Exchange Report: University of Glasgow, Scotland, Fall 2016 to Spring 2017

1. Preparation for Exchange

I. Why Glasgow?

When perusing SFU’s long list of exchange partner destinations, I settled on the University of Glasgow for five reasons. Firstly, my paternal grandmother was born in Glasgow, so a part of me felt like I was rediscovering my roots by going there. Secondly, UofG was founded in 1451, making it the fourth oldest university in the English-speaking world; and the pictures don’t lie - the campus really does look like Hogwarts! Thirdly, Scotland is an English-speaking country, which appealed to me as a monolingual English speaker who was intimidated enough by the prospect of moving abroad, let alone to a place where I wouldn't be able to readily communicate with the locals (be forewarned about the Scottish accent though!). Fourthly, I am a linguistics major, and the University of Glasgow’s English Language and Linguistics department has a good reputation. Lastly, I'd always dreamt of strolling through the Scottish Highlands and visiting its many lochs and isles; in fact, a Rough Guide readers’ poll recently named Scotland the most beautiful country on Earth, and after spending a year there, I can see why.

II. Academic Details

The University of Glasgow has a course catalogue like SFU’s, which you can access online. When you fill out your online application for the University of Glasgow, you are asked to indicate which courses you want to take; if you are eligible for them, the university will enrol you in them before you arrive in Scotland. If not, final course selection is decided in Glasgow. You must take 60 SCOTCAT credits per semester, which worked out to three 20-credit courses for me. You aren't restricted to just taking courses in your major; I also enrolled myself in some first year electives, including a course called The Archaeology of Scotland, which I really enjoyed, and it included a field trip to different prehistoric and medieval archaeological sites in Scotland.

III. Packing

Whether you go to UofG in the fall or spring semester or both, you'll want to bring pants, some heavier sweaters, a pair of boots or waterproof shoes, and a rain jacket. Umbrellas invariably invert in the strong Scottish winds, but you can bring one if you want. It doesn't really snow in Glasgow, at least not during the year that I was there, but it can rain a lot and get quite chilly. That said, it's easy to buy clothes and other items once you're in Scotland, so if you forget to bring something, don't panic. Also remember to bring adaptors for your electronic equipment; I would recommend having a laptop as the university library can fill up quickly and getting access to a computer is never guaranteed.

IV. Travel and Transportation

When your plane lands in Glasgow, buses are available to take you to the city centre, and there are taxis as well. The University of Glasgow Welcome Team also offers a free transport service from Glasgow Airport. The city itself is pretty walkable; it takes about 40-45 minutes to walk from the university in the west end to the city centre. It is easy to walk within these two neighbourhoods, but if you want to go from one to the other on a cold, rainy November afternoon, it might be preferable to use Glasgow's subway system. It is a simple, circular line that Glaswegians lovingly call "The Doughnut."
V. Financial Details

I opened a bank account and used my Scottish debit card to withdraw cash from ATMs during my stay in Scotland. However, it was my understanding that you can only open a local bank account if you're in Scotland for at least two semesters. For the most part, living costs are cheaper in Glasgow than in Vancouver, including consumer prices and rent. However, eating out can be pricy, so don't expect Scotland to be cheap overall.

2. During Exchange

I. Arrival and Orientation

The University of Glasgow arranged a whole week of orientation for international students before classes started. Orientation week included a welcome and introduction talk, an information fair, a campus walking tour, a bus tour of Glasgow, a "money matters" talk, a networking event, and a social event; the latter included a ceilidh (aka traditional Scottish dancing), which I would encourage all newcomers to Scotland to try. The orientation week was a great way to settle into the new environment before classes started, and I already started making some friends at the various events.

II. Accommodation and Living

UofG offers various student accommodation options, all of which are located off-campus, but most are within walking distance of the university. During the online application process, you list your order of preference for the different dormitories. I was put in Kelvinhaugh Street, which is a pleasant 15-minute walk to campus along a street adjacent to Kelvingrove Park. I shared the flat with four other female international students, which was another great way to make meaningful social connections.

III. Academic Details

The University of Glasgow's teaching style involves more independent study and less contact hours than SFU students might be used to, especially for higher level courses, where there might be only two hours of lectures per week. Some classes include a seminar, which is the equivalent of SFU's tutorial sections. Generally, I found that classes had fewer assessments, but each was worth more as a result. Course outlines usually came with a list of suggested readings instead of set textbooks. This teaching style might seem intimidating to those accustomed to more structure and direction, but as long as you create a study schedule and stick to it, you should be okay. And don't be afraid to ask for help - the university professors are really approachable, and they want you to succeed!

IV. Country Information

Definitely study and work hard, but don't forget to take advantage of everything that the country has to offer. I can't stress this enough! Scotland is a beautiful country, with the nicest, funniest, most open people. By the end of the year, you will be saying "aye" instead of "yes," and qualifying words with "wee" instead of "small." I would encourage students to take part in at least one tour with either Student Tours Scotland or ISUK (International Students UK Tours), which both offer tours to different destinations in Scotland almost every weekend; these tours are a great place to make friends, and are particularly good for places that are more remote and hard to get to by public transport. That said, there's nothing to stop you from taking the train or bus and discovering a sliver
of Scotland by yourself. For example, Edinburgh is only a little over an hour away by bus or train; I went there multiple times, including for its Christmas market in late November. If you plan to use the train or bus more than three times each while in Scotland, I would recommend getting the 16-25 Railcard and the National Express Young Persons Coachcard, respectively, which offer discounts on transport tickets.

Both during the month-long spring break and after my exchange program ended, I took advantage of Scotland’s proximity to Europe by visiting different countries on the continent. Getting to Ireland from Glasgow is also fast and affordable using Ryanair. Many countries in Europe offer discounts to students for admissions to sites, making it easier to travel as a student on a budget.

Glasgow is never short on events and celebrations to take part in, such as the Bonfire Night fireworks in early November, the St. Andrew’s Day parade, Glasgow’s Christmas markets, the Burns Night ceilidh on January 25th; and various concerts held throughout the city in January and February as part of the Celtic Connections Festival. Glasgow also has numerous museums, such as the fantastic Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum, which is free to the public and within a stone’s throw of the university. The Mitchell Library, also in Glasgow, houses family history records for those interested in learning about their Scottish ancestry. Go up to the top of The Lighthouse for amazing views of the city centre; attend a free guided walking tour of Glasgow’s impressive city chambers; explore the city’s botanic gardens, have a picnic in Kelvingrove Park on a sunny afternoon, or find the hairy Highland cows in Pollok Country Park; attend A Play, A Pie, and A Pint at Oran Mor, a lunchtime theatre programme in Glasgow that literally involves watching a play while eating a Scottish pie and drinking a pint; watch a blockbuster at Cineworld Glasgow, the world’s tallest cinema; an independent film at Glasgow Film Theatre; or a movie at the retro-designed Grosvenor Cinema, located off of Glasgow’s most charming street, Ashton Lane. And don’t forget to discover Glasgow’s seemingly endless selection of cafes and pubs. Basically, there’s no shortage of things to do in Glasgow!

V. Social and Extracurricular Activities

The University of Glasgow has lots of clubs - from the Cheese Society to Model United Nations and everything in between. I joined the university’s improv society, which was a great way to get involved and meet people from all over the world. Keep an eye out for Fresher’s Fair, held at the beginning of each semester, when all the stalls for the various clubs will be out. Although I didn’t join them, the university also has two student unions and many sports teams.

3. Reflection After Exchange

Looking back on my time at the University of Glasgow, I think that it was probably the best decision I’ve made in my undergraduate career, and perhaps one of the best decisions I’ve made in my life so far. If you can, try to take a course that would never be offered at SFU, like the Archaeology of Scotland; and don’t stress too much about course selection - it will all work out in the end. Again, remember to study, but also join clubs, take photos, and try to see as much of Glasgow and Scotland as possible. Go there with an open mind, a sense of discipline, and an adventurous spirit, and you’ll have an amazing time!
4. Photos

River Kelvin in summer

River Kelvin in autumn

River Kelvin in winter

River Kelvin in spring
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The university at night

The university at Christmas

Oran Mor at night

Ashton Lane at night

Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum
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Highland cows (aka hairy coos) in Pollok Country Park

Buchanan Street, the main drag in the city centre

View of the city centre from the top of The Lighthouse

View of Glasgow from the top floor of the university library