Post Exchange Report:

Participating in the Study Abroad programme was one of the best decisions I have ever made. I was on exchange at the University of Sussex in Brighton, England from September 2016 until June 2017, and loved every minute of it. Between living on campus, meeting new people, trying new sports and taking fantastic courses, I was fortunate to have a lot of new and exciting experiences over the year. I am so grateful for having had the opportunity!

Preparation for exchange

In terms of preparing for exchange, packing clothes was easy because the weather in Brighton is very similar to Vancouver, so packing was easy. I never ended up using half the things I brought though, so I would recommend only bringing the things you know you’ll need. Otherwise it is extra weight to travel with, and when you are packing to come home, it might not all fit in your bags because you’ll likely have accumulated some extra stuff over the semester/year. Before leaving for exchange, it’s really useful to budget your trip. The cost of living seemed a bit higher in Brighton, and it’s nice to have an idea of how much you can expect to spend so there are no surprises. Some people who go for a year-long exchange open an English bank account. I didn’t, but what’s best for you really depends on your bank. It’s helpful to go in and talk to them about different options. When researching courses before you leave, the University of Sussex website is really useful. Exchange credits are pass/fail, so this is a great opportunity to try some elective courses you might not otherwise have the chance to take! Sussex has an amazing International Development department, where most of my courses were. I’d definitely recommend looking into some of them!

During Exchange

When you fly to England, definitely try to get a ticket for Gatwick airport! It’s between London and Brighton, and the other “London” airports are actually way outside the city. I flew to Croatia from Stansted airport and had to take 4 trains to get there! At Gatwick Airport there’s a train station where you can take the train to Brighton. If you’re living on campus, there is a shuttle bus to the university that will meet you at Brighton station. I lived on campus for my year at Sussex Uni, but people who were there for a semester mostly lived in the city. There are lots of facebook groups for people looking for flatmates. When you arrive, there are lots of different orientation activities you can do through the university – they’re a great way to meet people.

I really enjoyed living on the university campus because I could walk to my classes, the library, and almost anywhere else I needed to go in less than 10 minutes. This was much easier than the two-hour commute I made to Burnaby in my first year, and meant that I had extra time for other activities. Aside of being close to everything, another reason I’m glad to have lived on campus is because my flatmates and neighbours ended up being my best friends there. We didn’t have much in common – we all came from different places and had completely different hobbies and interests – but we had the best time together and I’m so happy to have met them. Early in the year we covered our bulletin with paper and started writing all the funny things that happened on it…we had filled it by the end of the year, so we each took a piece home. I’m so lucky to have a year of great memories with friends I’ll stay in touch with for a long time.
In terms of academics, it was interesting to try going to a UK university – Sussex was more different from SFU than I expected it to be. I am in SFU’s International Studies programme (International Development, Economic and Environmental Issues Stream). At Sussex, the courses were much more self-directed in the sense that was less class time than at SFU, and more time spent reading. Sussex has one of the best International Development departments in the world, and I really enjoyed taking classes that examined development from different angles, including health, economics, the environment, and culture. Course evaluation was really different in my department, as I had essays and exams worth 100% of my grade at the end of the semester, rather than several assignments throughout the term.

Living in Brighton was amazing. It’s a city unlike any other I have visited, and I would be happy to live there again one day. Brighton is small, so once you’re in town you can walk anywhere you need to go. There is a beautiful rocky beach stretching along the southern part of the city (and into Hove, which is right beside it), and my friends and I loved going sit by the water to watch the sunset. The Pier is one of its most famous landmarks, and lots of tourists like going there. Brighton is a very vibrant city, and home to the only Green MP in the UK. It has a reputation for being a hub for political and environmental activists, the LGBTQ community, and the arts. There is no business district (seemingly because Brighton is so small and close to London), and at the centre of the city is the Laines. The Laines are a maze of streets you can walk in (most of them are too small for cars) filled with little cafes and shops selling everything you can possibly imagine. I really liked how Brighton has relatively few big chain stores compared to Vancouver, and the (hundreds of) local businesses in the city seemed to be thriving. One of the nice things about doing an exchange in the UK is that everything is close together. London is just an hour away on the train, and there are lots of cheap flights to Europe. Take advantage of the opportunity to travel!

At Sussex Uni, there are loads of societies to join. I’d really recommend it because it’s a great way to meet people and try something new. I was part of Enactus and the Ultimate Frisbee team. We got to go on road trips for tournaments, which was really fun, and there were lots of team socials, too. I liked Ultimate so much I’ve already joined the Vancouver league! So you never know what you might find while on exchange.

Reflection After Exchange

During my year abroad, I learned a lot both in school and out. I’ve always been quite reserved when I first meet people, but over the course of my exchange it got easier and easier for me. I think that being away in a place where I didn’t know anyone helped me to “came out of my shell”, so to say, and now when I’m chatting with people at work or speaking in class I notice that I’m not nearly as shy. I also learned to be more independent because this was my first time living away from home from taking care of the flat and managing things alone for the first time. Having the chance to get involved on campus reminded me that there’s more to university than just the classes, and that finding balance is really important. I’m bearing this in mind now that I am back, and trying to do a better job of making time to do the things I enjoy. So far this semester is off to a great start!

For students going on exchange, I think the most important thing is to make the most the opportunity to step outside your comfort zone, try new things, meet new people, visit new places,
and enjoy and enjoy the experience while you can. The year flew by faster that I could ever have imagined! Overall, I’m so glad I made the decision to take part in SFU’s exchange programme. People aren’t exaggerating when they say it can change your life!

The North Laine in Brighton
University of Sussex Campus
The Ultimate Frisbee team at Women’s Nationals!
Sunset at Brighton Beach