EXCHANGE REPORT –
NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF
SINGAPORE FASSTRACK 2017
In Summer 2017 from June 15th through to July 21st I participated in National University of Singapore’s FASSTrack program. This program was run through the faculty of arts and social sciences and was very different from my computer science and software systems major in the faculty of applied sciences back at SFU.

Preparation

I found the application process to be quite daunting, not just through the SFU exchange office but the NUS system as well post nomination. There were many steps required such as applying to NUS formally, registering for courses, getting on the system, activating student ID, applying for and redeeming your student pass (student visa) and more. I found the coordinator, Ms. Jane Toh to be very receptive to all emails and even phone calls when I was not sure how to proceed. The student pass (student visa) process is convoluted, confusing, and requires extra time to go to the ICA building in Singapore to formally print the card. Course outlines were posted on the FASSTrack website, some were very detailed and gave a thorough overview of what the course was about, whereas some others were more brief.

Packing wise bringing comfortable, athletic clothes and in particular shorts and a good pair of sandals since Singapore has scorching heat and unforgiving humidity. One nicer set of clothes helps for social situations and going out but other than this, pants are not a good idea. The UTown dorms did not have wifi, but had an Ethernet cable. Bringing a travel router or just a router in general would be extremely helpful. Standard toiletries and electronics should be brought as well; keep in mind Singapore uses plug type G so an adapter will be necessary for North American electronics. They also use 230V power, so check your electronics support the voltage and buy a converter if necessary.
Transportation around Singapore is very easy thanks to a comprehensive and ever expanding train metro system and network of buses. I highly recommend buying an EZ link transportation card, it can be refilled easily and prevents having to buy a ticket each time and awkward coin transactions on buses. It can also be used to pay for items at convenience stores and is used at NUS to print using school computers. Taxis, Uber, and Grab are all available through smartphone applications and are reasonably priced. It is absolutely essential to get a data phone plan while in Singapore as it increases communication, easy of getting around, and safety in leaps and bounds. Starhub has a $50 prepaid card available at UOB bank booth at Changi Airport with a month of data, unlimited in first week and over 5GB for the remainder and is a good option.

Singapore requires cash in some situations such as at hawker centers but in touristy and more expensive areas credit cards are widely accepted. As a student I would recommend withdrawing or bringing a healthy amount of cash to convert. ATMS are everywhere and so long as your bank card is on the Plus or Cirrus network, you should have no problem withdrawing Singaporean dollars albeit with a transaction fee and a conversion fee. Living in Singapore as a citizen is expensive, cars, electronics, and rent are very high but as a student, public transportation and dormitories are quite cheap. Food in Singapore in general is quite cheap and it is most economic to eat out except for breakfast.

During Exchange

Check in to residence was just like a hotel, I filled out a form and was shown to my room. The next day we had a welcome session where we were introduced to some of the professors, how to complete our student passes, which was followed by a lunch meet and greet.
Dorms are composed of 4 lockable, private rooms with a common kitchen, living area, and bathroom. Air conditioning units were provided in each of our individual rooms, but not the common areas. Accommodation externally looks nice at UTown but the dorms were not cleaned sufficiently in my experience and the shared bathroom and shower were both disgusting by the end of my exchange. Sheets are changed weekly to biweekly and one pillow and a basic blanket are provided. This blanket and the mattress itself were quite uncomfortable. I should note that in UTown, cooking is not allowed and food preparation machines like rice cookers and water kettles are banned. There are common laundry facilities on the second floor. Rooms as previously mentioned do not have wifi, but wifi is accessible in some of the lounges from other parts of campus. There are 2 inexpensive food courts at UTown and many more options at Clementi just a short bus ride away. The actual UTown campus is the nicest part of NUS and the field is a great place for Frisbee and just hanging out. Stephen Riady center has a nice gym and pool, with basketball, volleyball, and badminton courts. There are also PC and Mac commons with shared computers, study rooms, printers, and scanners.
Lectures run 3 hours at a time either 3 times a week or 2 times a week if you are in a field trip module. They are very intense, fast paced, and have required reading making FASSTrack quite an academically intense program. The courses I took were SE 2222: Southeast Asia in Context and SE 3214: Marketing Southeast Asia’s Heritage. Neither of my courses had field trips but both had group work. I felt like it was difficult to complete work in the short time given what felt like high expectations and different priorities of my groupmates as some wanted to just enjoy Singapore and others were aiming for high grades to transfer back to their home universities. There were also individual essays used for assessment and several of them were based on extremely difficult readings. Though the classes seemed intimidating and hard, the grades I received were better than expected. This difficulty prevented some students from travelling on weekends like on a normal exchange. Personally, by the time I went on the exchange I had been travelling for 6 months and felt no need to do so, but a few classmates were increasingly frustrated with the workload and lack of time to enjoy the rest of Asia. I would say that the program is short enough that there is more than sufficient time before and after the exchange to explore the region without using Singapore as a home base. The quality of the field trips range in quality and price, I heard the Indonesia trip was a lot of fun, the India trip was a unique experience, but the Taiwan trip was a boring waste of money. Do research before enrollment and check what the field trip itinerary looks like.

Singapore has many good tourist attractions and the most major of them can be seen in a 5 day trip. I highly recommend eating local Singaporean food while there, particularly at hawker centers where it is cheap and absolutely delicious. Highlights for me included the Marina Bay Sands observation deck, Marina Bay Sands light show, Gardens by the Bay, Gardens by the Bay light show, Singapore Zoo, the Merlion, Orchard Road, Boat and Clarke Quay, Chinatown, Little India, Kampong Glam, Jalan Besar, the Civic District, and Sentosa. Keep in mind that Singaporeans are practical people and the country
highly developed; many things in the city feel constructed or artificial in comparison to the rest of Southeast Asia so it helps to keep this in mind and enjoy things for what they are.

Social engagement is made easy by living on campus and the fact that everyone lives on the first few floors of the building. I found it easy to meet peers in my classes as well due to their small size. Eating and drinking are natural past times of Singapore and there are infinite opportunities to engage in them.

Reflection after Exchange

I took 2 distance education courses while enrolled in FASSTrack in order to graduate and it was a decision I highly regret. There was a lot of stress during the 5 week period and I felt like I could have gotten more out of it had I not had the extra burden. Many of the other students came from Ivy League schools and their majors aligned with the subject matter we learned, which left me feeling kind of alienated during the first weeks. Doing travel and FASSTrack simultaneously gives too little time to complete work and to enjoy travelling. Personally I would recommend a normal term exchange at NUS if you are looking to travel throughout Asia while attending classes or to travel then do FASSTrack or do FASSTrack then travel.