

THE BASICS

Your first name: Amy

Your email address: noakesa@uvic.ca

Your partner university: Aberystwyth University, Wales

Your UVic major during the exchange: [Biology \(minor in Microbiology\)](#)

UVic session(s) during which you did your exchange: [Fall 07 and Spring 08](#)

GENERAL EVALUATION

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

Rating: 5

Comments: I had an absolutely amazing time in Wales and at Aberystwyth University! I cannot recommend this school or study abroad enough 😊

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: 4.5

Comments: Carol Smart (the exchange coordinator at the university) met all of the international students at the train station on arrival. Members of student groups were also present. They arranged for transportation of our luggage to the residences and helped us get checked in. They then took us individually to our halls of residence. This was really REALLY helpful! The student groups then organized a dinner and tour of the town for all the international students. It was really a good chance to meet other students and ask questions about the place where you will be living for the next 4-8 months.

What assistance, if any, did you receive when you arrived at your exchange destination? See above.

How difficult was it for you to obtain your travel documents (visa, etc.)? It wasn't difficult to obtain my visa (took about 2 weeks once all the paperwork and biometric data was sent in), but I didn't get a visa before I went over for the fall term. The British government has changed their immigration policy, and you can no longer change your entry clearance when you are in the country, so I ended up having to fly home to Canada over Christmas to apply for a new visa. I recommend getting a visa even if you are only planning on staying for one term. It might save you a lot of time/money/hassle in the future.

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: 4.5

Comments: I thought the university provided a good overview of services available in the town and on campus. I found orientation events with the local students to be more informative though.

How easy was it to find information you needed to know right away? We were sent most of our check in information and general info about orientation events and the university before we left Canada. There was also a large package waiting for us when we checked in with more info.

What help did you receive from the international staff or office? The international office was very helpful. Carol Smart does her best to help you in anyways she can. If you need anything at all while you are on exchange in Aber, she will try to help you.

What was your impression of the international staff or office? Fabulous – very well organized and helpful.

What was the orientation like at your partner university, if there was one, and how well did it suit your needs? The orientation provided by the university was good. They had booths set up by local businesses and student groups so you could set up a bank account, get a mobile phone, get your student card or sports club card – basically anything you could want. They also had a program where you could be paired up with an Aber student (2nd or 3rd year) for a week. The students would show you around campus and town, and answer any questions you might have.

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? I personally found it really easy to adapt to the culture in the UK as it is similar to Canada. I actually found it harder coming home after the exchange. The university does have a counseling department and Carol Smart can pair you with Aber students who have returned from exchange if you want to talk to someone who knows what you are going through. The other exchange students were really helpful as well.

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: 4

Comments: International students are guaranteed a spot in university run accommodation. The flat I lived in was actually very similar to the layout of cluster housing at UVIC, except we didn't have a common room. My only complaint about the accommodation was that all of the international students seemed to be put together.

How early could students move in to housing at the beginning of term? Right away.

What options were available for meal plans or cooking facilities? Most of the university run housing is self-catering, but there is one (maybe more) residences that has a cafeteria and you must buy a food plan with this type of housing. I'm not actually sure how it works, but I think it is a 'debit card' system like we have in UVIC dorms.

How satisfied were you with the food? It is very similar to what you would find in North America, except you find a lot more fried food. Fruits and vegetables are quite expensive and are often not very good quality. Cheese and grain products are cheaper in comparison to Canada.

How close are the residences to the university? I lived on the seafront which is about a 20-30 minute walk (5-10 minute bus ride) to the University. There are on campus residences as well, and some just across the street from campus.

Could students stay in the residences during major holidays? Yes.

Which residence would you recommend to UVic students? I lived in the seafront halls (Ceredigion Hall) and I thought they were quite nice. If you are lucky, you get a fabulous sea front view. You also only have 3 other flat mates in these halls. Some of the halls on campus you can have up to 9 other flatmates.

If you lived in off-campus housing, how easy was it to find? N/A

What should future UVic exchange students know about living off-campus? Rent is charged weekly in the UK – that's about all I can tell you.

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: 4

Comments: Registration is all done by hand – no computer systems. It makes changing classes once you've registered a bit tricky as you need to get permission from the instructor first. But otherwise, it is ok.

Please describe the registration process at your partner university: each student is assigned a 'tutor' for the year (your tutor will be an instructor in your department). The tutors job is to help you chose your courses and to register for them, and to provide you academic (and personal) support throughout the year. If you have a problem with an instructor or with grades, your tutor is there to help you. They also hold tutorials once every 2 weeks or so with a tutor group (usually 5 students in the same degree program) to discuss academic goals, strategies for doing well on exams, etc. You have a meeting with your tutor to discuss the classes you would like to take, and they check the timetable to ensure there is no clash. If it all works out, they register you in the classes.

What kind of help was available? See above.

How successful were you in registering for classes you wanted? I was able to get all but one of the classes that I wanted due to a timetable conflict. In the biology department (not sure about the others), they schedule the classes so that in each year, there won't be any timetable conflicts (eg. All the 3rd year courses are scheduled so that you can take any combination of 3rd year classes without conflict). Usually problems occur when you try to take classes in different academic years (eg. 2nd and 3rd year courses) or between departments.

What advice would you offer to next year's exchange students about registration at your partner university? Take a look at the classes offered in your department before you go over (all the class descriptions are available online). Also be aware that it can be tricky to take modules (classes) from 2 or more departments because of timetable clashes. Make sure you have 'backup' choices in case you can't get into the modules you want.

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 thought the biology department was quite good. They had instructors with a wide range of research interests, and the instructors were able to teach in a way that made the material understandable.

How did the style of teaching at your partner university compare with that at UVic? I found the teaching style very different from UVIC. Classes were less about rote memorization and more about understanding broad concepts and problem solving. Class sizes are small (usually less than 30 students) so you get a lot of one on one time with professors to ask questions and discuss concepts. My classes were a lot less lab-based than those at UVIC as well (usually only 2 or 3 labs per semester).

How did the workload compare to what you would expect at UVic? I found the workload to be a bit lighter than UVIC. They don't assign reading, but put a lot of emphasis on individual reading. They do a lot of course work (essays, group projects, oral presentations, poster projects, etc) which you don't usually get a lot of in the science departments at UVIC. They don't have midterm exams (for the most part), and their final exams usually consist of 3 or 4 essay type questions. I also found that they have less

classroom time. I think on average I had about 10 hours of lectures per week – so they expect you to do a lot of reading in your own time.

How many courses did you take in your first term abroad? 4

Your second term? 3 plus a co-op work term

What would you recommend as an appropriate course load for other UVic students visiting your partner university? I thought 4 courses was an ok course load. I don't think you are allowed to take any more than that.

What specific courses would you recommend to visiting UVic students? I really enjoyed 'Functional Genomics', 'Bioninformatics', 'Parasitology', and 'Plant Interactions with Pests and Pathogens'.

Why? These classes were taught by a panel of instructors who each lectured about their area of expertise. I thought it was really cool to see how methods we were learning about were applied to current biological research. Also, most professors will take you on 'field trips' to their labs so you can actually see how things work. I thought this helped with understanding certain topics.

If you studied in a non-English speaking country, what was the availability of courses offered in English? Most classes are taught in English, but you do have the option to take most (all?) classes in Welsh if you prefer. There is also quite a large Welsh department.

What advice would you give UVic students about succeeding academically at your partner university? Do as much extra reading (in journals etc.) as you can on the topics you discuss in lectures. Most exam questions are quite general, and are looking to see if you can integrate what you learned in lectures to current applications.

What was your impression of the computer facilities, library, and internet access at your partner university? The computer facilities were alright. There are a few labs on campus with new computers, but the computers in the library and in the student union building were really really old and were very slow. There are a few libraries on campus (divided by subject area), and they generally have a good selection of books and journals. If you live in university run accommodation, internet access is included in your rent. Most of the campus is covered by a wireless network as well, so you can use your laptop on campus.

What electronic devices would you recommend a UVic student bring (laptop, PDA, etc.)? I would highly recommend a laptop because it is the easiest/cheapest way to keep in touch with friends and family back home. A mobile phone (can buy a cheap pay-as-you-go one with an 'international' plan (cheap international calling) for about \$30 Canadian at any of the mobile stores in Aberystwyth).

COSTS

Please indicate currency: Canadian

Books - per term: Less than \$100 (could even be 0 as most textbooks are kept in the library)

Accommodation - per month: about \$800

Meals - per month: depends what you eat, but between \$40 and \$100

Local transportation - per month: \$0 – Aber is totally walkable. Although, you can get a bus pass which gives you free transportation within Aber and ½ price tickets for any bus services beginning or ending in Aber) for about \$60 per year.

Health insurance - per term: \$0 – all students in the UK (including international students) are covered under the NHS. All doctors visits, hospital visits, and prescriptions are free.

Personal spending - per term: again, depends on what you buy. I did a lot of traveling, so therefore I spent a lot. I would guess \$2500 per term (not including accommodation, tuition, food, books, etc).

Communications (phone, etc.) - per term: Probably about \$100 per term.

Other university related fees - per term: Most fees are one time only, so probably \$200 for the year.

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: 5

Comments: There are many sports clubs, academic societies, and other groups available. Most are very social, and have organized events a few times per week. The student union is also really active. There are at least 3 pubs on campus and the union organizes an event almost every night of the term. In the town itself, I believe there are about 70 pubs and 3 night clubs. There is a theater (1 screen), and there are always productions on at the Arts Centre on campus. There are plenty of sporting activities as well. Wednesdays are BUSA (British University Sporting Association) matches, so everyone has Wednesday afternoons off from classes so they can go watch games. There are many football (soccer) pitches, tennis courts, gyms, etc. The town is surrounded by hills which are great for hiking, and if you are brave, Aber is right on the coast, so you can go swimming if you want. Transportation in Wales is pretty cheap (you can get from one end of the country to the other in about 8 hours and it will cost you about 15-20 pounds). Transport back into London is less great, as there is only one rail line going into and out of Aber, and trains to London and Birmingham leave only 2 or 3 times per day.

What organized activities (clubs, sports, etc.) were available to students? Each academic department has their own course society. There are societies for volunteer activities (eg. Red cross, conservation, Duke of Edinburgh, etc), sports (football, basketball, fencing, cricket, rounders, etc), and many others. There are also sports classes (yoga, pilates, etc) held in the sporting complex on campus.

What extra-curricular activities would you recommend to future exchange students? Any – just get involved in something. It is a great way to get to know the local students.

What do you recommend other visiting students see or do on their weekends or holidays? Travel! You are close to everything, so why not see it all? It takes about 6 hours by train to get to London, about 12 hours to get to Edinburgh, and about 7 hours to get to Dublin (by ferry). From London (or occasionally Birmingham) you can get cheap flights on Ryanair or Easyjet to big cities in mainland Europe for as little as 1 pence (about \$0.02 Canadian!). There are also some amazing places to see in Wales – any of the 100's of castles, Cardiff, the capital, is a nice city – about the same size but less busy than Victoria, or Snowdonia, the tallest mountains in the UK are all 'must sees'.

What opportunities were there for students to work on-campus? I didn't look for a job while I was over there, but I think for quite a few of the jobs you need to be bilingual in English and Welsh. I do know some exchange students who were able to find jobs though.

Off-campus? Same as on campus. Although a lot of the pubs hire international students.

What volunteer or internship opportunities were there for students? I did a co-op semester during my second semester in Aber. I worked for one of my professors in his lab. Most instructors are more than happy to have students help out in their labs.

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: 5

Comments: Aberystwyth is a really small town – total population around 12,000 (7,000 or so are students). The crime rate is really low and the students look out for one another. In generally, a really really safe place to live.

What are the biggest safety concerns for future exchange students going to your exchange site? The ocean – during the winter months there are big storms and there are strong undertows.

What are the biggest health concerns for future exchange students going to your exchange site? The flu and other communicable diseases due to living in close quarters with many other students.

PERSONAL AND CULTURAL CONNECTIONS

What was it like making friends? I found making friends to be really easy. The international students are all really friendly and outgoing.

How successful were you at making friends with local (i.e., not international) students? It was also really easy to meet locals. Join as many clubs/societies/groups as you can. I found that was the best way. Also, just talk to students in your lectures.

What was it like to adjust to the culture of your exchange site? I thought it was really easy. It is very similar to Canada.

What, if any, cultural differences did you find particularly challenging? None come to mind. Thick accents I suppose could be a challenge at time.

What parts of the culture did you most appreciate? Too many to list. The Welsh are very outgoing people (once you get to know them) and will try to expose you to as much of their culture as possible (food, music, comedy, the Welsh language, etc).

How were you treated by local people? By university staff and faculty? By students? In general, I was treated quite well. Occasionally people (students) were rude or wouldn't talk to you if they thought you were American, but in general, I found the Welsh and English to be really open and accepting. Sometimes lecturers would ask me to give a "North American" perspective on topics we were discussing, and some lecturers would insist on convert statistics in pounds to dollars or explaining 'British' terms in 'Canadian' terms so that I would understand. I found that a lot of people were really interested in my culture and what Canada was like. Be prepared to answer a lot of questions about your country (especially questions about Mounties, moose, igloos, etc).

As far as you could tell, how easy would it be for students with disabilities to study at your partner university? I think once you are on campus it would be alright as most building are fairly accessible. The main campus is on a large hill though, so that could be a challenge.

For students who are visible minorities in your host country? No problems.

TAKING STOCK

What are the three most important things for students to take with them when they go to your host country or region? A laptop, a sense of humor, and an umbrella or water proof jacket.

What are the three most important things you would tell a UVic student who is going to your partner university on exchange? Join at least one club, make an effort to meet the local students, take advantage of all the breaks you have to travel and see the country and Europe.

Is there any other information that you think might prove useful to UVic exchange students attending your host university? I think I've covered it all here. It is a great place to study.

What was the most rewarding part of your exchange experience? Meeting new people from around the world was really rewarding. I also feel really lucky to have been able to see as much of Europe as I did. It gives you a new perspective.

What was your greatest challenge on the exchange? My biggest challenge was trying not to convert prices in pounds back to Canadian dollars. If you do, you will never spend any money and you will likely have a very boring year.

How has your perspective changed as a result of the exchange? I think I have a better understanding of British culture (and British comedy). I think going on exchange also allowed me to get a better understanding of how other people view Canadians and what stereotypes they have of us and of those we may have of them. I think it was an eye opener as well to see how little some people knew about Canada and North America, and how little I knew about Europe. I feel a lot more informed now, and more motivated to continue keeping up to date with global news and history.

What else do you want to say about your exchange experience? I would really recommend an exchange semester or year to anyone that is thinking about going. It can be quite expensive, but the knowledge, insight, and personal growth that you gain from it is well worth it.