Exchange Report: University of Oslo, Spring 2015

From January to June, during the spring 2015 semester, I was lucky enough to go on exchange to the University of Oslo (UiO) in Norway. I am a psychology major at SFU but I was able to take some electives during my stay in Norway. I was registered in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and took an introductory Norwegian language course, Norwegian Life and Society, and Gender Equality in Scandinavia.

I wish I knew how different it was to register for courses at this university. I was not able to register for courses until only a month before I had to leave. Further I was not able to be accepted into any Norwegian language course until my arrival in Norway. I was not aware of this at the time but it is useful information for anyone who is planning on taking a language course. It is also important to note that I had to apply for a residence permit through the Danish Embassy in Ottawa, since Denmark handles those matters for Norway. I would advise to start this well in advance since there is a strict deadline and the application can be a little time-consuming, if you have to apply for one.
Waterproof boots, a warm jacket and other winter clothes are a must for packing. It can be quite cold in Oslo, especially in January and February but a light jacket, some casual shoes and lighter clothes are good things to pack for when spring begins. It is extremely dark in January (which can be a little depressing), but the seasons change quite fast when spring begins, and by June the sun is up for over 18 hours! Aside from clothing, I brought some mementos to make my flat feel homier. I would advise bringing any pharmaceutical/medical items from home since such products are likely to not be identical in other countries. I would recommend just buying your towel, washcloth, bed sheets, etc. here because IKEA is pretty cheap and is close by. Also, it is essential to be mindful of the day of arrival in the host country. On Sundays, most businesses are closed, including grocery stores, so it is much wiser to arrive on a weekday in Oslo. I arrived on a Saturday at Oslo Gardermoen airport. There are trains that run directly from the airport to Oslo S (Central Station) every 20 minutes, running until about midnight. The ride is about 30 minutes and is the easiest way to get from the airport to central Oslo. From Oslo S, the metro goes directly to most of the student villages.

While it is useful to have some Norwegian kroner on hand, credit cards are accepted everywhere with no extra charge. With respect to finances, Norway is quite expensive. I would highly recommend setting a budget prior to arrival and to follow it. Cooking at home is the best
way to eat because eating out is extremely expensive. For those who enjoy the occasional drink, be mindful that alcohol is extremely expensive (the student pubs are much more reasonable, but it is still not cheap!).

I arrived over a week before orientation started because I had made plans to travel with some friends before the semester began. However, on the first day of orientation, there are orientation leaders at Oslo S to help navigate students towards their residences. Even though this is helpful, the transportation within Oslo is extremely clear and it is not difficult to figure it out for oneself. I lived in Kringsjå Student Village (most exchange students live here or at Sogn Student Village – about 15 minutes from Kringsjå by walking or by metro). Most residences at Kringsjå have seven people sharing a kitchen within a flat and one roommate with whom to share a bathroom. At Sogn, the layout is similar but many residences have all seven people sharing a flat also sharing one or two bathroom(s). The great thing about Sogn is that it is closer to UiO and that you can take three metro lines there. Unfortunately, to get to Kringsjå you can only take the #6 (green) line and it comes once every 15 minutes in both directions. Therefore it is useful to memorize what time the T-bane (metro) comes from each station you frequent. The
main advantage of living in Kringsjå, however, is its close proximity to Sognsvann, a beautiful lake where many people go skiing in the winter, and running and barbequing in the summer.

Orientation is a must. There are tons of fun social activities to do (skating, quiz nights at the student pubs, sledding) and it is the case that most people become very close with those they meet in their buddy group. I met almost all of my best friends in Oslo from my orientation group and it was a great way to start off the semester.

Class is quite similar to home, but Powerpoints are not used as frequently in class and most professors don’t upload lecture slides to the course website. Also, most classes have one final exam which counts for 100% of your grade (papers during the semester are usually just pass or fail) which is quite different than home! It is also interesting because classes start and finish at different times. For example I had one class start Jan 19 and finish on April 10 and another start February 2 and end on May 7.

There are several activities to take advantage of while being abroad in Norway. A must is to take advantage of the snowy months because cross-country skiing is a favourite Norwegian pastime and is something everyone living in Oslo should try at least once. There are tons of great
hiking areas in Norway. Most people do the beautiful Trolltunga or Preikestolen hikes (about 8 hours from Oslo), but they are not usually safe to do until late spring/summer. Also during the semester most people will visit the beautiful city of Bergen and will go north to Tromsø during the winter to do dogsledding and to see the northern lights. In Oslo itself, taking a trip to the islands in the fjord makes for a great day-trip. Vigelandsparken is a must-see, as well as the Oslo Opera House. The Royal Palace, Karl Johans gate, Nationaltheatret and the Holmenkollen ski jump are definitely places to see as well. If given the opportunity to sign up for a cabin trip (a very typical Norwegian activity) I would highly recommend it. Finally, once in Norway it is extremely easy to travel around Europe so I definitely took advantage of that, travelling to nine other countries during my exchange. While some of these trips were planned in advance, I also made plans with the people I became friends with while on exchange.

One piece of advice I would give would be to get involved as much as you can. At my faculty at UiO my friends and I volunteered at one of the student pubs and it was fantastic. We had tons of fun events, I met great people and the best part was that most people who worked there were Norwegian. On exchange it is usually the case that exchange students befriend mostly
other exchange students. By volunteering at the bar I was able to also forge great friendships with many Norwegians. Out of everything, deciding to volunteer here was 100% the best thing I did while on exchange. It is hard to describe how much you really learn on a trip like this but I definitely gained first-hand cultural experiences that I would not be able to have otherwise. It was extremely valuable to catch a glimpse into another country’s perception of the world by living in it. However, from meeting people from all around the globe I got to learn so much about relations in several other countries as well. Coming to Norway, I definitely faced some culture shock. Norwegians are generally very reserved and the language barrier was a little scary at first (even though everyone speaks great English). I am really glad I took a Norwegian class because was able to communicate with Norwegians more comfortably by the end and it was a great way to immerse myself in the culture. I wish I knew how difficult it would be to move away at first, since it was my first time living away from home. I adapted very fast once school began but for the first week or so it was a little difficult to adjust to such a new place. In all, the best piece of advice I can give about exchange is to just do it. It was the most rewarding experience, broadened my horizons, changed my view of the world for the better and was by far the best decision of my life. I wish I could describe how incredible it was but the only way to truly understand the value of such an experience is to experience it for oneself.