I am in my final year of my undergraduate degree in the Arts and Social Sciences Faculty finishing a double major in Political Science and Communications. During the spring of 2014, I spent a semester within the media studies program in the University of Leicester, England. I will be completely honest in stating that my decision to apply for exchange came with years of hesitation and reluctance. Prior to exchange I had questioned the value of going on exchange over international co-op, comparing monetary differences and in essence formulating any excuse that would validate my uncertainties in experiencing an environment that is outside of my comfortable familiarity. Fortunately, despite my perceived logical rationalizations I applied for the exchange program just before the deadline. I may not be the first to say this, but I will definitely reassure, in full confidence that exchange has been the most rewarding experience of my university career and I will continue to be immensely thankful that I did. Before expanding on these reflections, allow me to elaborate on the preparation procedures prior to exchange.

Preparing for exchange can be quite demanding in terms of paperwork, packing and accumulating all essential materials. However, through time management and with the help of the study abroad team, preparing for exchange was very organized through their detailed lists and the pre-departure session. In terms of packing, depending on the kind of packer you are, I would recommend a week prior to your departure to prepare your luggage and if possible, a few weeks prior in collecting all the necessary items you would require for exchange. Due to the fact that the spring semester involves both winter and summer conditions, I would pack clothing to layer to accommodate both conditions while
also allowing room for a good winter coat. Snow is not necessarily an issue as it is here in Canada so snow shoes, I learned was not essential. The best advice I can provide is to pack smart, essentially keeping your packing to a minimum in order to leave space for all the travel memorabilia you will acquire throughout your exchange. One must keep in mind that there are grocery, clothing and utility stores in England should you need your basic supplies.

In terms of financial funds for travel, trains are easily accessible in Leicester as well as coaches with coaches being the cheaper, but lengthier form of transportation. Both forms of transportation do provide scenic routes that would allow you to enjoy the country and small town atmosphere that England has to offer. I will leave it to your discretion as to what would appeal to your budget more. Although for longer trips, such as going north to Scotland, I would highly recommend taking the train to Edinburgh as you cut your travel time to approximately 8 hours rather than 14 hours by coach. To and from airports is also quite easily accessible as there are five main airports in England: Heathrow, Luton, East Midlands, Gatwick and Stansted. When you do travel around Europe, there are several cheap airline deals that will be passing through either of the smaller airports as Heathrow, having more air traffic, will sometimes be the more expensive route with major airlines. I personally allocated $6,000 CAD, but you can definitely travel for less during your exchange by staying in hostels, airbnb, and grocery shopping rather than eating out every night. Keep in mind, living expenses in England are higher than that of Vancouver in terms of currency exchange but as a student you will able to find valuable deals that will cut costs. Some tips include but not limited to: buying produce from the market rather than groceries, poundland for some essential utilities
rather than a department store or splitting costs with other exchange students from the same accommodation as yourself. I advise that your expenditure be focused more through cash transactions as it not only forces you to strictly budget the cash you allocated to yourself per month but also saves you exchange rates if you use your credit card as your main form of payment. Debit cards from Canada are not accepted in England.

Upon arrival, the University of Leicester employs students to the welcoming committee that will welcome you at the meeting point of Heathrow’s airport and there is a free coach that will take you from central London to Leicester, which will take approximately 2.5 hours. They will organize you based on the accommodations you have been assigned. This provides the perfect opportunity to acquaint yourself with those who live in or around your allocated accommodation. Given that I chose self-accommodation, I was able to meet a few friends residing the same accommodation who were more than willing to split costs for kitchen equipment and necessary cleaning utilities (depending on the accommodation of shared bathroom or kitchen). The welcoming committee also organizes trips to the grocery store as well as a welcoming dinner that also provides you the best opportunity to meet other exchange students from all parts of the world. In relation to academics, this does vary according to the program you have selected. However, with media studies there were no tutorials but class size was smaller, as it was third to fourth year courses, and lectures were very similar to that of SFU with power point lecture slides and occasional professor and student interactions and group discussions. Grading in England in general is very different than in North America as 70% is perceived as a first or an equivalent of an A-, so don’t be shocked if you receive a mark of 74, which actually translates as a very well written or well-presented academic
essay or presentation. During your first week, your professors will convey this to you as well.

Finally, social and extra-curricular activities are definitely a necessity when on exchange. I would recommend joining a few societies, although in Leicester, there is a fee to join the societies. I would recommend being active within these societies in order to interact with other exchange students but also other local students as well. However, due to the fee, I would advice in being relatively selective in which societies you would like to participate in. For those interested in joining the gym, SFU’s gym membership is included in your tuition however Leicester charges £150-£200 pounds for a membership during the semester.

My hesitations arising prior to exchange may have risen from the innate nature that unfortunately plagues many individuals, students not excluded, which is: being too comfortable. Exchange has allowed me to take risks, calculated and sometimes miscalculated. I will not conceal the fact that there will be some challenges that you will face but I definitely do not disclose this to deter anyone interested in exchange but rather entice those who, like myself may be at a crossroad between what is expected for oneself and what is uncertain and vague yet carries with it an opportunity for self-growth and reflection. Exchange is a life experience that brings challenges and rewards. I wont divulge much on the personal challenges and rewards I have been fortunate to experience, as I would prefer you to make your own. However I will conclude with this final remark: while exchange may have been designed for academic exploration, it is much more as it acquaints you with several practical life lessons that transfer into life after academics which make it vastly more valuable and memorable.
Photos:

Picture 1: New Walk: Scenic walk from the University to Leicester’s main City Center. This walk also leads to the market place and the mall area, which is approximately 10 to 15 minutes away by foot from the University.
Picture 2: Part of New Walk’s Museum wherein entrance is free and there are many interactive exhibits that engage both children and adults in Egyptian history, Space, and Wild Life

Picture 3: Leicester market at sunset.
Law department’s Paternoster elevator: An elevator that cycles at the top and bottom rather than the usual vertical motion. Many students, especially new students, tend to over ride it thereby justifying the sign requesting to keep the noise to a minimum as students and staff are working.