Exchange Report

Partner University: Maastricht University

**Partner Faculty:** University College Maastricht (Liberal Arts)

**SFU Major:** Double major in International Studies and Political Science

**Exchange Term:** Spring 2016 January 26\(^{th}\), 2016 to May 27\(^{th}\), 2016
Preparation for Exchange

Packing:

When I started to pack for exchange I had to pack strategically and practically. I was lucky because my dad was able to come with me for my first 4 days in Maastricht. I ended up packing my hard-shell double-sided bag with all of my clothing. I had to pack both winter and summer attire, as Maastricht’s weather is very similar to Vancouver’s weather patterns. I packed clothes that I could layer with, as they could dual for the winter and summer weather. I had the luxury of buying a second bag that I could send home with my dad. This bag I named my necessities bag, which carried sheets, towels, soap, shampoo, conditioner, toiletries, comfort food, notebooks, etc. I also had a carry-on roller luggage; this luggage just carried random stuff that would keep the weight out of my checked bags. This carry-on came in handy during my weekend trips and reflection week trip. When you want to travel cheap during your exchange term you have to travel with only a carry on bag. I chose to bring a roller over a backpacker’s backpack because I wanted to save my back the trouble. I also bought TSA approved locks from Shoppers Drugmart (cheaper on Amazon), just for some peace of mind.

Travel & Transportation

(Chart of prices listed below)

For my airfare I opted to fly into Brussels Airport (yes my tickets were booked before the attacks), which was so much cheaper than flying into Amsterdam. I booked this flight on Air Canada’s Thanksgiving sale, which allowed for a decent savings. A benefit with Air Canada was that I was able to earn Aeroplan points. However, this flight option although cheaper did involve one connection. My flight went from Vancouver to Montreal, then Montreal to Brussels (BRU). I did not find this to be a problem as they interlined my bag through for me and the gates were
fairly close to each other in Montreal. Since flights to Amsterdam are for the most part direct they cost more. Also in terms of distance Amsterdam Airport (AMS) is about 2 hours and 40 minutes away from Maastricht by train. This train ride costs about €25,60 (website for trains: ns.nl). Whereas BRU, is 1 hour and 37 minutes by train and the costs are significantly cheaper. The youth rate age in Belgium is 26 years and younger, this rate is called Go Pass, and costs about €12,80 via https://www.belgianrail.be. However, there are multiple connections (for AMS only 2 connections depending on the time you leave), which range from 2-3 in a tight time frame. My dad and I chose to instead take a Flixbus (https://www.flixbus.com ) from Brussels-Nord/Noord Station to Maastricht Station. This bus only was only €5, which was a complete score. But we did not factor in the price from BRU to Brussels-Nord/Noord station. We made the mistake of purchasing a train to the station from the airport and they completely ripped us off. Make sure when you travel always purchase your tickets online no matter what, the savings will always be there. The University does have a student mentor that will meet you at both BRU and AMS; however, I came the day before the program started. They do not send the dates for the mentor program in a timely manor so it makes it hard to coordinate your flight with the mentor dates.
Flight

**Air Canada**
1 Connection
Vancouver to Montreal
Montreal to Brussels
**Round Trip Price:** $952.61
Departure Date:
January 21st, 2016
Return Date:
June 28th, 2016

**KLM**
Direct Flight
Vancouver to Amsterdam
**Round trip Price:**
~$1200.00

**Iberia & British Airways**
1 Connection
Vancouver to London
London to Dusseldorf
**Round trip Price:**
~$960.00

Train

BRU to Maastricht
(Not direct)
€12.80
~$18.40
BRU to Brussels Nord (Direct)
€11.20
~$16.10

AMS to Maastricht
(Not direct)
€25.60
~$37.00

Dusseldorf to Maastricht
(Not direct)
€25.00
~$36.00

Bus

Brussels Nord to Maastricht
€5.00
About $7.18

N/A

N/A

Total Cost

~$971 (train)
~$976 (train & bus)

~$1237.00

~$996.00

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**Financial Details**

When you are at small local stores and all grocery stores (Albert Heijn and Jumbo) they do not accept Canadian debit and visa cards. That is why I found it helpful to open up a bank account at ING bank. In order to signup for this account you must have your passport, proof that you are enrolled at the university and have a Dutch phone number (you can purchase a cheap pay as you go Sim at Vodafone). For some reason Canadians are only allowed to apply for an ING bank account at their Stationstraat location. Other big box stores do accept Canadian cards, however, it is handy to have a local debit card. This debit card comes in handy when purchasing group train tickets ([https://www.ns.nl/producten/en/losse-kaartjes/p/ns-groepsretour](https://www.ns.nl/producten/en/losse-kaartjes/p/ns-groepsretour)), as you can e-transfer money. The cost of living is about the same compared to Vancouver. However,
restaurants are fairly overpriced and groceries are reasonable. Every Wednesday and Friday there is a local Market in Markt. At this Market there are fruits and vegetables for a good price, and they only accept cash. ATMs are located everywhere throughout the city and are hard to miss.

**During Exchange**

**Orientation**

UCM has a mandatory 2-day orientation, each day end with a complimentary dinner. I highly recommend staying for the dinners they are delicious! The 2 day orientation has a main goal of getting student acquainted with the schools Problem Based Learning (PBL) system. PBL is all about structured conversation, which is backed up with facts from the readings. These conversations take place during tutorials. The orientation is also a great place to meet friends/travel buddies. Also there are some presentations that take place in the lecture hall at UCM that discuss tools that will make life a lot easier in the city.

**Accommodation and Living**

For accommodation the school recommends using the company Maastricht Student Housing. There were complications with my residence application so that distracted me, which caused me to miss out on booking housing through this company. However, some of my friends did book housing through them. For their accommodations they had an option of the main guesthouse. The main guesthouse is shared with a private hospital, which gives the rooms the feeling of being in an old school hospital ward. My friends did love the amount of other exchange students they were able to meet. My other group of friends stayed in Markt, in the housing called Heigel Geest. They loved their accommodation because it was a private mini studio apartment and was more central than the main guesthouse. They didn’t need to purchase a
bike because everything was walking distance. The only downside is that they were isolated from making friends within the building because everything was so private.

As for my housing I went through a private lease, which worked for me because I was in a family oriented neighborhood. Which was a 2-minute walk away from the train station. Also it was close to a fresh fruit market and 2 grocery stores. My room was much larger than most of friends space. But the housing is all based on personal preference.

It does not matter, which side of the river you live on, as the infrastructure for bikes is setup perfectly in order to get to school and the city center very quickly. As for purchasing a bike that is not too difficult. You just need to find a Facebook group for purchasing and selling bikes within Maastricht. You can bargain with the sellers and once you leave you can post your bike on the various Facebook groups.

**Academic details**

The semester is split into 2 periods. For myself I attended the semester that had period 4 and 5. During each period you must take 2 academic classes and 1 skill class. Each academic class includes 2 tutorials, which are 2 hours long each and 1 lecture, which is also 2 hours long. As for the skill class the lectures do very depending on the subject you take. However, there is only 1 tutorial per week that is 2 hours long.

As for the grading system the most important component of your grade is participation. Even though the participation grade isn’t weighed as heavily in terms of percentage on your final grade. Participation weighs heavily on the perception that your course coordinator (professor) has on you and can affect the way they grade other assignments. For most courses there are only two things that are graded. Each is usually worth 50% of your final grade. The grading scale ranges from 0 to 10. I have posted the exact grading scale below for a better visual.
There is a separate final exam period, which is similar to SFU you have 1 week usually to study for exams. And all of the grades will be posted online and sometimes they are emailed to you as well.

Country Information

The weather in Maastricht is similar to Vancouver. Some days during the winter and spring you tend to get 3 different kinds of weather. Which can be difficult because you do not know how to dress for your busy days.

In terms of the cultural difference there is a slight difference. Dutch people are very direct and it is hard to interpret whether the person is being rude or just being normal. In most cases the person you are talking to is just being their normal self. I had to learn that this was nothing personal and they did not know how to sugar coat the information they were relaying.

A great cultural event to attend is carnival in the beginning of February. Carnival is similar to Halloween except it’s a big street party where you dress up. Every restaurant is shutdown and many of them turn into a dj booth in Vrijthof. Carnival is such a fun time I highly
recommend attending the main event on the first day. And travel for the rest of the week, since everything including the school is shutdown for that week.

A great festival to attend is the tulip festival in Keukenhof. I attended the tulip festival with the ISN. The ISN, which is a great social group run by the university that organizes many day and weekend trips to various places. I would highly recommend going with the ISN because it’s a bit complicated getting to Keukenhof and the ISN makes it way easier.

**Social and extracurricular Activities**

UCM has multiple clubs that you are allowed to join, however, I did not join any of them because I preferred to travel. But they did seem fun one club offered waffles in the common room every Wednesday.

UCM’s building is setup in a way where students are able to bond because their population is not very big. The social life outside of school is really great because for the most part students have the same type of schedule. You are likely to run into a classmate or 2 outside of school and you end up just spending the day together.

**Reflection after Exchange**

Now that I am home I tell everyone that going on exchange was the best experience of my life. I highly recommend going on exchange especially in Maastricht. Maastricht is a beautiful city and there is barely a language barrier. I think Maastricht is a great city if you are also looking to travel around Europe because of its close proximity to many airports. Maastricht is a small city especially when compared to Burnaby/Vancouver. I loved the fact that Maastricht is a small city as it was a great break from the busyness of a regular sized city. The change of
pace was a great break. Riding my bike instead of driving a car, although it was a pain when it rained, was such an enjoyment! I highly recommended living and going to school in Maastricht!

Carnival!

Tulip at the Keukenhof Tulip Festival
Group Picture at the Tulip Festival

Maastricht- The River Maas
Partner Biking a Common Sight in Maastricht

Group Shot in Amsterdam