

## THE BASICS

Your first name: Robin Grantner

Your email address: grantner@uvic.ca

Your partner university: Université Libre de Bruxelles

Your UVic major during the exchange: Political Science

UVic session(s) during which you did your exchange: Spring 09

.....

## GENERAL EVALUATION

Please rate your overall exchange experience on a scale of 1 to 5 (5 is the best rating):

Rating: 4

Comments: Going on exchange was one of the best experiences of my time spent at university.

.....

## ARRIVAL

How satisfied were you with your experience of arriving in your host country or city? Please rate on a scale of 1 to 5 (5 is the best rating):

Rating: 3

Comments: I had a good idea of how to navigate Brussels from the information sent to me by ULB. Arriving in any foreign city is a bit nerve-wracking but it wasn't overly difficult to figure out.

What assistance, if any, did you receive when you arrived at your exchange destination? There was an airport meeting service offered by the student association but only on certain days.

How difficult was it for you to obtain your travel documents (visa, etc.)? Fairly time-consuming. The Belgian visa required a criminal record check, financial records, references and numerous photos.

.....

## ORIENTATION AND ASSISTANCE

How satisfied were you with the orientation and assistance available to students at your partner university? Please rate on a scale of 1 to 5 (5 is the best rating):

Rating: 4

Comments: Both the exchange coordinators (ULB staff) and the ULB exchange students association gave good orientation sessions/events. We were given the relevant information within the first few days of arrival and had lots of time to figure things out. I got to know people right away which was wonderful

How easy was it to find information you needed to know right away? Fairly easy – the information provided was useful and the coordinators were available to answer questions.

What help did you receive from the international staff or office? Information on courses and registration, other ULB formalities required, how to register with the city, etc.

What was your impression of the international staff or office? Well-prepared, if a bit difficult to approach sometimes.

What was the orientation like at your partner university, if there was one, and how well did it suit your needs? [ULB didn't offer one per se but the orientation events given by Express, the student's association, were a great introduction to ULB and Brussels.](#)

What was it like to adjust to the culture of your exchange site and were there people you could talk to about what you were experiencing? [Adjusting to the Belgian way of life wasn't any more difficult than I was expecting it to be. I met many international students and our new city and university was a frequent topic of conversation!](#)

---

## HOUSING

How satisfied were you with the housing available to students? Please rate on a scale of 1 to 5 (5 is the best rating):

Rating: [not applicable](#)

Comments: [There were a limited number of spaces in the residences, though I did not live there and never saw the building interior, so I can't say. I found a place to live off-campus in a large house with other exchange students and interns. ULB gives you information on how to find accommodation off-campus before you arrive.](#)

How early could students move in to housing at the beginning of term? [n/a](#)

What options were available for meal plans or cooking facilities? [n/a](#)

How satisfied were you with the food? [n/a](#)

How close are the residences to the university? [Very close – right on the main street of campus or just a block away.](#)

Could students stay in the residences during major holidays? [n/a](#)

Which residence would you recommend to UVic students? [n/a](#)

If you lived in off-campus housing, how easy was it to find? For me, it was actually very easy. I found a room using the Facebook group set up by incoming exchange students. There are other websites and listings as well. Perhaps just be aware that you will be speaking French with potential landlords!

What should future UVic exchange students know about living off-campus? [I think it's a better option than living in residence. There are many, many rooms and apartments for rent right around the campus in Ixelles, within walking distance of ULB. It's a great neighbourhood to live in and more exciting than being right on campus. Try to get your accommodation sorted out before you arrive though, since it is so much less stressful to have a room right when you get off the plane.](#)

---

## COURSE REGISTRATION

How satisfied were you with the registration process at your partner university? Please rate on a scale of 1 to 5 (5 is the best rating):

Rating: [5](#)

Comments: [Although I can't imagine the organization it takes on the university's part, ULB class registration is simple for the student. \(I had a positive experience since I was fairly flexible about the classes I could take. If your program has specific classes you need, it might be more complicated.\)](#)

Please describe the registration process at your partner university.

[You read the course calendar and plan which of the courses offered you are interested in checking out. You attend the first lecture of all these classes and decide how many you need and what your schedule](#)

should look like. After three weeks you take your class list to a coordinator and once they verify that you're eligible for the classes and that they fit your program, they formally register you and you're done.

What kind of help was available? I found it a simple system so I can't say what type of help. I'm sure the exchange coordinators could answer questions.

How successful were you in registering for classes you wanted? I got into all the classes I wanted to take.

What advice would you offer to next year's exchange students about registration at your partner university?

I would say the most complicated thing about classes on exchange is worrying about the transfer credit you'll be receiving back at UVic. My approach was to not worry too much, cut my losses and just concentrate on taking interesting classes I would not normally have a chance to experience in Victoria. I know not everyone's program permits this but it's an idea on how to have a more enjoyable exchange.

---

## ACADEMICS

How satisfied were you with the academic program at your partner university? Please rate on a scale of 1 to 5 (5 is the best rating):

Rating: 4

Comments: I found the level of material taught in my classes comparable to 300- and 400-level poli sci classes back at UVic. (Most European universities have a 3-year Bachelor program so I was taking 300-level Bachelor's and 400-level Masters classes.) The only real difficulty other than rapid French that I found was sometimes the authors professors refer to are not familiar to North American students.

How did the style of teaching at your partner university compare with that at UVic?

In my experience the classes were more lecture-based with less student participation. Questions were not discouraged by any means, though.

How did the workload compare to what you would expect at UVic?

Markedly less in terms of assignments. I did not have a single paper to write – all my classes were evaluated on the final exam. The readings were comparable to an upper-year class at UVic.

How many courses did you take in your first term abroad?

Seven (five poli sci, one literature and a French class).

Your second term?

n/a

What would you recommend as an appropriate course load for other UVic students visiting your partner university?

Six or seven courses.

What specific courses would you recommend to visiting UVic students?

Communication politique and Introduction à l'étude des politiques publiques.

Why?

Both courses had excellent professors and really interesting subject matter presented from a European-politics perspective that I could not have had at UVic.

If you studied in a non-English speaking country, what was the availability of courses offered in English?

As far as I know, all ULB classes are taught in French except some Business classes.

What advice would you give UVic students about succeeding academically at your partner university?

I found it quite different than at UVic, in a good way. First: go to all your classes, or as many as you possibly can. Remember this when creating your schedule – 8am classes are no fun no matter what country you're in! If you go to class you'll get a good set of notes, won't miss important announcements,

and will even get to know the other just-as-confused exchange students who are in the same boat as you are.

Second, since most classes are just evaluated on the final exam, it can seem like there's no work at all in the first four months of school. This is technically true and it means you have more free time at the beginning to explore your new city and country. Try to keep up with the readings and keep taking notes in class. Once exam period starts, though, everyone lives at the library and madly studies and reads everything they haven't already. Adopt this Belgian student approach like everyone else, know enough to pass, and you'll be fine.

What was your impression of the computer facilities, library, and internet access at your partner university?

There were computer facilities but I did not use them. ULB has wireless access only in the main library. This library is OK but definitely not big enough – during exam period, it fills up early in the morning and you won't find a seat if you come later. Find an alternate study spot off campus.

What electronic devices would you recommend a UVic student bring (laptop, PDA, etc.)?

A laptop is essential since so much organization and planning needs to be done online. Not many students bring laptops to class. A PDA or Blackberry is not a good idea since it won't work on the European cell phone networks.

---

## **COSTS**

Please indicate currency: **Euros**

Books - per term: **50**

Accommodation - per month: **300**

Meals - per month: **150**

Local transportation - per month: **30**

Health insurance - per term: **11**

Personal spending - per term: **lots!**

Communications (phone, etc.) - per term: **Cell phone (GSM) credit about 20 euros/month**

Other university related fees - per term: **none**

---

## **EXTRA-CURRICULAR/SOCIAL ACTIVITIES**

How satisfied were you with the out-of-class opportunities at your exchange site? Please rate on a scale of 1 to 5 (5 is the best rating):

Rating: **4**

Comments: **I didn't do many activities organized through the university but Express offers lots of options.**

What organized activities (clubs, sports, etc.) were available to students? **There are gym classes and sports offered – the gym card is 20 euro and gives you access to conditioning and aerobics classes all term.**

What extra-curricular activities would you recommend to future exchange students? **The gym card is a good deal. Go for runs and bike rides around Brussels.**

What do you recommend other visiting students see or do on their weekends or holidays?

**Explore Brussels and TRAVEL! Despite its reputation as Eurocrat central and therefore boring, Brussels is a great city with a lot of diversity, excellent food and beer, and wonderful parks. I loved living there. Belgium is also a very cool country – buy a GoPass for the trains and go to Bruges, Ghent, Ypres, Antwerp and the North Sea coast. Rent a bike in Bruges and ride to the sea. Also, Belgium is very centrally located in Europe – avoid cheap flights since they're a hassle, bad for the environment and not actually that cheap, and use Brussels' great train connections to go to France, the Netherlands, Germany, the UK and beyond.**

What opportunities were there for students to work on-campus? I don't know of anyone who worked on campus.

Off-campus? Again, I don't know of any opportunities.

What volunteer or internship opportunities were there for students? I didn't have any experience with these. There are quite a few internships with the EU but only, unfortunately, for students from EU countries.

---

## SAFETY AND HEALTH

How safe did you feel at your exchange site? Please rate on a scale of 1 to 5 (5 is the best rating):

Rating: 4

Comments: I never felt unsafe in Brussels. Don't be out late somewhere you don't know by yourself, don't do anything you wouldn't do at home, and you'll be fine.

What are the biggest safety concerns for future exchange students going to your exchange site? I can't think of any (other than normal) safety concerns. Use common sense and find out about what's going on around you.

What are the biggest health concerns for future exchange students going to your exchange site? Just keep your personal health in check. Belgians love their frites, waffles and chocolate...

---

## PERSONAL AND CULTURAL CONNECTIONS

What was it like making friends? Come with an open mind a smile and making friends is easy. There were many other exchange students and lots of events at the start of the semester so it's not hard at all.

How successful were you at making friends with local (i.e., not international) students? This is a bit more difficult. Belgians have their own friends at university already (very much like we do at UVic) and it's intimidating to approach these groups when they're speaking rapid French! Try to meet Belgians outside of classes.

What was it like to adjust to the culture of your exchange site? As above, come with an open mind and the knowledge that things won't be exactly like Canada. The differences are what makes an exchange so much fun and so rewarding. Keep in mind that it's still the western world and things aren't actually so different.

What, if any, cultural differences did you find particularly challenging? The slower-moving administration. Don't get your hopes up for a quick resolving of your registration with the city.

What parts of the culture did you most appreciate? The slower pace, enjoying life and a good Belgian beer on a terrace watching the world go by...

How were you treated by local people? By university staff and faculty? By students? Fine. The 'customer-is-always-right' idea does not hold in Belgium but that means you're not bothered by perky customer-service people. Be polite and they will be polite back to you.

As far as you could tell, how easy would it be for students with disabilities to study at your partner university?

The uneven Brussels streets could be a challenge. I noticed ramps and elevators in most of the campus buildings, though.

For students who are visible minorities in your host country?

Brussels is a very diverse city with almost as many immigrants as native Belgians. I don't think minority students should have a problem living there.

---

## **TAKING STOCK**

What are the three most important things for students to take with them when they go to your host country or region?

These are obvious: pictures from home, a camera, an open mind!

What are the three most important things you would tell a UVic student who is going to your partner university on exchange?

You're going on an adventure, so be open to new people, things, experiences and places. Go to class and make the most of your opportunity to actually study abroad. Explore the city you live in – you're a local, even if it's only for six months. Travel and meet people who can teach you things.

Is there any other information that you think might prove useful to UVic exchange students attending your host university?

Don't worry about the little things. They will turn into good stories with a little time.

What was the most rewarding part of your exchange experience?

The whole package: good things and not-so-good, it was so worth it.

What was your greatest challenge on the exchange?

Missing people from home, probably. (Get Skype.)

How has your perspective changed as a result of the exchange?

Absolutely. The world is a great place and we should be getting out there to see it.

What else do you want to say about your exchange experience?

Everyone should have this opportunity.