Introduction

In Fall 2019, I completed my study abroad semester in Ireland at University College Dublin. As an SFU undergrad, and specifically a business student, there are so many opportunities available to enhance your degree, but I would highly recommend everyone at least consider an exchange semester as it has been an extremely memorable, challenging, and fun few months. I would have never predicted the personal growth that would come with this experience, and I am unsure if I could have undergone it without my study abroad semester.

Preparation for Exchange

When planning for exchange, I spent hours researching what to expect, and with certainty I can say that there is no way to be 100% prepared. Nonetheless, the previous exchange reports provided solid groundwork for what to expect. I also found that chatting with people who had already completed exchange semesters around the world, and current exchange students studying at SFU helped me understand and predict common obstacles and challenges exchange students face. Of course, they also really made me excited for the journey I was about to embark on! That being said, I do have some recommendations that are UCD specific.

First off, bring a toque. It does not rain as much as Vancouver but it is often either cold, windy, or rainy (or some combination of those three). During my semester (August to December) there was no snow, but it is not uncommon for Dublin to see some snowfall in the wintertime. In case you forget something, there are plenty of shopping options nearby. From campus, you can bus for about 15 minutes to one of Ireland’s largest malls “Dundrum” or take a 30 minute bus ride into town, which is full of shops.

Secondly, if you are arriving here by yourself and moving into the dorms the same day, take the Aircoach. You can buy tickets online (this option is cheaper) or in person at the airport. The bus is about an hour long and stops just across from the main UCD entrance. The aircoach is not a city bus, it is operated by a private company and runs 24/7.

Thirdly, bring some cash with you. The local currency is euros. Credit cards are widely accepted, except on city buses and taxis. City buses stop service around 23:30 and are not the most reliable during the day, so having cash on you is a smart option in case you need to cab. If
using an ATM, I would strongly recommend using one on campus, as they do not charge international debit cards a premium for withdrawing cash. There is an AIB on campus, which is a reputable Irish bank, and the staff there are helpful if you have any questions.

It should also be noted that the cost of living is quite high. Currently, Dublin ranks as one of the most expensive cities to live in within Europe. A budget for living expenses of about 2000 CAD is reasonable per month. My dorm was about $1500 and did not include a meal plan. It should also be noted that a bus pass is not included in tuition, however with a student Leap card (similar to a compass card) each bus ride costs 2.25 EUR and the card can be topped up on campus at the SU shop or Centra. Without the student leap card, bus rides vary in cost based on distance, but in most cases are 3 EUR and you must pay a new fare with each transfer.

Finally, UCD’s website is slightly hard to navigate. It has been undergoing significant changes this past year, so possibly by the time you are reading this it will be a better website. But, as of 2019, to find course descriptions go to “Current Students” → “Course Search”. Do not be hindered if you search for a course with a final exam worth 70% of the final grade, it seems that the final exams are typically worth a lot more than at SFU.
**During Exchange**

UCD provides an airport welcome booth for a few days at the start of each semester. I did not see this booth as I arrived a few days early to travel around the country before settling into the dorm. But as mentioned earlier, getting to campus from the airport is quite easy, and if you are not sure where to find the aircoach bus stop (or anything), Irish people tend to be super friendly and willing to help.

If living on campus, you do not have to move in on the first day the accommodation becomes available to you; two of my roommates moved in four days after I did. Also, there are different dorm buildings and likely not all will be available to you when selecting your dorm. The dorms I could select from were Belgrove, Ashfield, and Merville - none of these offer meals plans so I had no choice but to cook my meals.

To significantly reduce costs, I would recommend buying groceries at Lidl or Aldi. There is a Lidl at Dundrum Shopping Centre, near campus. These groceries stores are about one third of the price of Centra (the on-campus convenience store) and offer a much wider selection.

Furthermore, if travelling to Continental Europe, fly Ryanair. Ryanair is based out of Dublin, so there are a lot of available destinations. With Ryanair you can find flights to major cities for as low as 10 EUR. Of course, the price has its reasons, you are only allowed to bring a bag that fits under the seat; regular carry-on luggage costs extra. Additionally, in big cities, Ryanair typically flies to a smaller airport about an hours drive from the city (think Abbotsford airport).

While in Ireland, there are many great sites to visit too. I would definitely suggest visiting either the Cliffs of Moher or the Giant’s Causeway (N. Ireland). The International Student Society (ISS) and resLife put on quite a few events that take students to different cities and sites around Ireland. Of the day trips, I really enjoyed Glendalough/ Kilkenny, but would recommend any of them because getting outside of Dublin and seeing the countryside really provides a different aspect of the country.
When choosing courses, much is similar to SFU. The biggest difference is that course selection takes place in the last week of August and that what we call a “course”, UCD refers to as a “module”. The average student takes six courses a semester here. I took four courses (equivalent to 10 SFU credits) and easily could have taken a fifth course. That being said, you will likely spend a lot of time travelling, and meeting new people, so do not overload yourself.

On-campus there are a variety of clubs and activities available to exchange students. Of course, join the ISS (this is a must if you want to partake in any of their organized trips). You will also be able to join recreational teams for a vast range of sports. Like SFU, a gym membership is included in your tuition, and the UCD gym offers free personal training for students, and if living on campus, resLife offers weekly drop-in yoga, pilates, Les Mills Core classes, as well as, weekly drop-in soccer.
**Reflection After Exchange**

The biggest takeaway from my semester abroad was learning that mistakes are opportunities to learn. Before, I thought that meant that if I forgot to pack something, then next time I travel will remember to bring it. But exchange has shown me that the learning opportunity comes more in the way you problem solve. You quickly learn that the best way to handle problems is to remain calm and focus on current and future actions, not what is in the past. This sounds melodramatic, but as much fun as exchange is, there will be times when you face situations you may have never encountered before like immigration or even new social situations where the cultural norms are unclear (example: understanding the historical and present significance of the complex relationship between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland).

Unsurprisingly, this has been one of the best experiences of my life, and I am so grateful to have had this opportunity. If you are on the fence about a semester abroad, see an advisor and talk to former exchange students in order to discover which partner university suits you best. Ireland was amazing and definitely a great option worth your consideration.

![The Giant’s Causeway](image-url)