Pre-departure

Once accepted, the transition to University of Sussex is comprehensive and easy as they email you multiple handbooks and PDFs of all the information you will need for academia but also life in the UK. These PDFs were extremely useful; especially for selecting ‘courses.’ At SFU, what we would call ‘courses’ the UK calls ‘modules,’ and your ‘major’ is your ‘course.’ At first it is tricky to remember the different terminology when researching for ‘module selection,’ but you pre-assigned academic advisor is always available via email to answer any questions or concerns you have.

Packing for me was a challenge. I have never lived in a dorm so I was unsure about what exactly to bring as I didn’t want my first few days in Brighton to be consumed by going to multiple homeware stores to buy dorm supplies. I chose to pack some necessities from home rather than buy them in the UK and pay double the price. Upon arrival, I flew into London Gatwick Airport (LGW) as it is much closer to Brighton and less congested than Heathrow. From Gatwick, I was able to take a 30-minute train to Brighton station and then use the (free) university shuttle to get to my off-campus dorm. I found the whole journey from LGW to my dorm very simple as I felt it was no different than taking the Skytrain in Vancouver.

The largest obstacle I faced upon arrival was banking. Sussex provides a list of banks that will allow students to open short-term bank accounts. However, when I went to these banks and said I was staying for less than 6 months, all 3 institutions denied me. This made me panic as I did have cash, but not enough to last a whole semester! Luckily my family was able to send me a “multi-currency MasterCard” from Canada that allows you to have up to 6 different currencies on the card. This- along with cash- is what I used for the semester and travelling around Europe. I refrained from trying to use my Canadian bank cards as you are charged per transaction in addition to the exchange rate- remember the UK pound is double the Canadian dollar!! Sometimes, I actually found things in the UK to be cheaper than Vancouver while some was more expensive; depends on what you are looking at.

During Exchange

Orientation happens a couple days before university commences (last week of September) I went to the international student orientation - which is mandatory- and did not go to the “new to Sussex” orientation as it is geared more for first years/ ‘freshers.’ The international orientation was super informative and helpful. In addition to this, Sussex also offers ‘course’ orientation which introduces you to your admin and advisors of your program. I attend this and found it really helpful for understanding how modules operate and who to contact if you have concerns. As I am an Upper division student at SFU and almost finished my degree, I took third year modules at Sussex. In England, undergrad degrees are three years long. Depending on the course, third-year courses tend to be seminars or workshops. These structures have a greater on independent learning via readings and personal knowledge and heavy discussion. Workshops will have more discussions and presentations than seminars.
The UK has a completely different grading system in comparison to Canada. In England, a 40% is a passing grade and anything above 80% is an outstanding grade. Depending on the course (major or minor) 80% or above on a written assignment can be considered to be published in an academic journal. After about a month, I started to remember the grading scale, so don’t worry if it takes time to adjust, and don’t panic if you get your grade back on your first assignment and it says 75/100!

For accommodation, I can’t speak for living on campus but I highly think it is better to live OFF-campus in Brighton than on University. The bus to Sussex from Brighton is about 45 minutes with traffic. Brighton is a beautiful, lively city and it is where you will want to explore and spend most of your time. I stayed in a university managed dorm off-campus. While the location was perfect (sea view from my room window and a 2-minute walk to the seafront, the accommodation itself was old, not up to date, and not worth the amount I spent. The plus side of living in this ‘dorm’ was I was with approximately 50 other international students and this is where I met my friend group. There are options of homestays through Sussex which I did not look into but may have been a better accommodation; however, you will not experience the ‘dorm-life’ setting through this option. It is important to note that bus passes or train cards are not included in tuition fees like SFU.

Fall and Winter weather in Brighton is similar to Vancouver; rainy and cold. However, as a I lived right on the seafront, I found the winds very cold and it feels like the wind goes right through you. Therefore, thick jackets and boots are a must while umbrellas are a major no due to wind levels. Brighton has so much to offer and explore in spare-time. If you like the fast-pace of a city, London is a 30-minute train ride away! I enjoyed Brighton more than London and so did my friends. It has the perfect mix of a fast-paced city with the relaxing feeling of the sea. There are plenty of cafes, clubs, pubs, unique thrift stores, high-end shops, parks and hikes, and quirky events to attend. If you are into outdoor adventures, definitely hike the Seven Sisters cliffs; my friends and I loved it! If you are into nightlife and social- scenes, Brighton has many pubs and clubs with different themes. While some of my friends joined university sport teams or drop in sessions, I joined a dance studio not affiliated with the university. There is really something for everyone in Brighton!

Post-exchange reflection

The largest obstacle I faced was access to my funds and banking. However, once that issue was solved, I didn’t feel as though there were any overwhelming challenges. As I am a very ‘on-the go’ person, I believe one of the best things I “learned” from going abroad was much I appreciated both big things (travelling to another European country with my friends) and the little things (sitting in our common room, listening to music, and sharing stories). Another big take away was learning from new perspective in my field of study; which for international development, makes a huge impact. I would recommend also travelling to other European countries because majority of the flights are all under 3 hours. Saying this, my biggest piece of advice would be, remember to explore Brighton (they have so much street art) and not just overlook where you live! Brighton has so much to offer and living, studying and exploring Brighton really helped me grow.
Picture of campus sign when getting off the 25X Bus

Brighton seafront at sunrise in December
The Seven Sister Cliffs and Hike (approximately 1 hour from central Brighton)

Friends and I going to an ABBA night out
Brighton Old Pier in the Evening

Famous Brighton beach huts