I was lucky enough to get tickets to see Adele in Manchester, which was so incredible as it was only her second show on her tour and was held at a much smaller arena then Rogers arena in Vancouver.

Another unique experience was stumbling upon “The Revenant” premier in Leicester Square, my friends and I saw many famous faces including Leonardo DiCaprio!

My final unique experience would be my internship at the BBC in London. I knew it would be competitive as thousands of students apply. Upon my first try I didn’t receive a placement, but I reapplied, a few more months later and I ended up being assigned to work for the BBC World Service for 3 weeks! It was an absolutely unforgettable experience and certainly beneficial to my future career.
REFLECTION

My exchange experience was without a doubt one of the best 10 months of my life. While it was difficult and overwhelming at first, once I was settled I had an incredible time. I definitely learned to embrace new experiences, from backpacking for the first time to trying my hand at radio, each of these experiences led to so many great opportunities. It was definitely difficult being away from my mum for so long, but the power of technology today made us feel very close even when we were so far away, and while I would like to say I kept up with all my friends back in Canada I often didn’t really have time to, but that is very normal and expected when you are travelling. Part of my exchange experience allowed me to relax much more; for the first ever, I was only taking 3 classes per semester and not working so I really tried to make the most of this time.

My final piece of advice for a student planning to go on exchange is to make friends with local students. While I did make some great Canadian, Australian, and American friends, I made many British friends that truly allowed me to embrace British culture. I was also able to stay in places in England which I would have never normally experienced like Bath in Southern England.

I wish I had known how homesick I would be during the first month of my exchange, but it is something that you can’t really prepare for. You just have to know how to make yourself feel better when you get upset, and know that it is...
okay to feel that way. Once I pushed through that first month, things got easier and easier, and I knew the difficulties I had in the first month would only make my year much more worth it. My year abroad allowed me to see 13 countries, some celebrities, an amazing work experience opportunity, and truly solidified what I want to do after I graduate which I did not expect to happen; and for that I am truly thankful to SFU and University of Leeds for offering such an amazing opportunity for students. Thank you.