Exchange Report

PREPARING FOR EXCHANGE

Before coming to the University of Leeds in England for Semester 2 (January-June), I was completely unfamiliar with what to bring. However, one thing in which I did not have to prepare for was a change in weather. The weather in the United Kingdom (and particularly northern England) is very similar to Vancouver. Thus, in terms of packing, it was more of a challenge figuring out how to fit my whole life into only one suitcase. Before leaving, I did a lot of research into the items that I should or should not bring for an exchange abroad. If one is going to the UK, I highly recommend bringing a rain coat, umbrella, pair of boots (does not have to be rain boots, as long as they are good quality and can be weatherproof), and pair of runners. I found that I ended up bringing too many pairs of shoes. I only used the same 3 pairs over and over again. In terms of clothing, I would recommend bringing two weeks’ worth of clothes, including undergarments and shirts. I did not bring any cookware or bedding. I bought all of those items when I got here, which I would highly recommend doing rather than bringing with you. The university provides packages that you can purchase and any other item needed can be easily found at shops in the city.

I obtained a 6-month student visitor visa prior to arriving, which was the shortest visa a student can obtain when I went on exchange. There are many different ways to get to Leeds, but the path that I took was to fly from Vancouver to London (Heathrow) and then London to Leeds (Leeds Bradford). The airport is very close to the university and there are taxis (Amber Taxi) at the airport that can take you directly to your accommodation.

In terms of finances, the cost of living in the UK is very high. My accommodation rent was very expensive and buying any food or drinks out is also very expensive. An average night
out was, on average, £15-£20. However, one thing that is not too expensive is groceries. Compared to Vancouver, they are roughly similar prices when converting the currency and they are cheap when compared to everything else in the UK. In terms of what to pay with, I used a combination of cash and credit card. I would take out big sums of cash at a time and use that until it ran out. I also used credit card when I either did not have cash or didn’t feel like using it. Almost all places will accept credit card and I never had any problems using it. However, most places will not accept debit cards.

DURING EXCHANGE

I found arrival and adjusting to life here quite difficult at first. It was hard not having basic necessities or knowing where anything is, and I suffered pretty severe jetlag for a few days. Orientation helped familiarize me with how the school works and helped me to meet other exchange students. My accommodation was called James Baillie Park and it was a 25-minute walk to the campus. There was 6 of us to a flat, with a shared kitchen but en suite bathrooms. Accommodations varied greatly, with some having meal plans and shared bathrooms and distances ranging from on-campus to an hour-walk/20-minute bus ride. Although my flatmates were all local, most exchange students got placed with other exchange students, which I was told was helpful.
The way the university works compared to SFU is different. A full time course schedule at the University of Leeds is 60 credits and I had three 20-credit modules. The overall contact hours are much less than SFU; my weeks ranged from 6 to 8 hours of class. Each module has an hour lecture and an hour seminar. Attendance is mandatory (register is taken) and course readings are fully expected to be done ahead of time. You are also expected to participate in discussion. The grading scale is from 20 to 90, with a pass being 40. An average grade is between 60-69 (called an Upper Second), with the equivalent of an A being from 70-79 (called a First). In terms of assignments, there is much less course work when compared to SFU. For my modules (in which I was in the School of Media and Communication), I usually had one 50% essay and one 50% exam that consisted of my whole grade. However, it was not uncommon to
have either a 100% essay or exam for a module. The quality of teaching at the University of Leeds is very high and all of my courses were incredibly interesting.

The university campus itself is very large and wide-spread. It is about 20 to 25-minute walk from one end to the other. The university’s student union is rated the best in the UK and that is because of its phenomenal student clubs and activities. The union has over 200 societies in which anyone can join and holds many free ‘taster’ sessions of a wide range of activities and sports. Joining clubs and taking advantage of the many events that the university holds was the main way in which I met new people. There is even the International Students Club specifically for study abroad students that I would highly recommend joining. I participated in many free activities such as tea-making, quidditch, Scottish dancing, board games, and movie nights, among others. I also went on the many local day-trips hosted by the union, which is an excellent way to explore the UK and visit places you might otherwise not get to on your own. I found that I primarily made friends with other international exchange students and it was sometimes hard to meet people who actually live in the UK.
The culture of the UK is both similar and dissimilar to Canada. Going-out culture/night-life is much bigger in the UK and there are many excellent pubs in Leeds in which to enjoy great foods, drinks, and music. The food is pretty similar to Canadian food, as it is made up of many different types from many countries. However, common food staples are curry chicken, beans, fish and chips, sausages, and pies. The city centre of Leeds is close, easily-navigated, and full of great shops. The university is only a 10-minute walk from the city centre. As mentioned earlier, the weather is very similar to Vancouver: rain and moderate temperatures. I did find that it was often very windy and the weather changed more often throughout the day than in Vancouver. In terms of places to visit, I could honestly recommend almost any city in the UK, as all are diverse and steeped in interesting history. Getting around the UK is incredibly easy and often very cheap: coach buses go almost everywhere in the country, as do trains, which are faster but more
expensive. London is the obvious recommendation of places to visit, but others are Wales, the Lake District, Bath, Durham, York, Cambridge, and Stonehenge. Additionally, Edinburgh is fantastic and the highlands of Scotland are one of the most beautiful things I have ever seen. It is also very cheap to travel to many countries in Europe from the UK, especially using discount airlines such as Ryan Air.
REFLECTION AFTER EXCHANGE

I learned a great deal from my semester abroad in Leeds. Learning the in and outs of travelling is one the biggest things I have learned, as I did not have much previous experience with travelling before coming. One of the biggest challenges I faced was the initial adjustment to living there. As mentioned earlier, I struggled with getting set up and I was very intimidated to meet new people at first. I was also very homesick in the first couple of weeks. The culture shock was bigger than I was expecting and it took a few weeks for me to feel comfortable and properly adjusted. However, once that period of culture shock subsided, I was able to fully enjoy my time in Leeds and I was actually surprised by how little home sickness I felt throughout the semester. Although I was already very independent before studying abroad, doing an exchange term is a
fantastic way to gain independence and knowledge about how to live on your own. My biggest advice for other students is to take advantage of every opportunity (big or small) that comes your way and don’t be afraid to go out of your comfort zone. I was very hesitant in the beginning to try new things and I regret not doing more than I did. However, I learned that the best way in which to adjust to a new culture is to simply immerse yourself in it and embrace it. I made many life-long friends from all over the world and I can honestly say that my semester abroad was one of the best experiences of my life; a truly unique and enriching opportunity.

Jumping shot from a tour in Valencia, Spain