Preparation
The application was very easy as SFU exchange office done most of the things. However, I need to do the visa application myself. The exchange university (Koc University) advised me to apply for the visitor visa and then Koc helped me apply for a resident permit.

In terms of researching courses, I suggest having more option than the class you plan to take. As many of the other exchange students had difficulty getting the classes when its enrollment day. Enrollment day is very aggressive (similar to the SFU system) so make sure you are ready or else you might not get the courses you wanted.

Health insurance is mandatory to apply for the resident permit. I was on SFU health insurance plan so I had to notify the school insurance of my exchange. A few other exchange students bought health insurance locally.

There is unlikely any issues about how one dress outside of mosques in the European side of Istanbul. However in the more traditional area (mostly on the Asian side) if you are a female (like me) I would suggest to dress more conservatively and not to wear any religious symbol. If you are a female and plan to travel elsewhere in Turkey I highly recommend that you bring some long sleeves/pants (and a scarf for covering your head).

Money
Though credit card is available in most stores they are unlikely to have tap (so no phone payment) and some credit card doesn’t work (usually European banks). I personally use cash all the time as credit card fee is very expensive and is a big hassle to open a bank account in Turkey.
They use the TL (Turkish Lira) in Turkey and Turkish Cyprus, I suggest not to bring too much TL as it values fluctuate a lot. I withdrew cash from ATMs when I was low on cash. However many other exchange students will bring a large amount of a stable currency (ie USD or EUR) and exchange to TL in currency exchange stores (not banks) as needed. Cost of living is much cheaper in Istanbul than Vancouver but since the currency fluctuate there are some dramatic inflations.

The dorm was 1469.00 USD for double occupancy room and 1069.00 USD for triple occupancy (Spring 2019) for one semester. A lot of people prefer to live in an apartment because is cheaper, closer to the city and don’t have any school rules. Yet the school is far away from the city centre, so they often have a very far trip to go to school.

During Exchange
Information on Istanbul and Turkey
As a powerful soft power in the middle east Turkish TV shows is widely watch and if you follow any of them you are in luck because many are filmed in Istanbul.

Food
There aren’t a lot of authentic other cultural food, but Turkish food is very delicious so there are lots to try!
*Notes: If you are vegetarian or vegan, there might be less option in the restaurant for you as many of Turkish food uses animal products. However usually the lentil soup (mercimek corbasi), the menemen (a tomato egg breakfast dish) and raw meatball (cig kofte) is Lacto-ovo vegetarian.

Politics is a very touchy subject in Turkey and most people have a strong opinion so choose who you are talking to wisely or avoid talk about it.

The electronic and real brand name thing is quite expensive because import tax, however if you look around there are some cheap second hand electronic in bazaars. There are also many fake brand name things so be careful of what you are buying.

Left: Busy street in Fatih, Istanbul. Right: Little motor traffics is allowed in Heybeliada, Adalar, Istanbul

Arrival
Incoming students need to make their own way to the campus from the airport. I recommend taking a taxi or a uber* because is very complicated to ride the public transportation to the campus. I personally like uber more as they are more spacious than a taxi, in additions I heard horror stories of other exchange students being scammed on their first night and paying 7 times the usual taxi cost from the airport. However if you want to ride the taxi to the campus use “BiTaksi” app as they will give you and the driver a good approximation of how far and how much the fare should be. When setting destination choose “Bati Kampusu Koc
universitesi” instead of Koc university if you are staying in a dorm as all exchange students who apply for dorm lives in “Bati kampusu” (meaning West campus)

*Note: Uber is technically illegal (as of writing, Jan 2019) but a lot of people use it. The orientation ladies even recommend using uber over the taxi.

There is 3 airport in Istanbul, İstanbul havalimani (ISL) (the newest and only 20 minutes drive to campus), Istanbul Ataturk Havalimani (IST) and the Sabiha Gokcen havalimani (SAW). I arrived in SAW on Pegasus airline, there is no wifi in the airport so I had to use International roaming to get an Uber. The custom was very fast as it was very late when I went through. However it also seems like the border guard doesn’t know enough English to ask me more because all the Turkish speaker seems to have a tough time going through custom.

Incoming students had a week of orientation and then class begins. Orientation is mandatory as you will get vital information on residents permit, schooling, a lesson on survival Turkish and most importantly meeting your mentor.

At Koc University they assign each exchange student with a highly trained mentor. The mentor usually has 3-4 students per semester, and they are how the International office (OIP) in Koc University contact the exchange students. My mentor helped me get my sim card in the first week and help me solve many other problems.

They approve and give me the resident permit when ⅜ of my exchange has passed so make sure your visa is multiple entries. (most tourist visa is)

Living in a dorm
I lived in a triple dorm room, is the best to be the first one arriving in the dorm room because then you can choose which bed to get. The bedroom in a triple occupancies room is usually configured with a phone to dorm management, one armchair, 2 tables with desk lamps and chairs, a mini fridge, a wall of wardrobe, one bunk bed (for two people) and a bunk bed/table (for one person). I personally think the best bed is the bunk bed with a table attach so you can get some personal space. All the exchange students will have Turkish roommates who are usually taking pre-university English classes or first-year students. I didn’t really know my roommates well as they knew no English but some other exchange students have roommates that spoke fluent English and became their best friends, so is all about luck. There is always an option to transfer to another 3 people room however that is the very last resort.

The kitchen is in -1 floor of the B building and there are sinks, electric hobs, microwaves, and panini presses. There are no cooking tools so you have to buy your own. However most people order in as most restaurants deliver through the food ordering app “Yemeksepeti”.

There is tight security all over campus with a complete ban on all non-prescriptive mind-altering substance (including alcohol). There are no outside visitors (except immediate relatives) after 10pm and all visitors must get a visitor pass. Visitor pass will be given to visitors as long as you call ahead to notify the security of their arrival.
There are shuttles between the main campus and west campus that are free for the student to use. The schedule can be found on the university website, next to the gates, and on their app “Koc Universitesi Mobil”. I highly recommend downloading the app as it also contains other useful information like library account information, where things are, warnings etc.

Other forms of transportation includes minibus (dolmus) and bus. I do not recommend walking as it takes 5 minutes by car/bus but 45 minutes on foot.

There are many stray cats and dogs all around the campuses and are usually harmless. However the dog can bark a lot at night and any bites or scratches should be checked out by a doctor.

Travelling to the city centre from school or west campus
The 150, 154, and 151 bus should take you out of the school area to haciosman metro where one can take the M2 line. Same can be done on a minibus (dolmus), they are slightly more expensive and not as comfortable. However they are more frequent than the buses. Almost all public transportation runs around 6am to 12am so if you are out late you would need to use BiTaksi, Uber or ride the 40 bus from Taksim to Rumelifeneri and get off at Sariyer Evleri.

Classes
Koc University is a boutique university so the classes are much smaller than SFU. Almost all classes are taught in English however since some student is not good at English so the professor often speaks Turkish.
I personally find the class material much easier than SFU, but there are more small assignments that are time-consuming. Not a lot of people speaks English so is very worthwhile to learn Turkish to improve your experience there.
The two class I highly recommend all exchange students to take is TURK 201 (Intro to Turkish language) and EXCH 301 (Turkish Culture and History). Those two classes should give you enough information on Turkey to get through daily life.

Extracurricular
Most student clubs use Turkish as their main language but since most students speak some English so there is no harm in trying.
I personally recommend the football (soccer) team, board game club, painting classes/club, and any sports classes/clubs. (ie Tennis or Krav Maga) I have most language trouble with the board game club as many of their board games are in Turkish but I can usually find English translation online.

OIP events
The exchange office (OIP) along with the mentors will organize parties and trips for exchange students.
I would recommend going to all the trips and the first party the OIP host. Although it cost some money it takes the headaches out of planning the trips yourself. Also is more fun to
travel with other exchange students. I went to Cappadocia, Izmir, Efe, Pamukkale, and Bursa through the OIP organized trips.

Visiting religious places
Turkey is officially a secular country, but in practice is 98% Muslims (Pew Research 2010) mostly practising some type of Sunni Islam. There are many amazing mosques to visit and worship in most famously the Hagia Sophia, New Mosque, Sultan Ahmed Mosque, Suleymaniye Mosque etc. Non-Muslims can visit some touristy mosque given that they respect the rules of that mosque. Usually meaning removing shoes before entering, do not disturb the people who are praying, do not enter the zone of the opposite gender, ladies need to be cover and wearing a headscarf, sometime not to take photos inside etc.

Left: Inside the Hagia Sophia. Right: In the mineral-rich thermal water on exchange students’ trip to Pamukkale

Reflections
Living in Istanbul is like living in most cosmopolitan cities, with the exception of the amazing culture and history that the city and country over. After 4 months of exchange I still have yet to discover all of Istanbul, nevermind Turkey. I had made some great memories with my friends and learn about cultures from everywhere through the other exchange students.

Turkish people are generally very nice to everyone however I will be remiss to not mention the following. Sometimes when I come out of a church from worship there are verbal insults (in Turkish so I didn’t realize it until it was pointed out to me) and dirty looks from passerby. However I always feel physically safe in these encounters. Additionally, as a female there can be weird glares by guys, unwanted photos taken, uninvited flirting and touching. Some good ways to signal to guys to avoid the above is to either wear a headscarf or wear a ring on the 4th finger of the left hand as if one is wed. If travelling to more eastern parts of Turkey, I would recommend having male companies or to travel in a big group as guys might be more aggressive.

Yet I am very grateful for the opportunity to study at Koc University. It is a top-notch school and Turkish people are some of the nicest people ever.
Additional tips!

- always carry photo ID (student ID & a national ID)
- get data roaming for at least the first week (wifi aren't offered everywhere and if there is one they usually ask for Turkish phone number)
- If you are staying for less than 120 days, don’t register your phone, because the registration fee is very expensive.
- Tape over microphone and camera on your laptop
- Koc university has many facilities and services try their ice skating rink, hair salon, English counselling (if you are homesick), swimming pools, library (free Press Reader subscription & Ipad lending), and language circles (English, French, Turkish, Chinese, German).
- Must try food/drinks: Cig kofte, mezesi, baklava, künefe, manti, simit, pide, tavuk pilaf, menemen, durum, adana kebab, iskender kebab, dondurma, raki, Emir wine, turk cay, turk kahve, ayran, salep, fresh pressed pomegranate juices, shisha
- only drink bottled water, and filter water. If you don’t want to buy water all the time, the school have many drinkable water taps all over campuses so you can fill up water bottle or jugs.
- Try going to Turkish bathhouses (Hamam) I recommend the Ağa hamamı if it is the first time. They have great service, cheap and explained the process well.