

THE BASICS

Your first name: Nicholas

Your email address: meikle@uvic.ca

Your partner university: University of Stirling

Your UVic major during the exchange: Psychology

UVic session(s) during which you did your exchange: Fall 2009

GENERAL EVALUATION

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

Rating: 4.5

Comments:

What can I say? It was a fantastic exchange! I would highly recommend studying abroad as a part of one's undergraduate experience.

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: 5

Comments: I was picked up by a friend of the family at the Glasgow International airport. She hosted me for the first few days, showing me around.

What assistance, if any, did you receive when you arrived at your exchange destination? My friend dropped me off in Stirling, so I did not require any transportation from my exchange university. Every exchange student, however, was given the option to be picked up from the airport. The university required that you provide them with the full details of your arrival and they would arrange to pick you up and take you straight to campus.

How difficult was it for you to obtain your travel documents (visa, etc.)? Believe it or not, obtaining my travel documents was the most challenging part of my journey. The IESS recommended that we apply for a visa before we left. Thus, in the summer months leading up to my departure, I went over to Vancouver to apply for a visa. Unfortunately, my application was rejected. Therefore, I had to re-apply for another visa and was successful the second time around. Upon conversing with other Canadian exchange students from other universities, however, they informed me that rather than applying for a visa beforehand, they simply showed the correct documents upon landing in the UK. They were permitted to enter and given a visa upon arrival. I suppose this is certainly another option; nonetheless, the visa I obtained ultimately helped when travelling outside the UK.

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:

The mandatory orientation meetings themselves were quite helpful. Though the meetings were exhausting as they were set up one after another, they provided us with so much valuable and necessary information that I was able to refer to the rest of the semester. The university also provided 'optional' meetings which many chose not to attend. However, I would highly recommend going to these as well as they gave a lot of useful info and tips not described in the mandatory meetings. During this time be prepared for lineups, especially to get your student card. Fortunately, I met some great people in the line

who I ultimately stayed friends with the rest of the semester!

How easy was it to find information you needed to know right away? Very easy. During the first week, there was an international help desk within the main corridor of the atrium. They provided me with any information I needed to know as well as plenty of tips on getting used to life in Scotland.

What help did you receive from the international staff or office? The International staff was extremely helpful in answering any questions from exchange students. They were well prepared, very organized, and give you all sorts of useful information, such as adapting to any cultural differences.

What was your impression of the international staff or office? Unfortunately, the set up of their international office was a little intimidating. This is likely because it's combined with various departments along with a general secretary at the front desk. Of course they were super friendly and helpful, but I was used to the open atmosphere of the Uvic office, where you're immediately greeted by the IESS staff.

What was the orientation like at your partner university, if there was one, and how well did it suit your needs? The orientation was extremely helpful. It provided me with everything I needed to know really. As I mentioned previously, the optional meetings were well worth it as well. I opted not to go for a campus tour as my flatmates showed me around. They offered a free bus tour at the end of the first week. This was a fantastic opportunity to learn about the area and meet more international students!

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? For me it was quite easy adjusting to the Scottish culture; however, like any new culture there were times of frustration. The international staff offered an open door policy and they were really experienced in helping students adjust. Also, the counseling centre was an option if you felt like talking to someone. Basically, someone is always there to listen. Your own flatmates are helpful as they are familiar with the culture and expectations. In addition, the other international students were a great resource as well because they were going through the same experience as you.

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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: 4.5

Comments:

They have accommodation to suit a variety of needs. For instance, housing varied from 5 students to 8 and there is an option of co-ed or same-sex housing. In addition, they offer housing directly on campus or even off campus if you prefer.

How early could students move in to housing at the beginning of term? Saturday Sept 12th was the earliest entry date; however, upon request the university offered prior accommodation if necessary.

What options were available for meal plans or cooking facilities? They had meal plans available, but they were quite expensive and didn't actually seem to save a significant amount with them. Each flat contained a kitchen including a sink, oven, fridge and freezer. It is worthy to note, however, that your flat does not come with pots, pans, and utensils though. I was fortunate enough to have flatmates who had all necessities and supplies. Keep in mind, the fridge and freezer are tiny! It's really worth it to find a flatmate to share groceries with if possible.

How satisfied were you with the food? I really enjoyed the food as I did a lot of cooking myself. But, there were quite a few different spots you could eat on campus, which offered quite a variety, from fast food to chef prepared dining. I tried all the classic Scottish meals and enjoyed most of them. It's certainly fun trying food in a different culture.

How close are the residences to the university? The residences on campus varied from as close as a 5 minute walk to as much as a 20 minute walk to the main buildings. The residences in town are about a 45 minute walk to campus, if walking at a quick pace. Most living off campus buy a student bus pass.

Could students stay in the residences during major holidays? Yes, you could stay over the winter holidays; however, they have limited services during these times. Evidently the hot water was shut off from time to time, so if you're planning on staying over the holidays be sure to let them know!!

Which residence would you recommend to UVic students? Personally, I would recommend the chalets. They're set up like miniature log cabins. Compared to the other residences, they are much quieter, which helps when studying or trying to get some sleep. Also, I think they're much 'homier' than the flats as they have a great living room, which allows for you to bond much more with your flatmates.

If you lived in off-campus housing, how easy was it to find? It was quite easy for students living off campus. They're situated right in the downtown region of Stirling and are close to all major amenities. Also, there is university staff there to help settle you in during the first week.

What should future UVic exchange students know about living off-campus? The walk to the University is roughly 45 minutes to 1 hour, depending on your pace. When walking to the University from town, it's easy to gauge where the university is as it's located close to the Wallace Monument. The majority of students who lived in off-campus housing bought a bus pass. The bus pass is *not* included in tuition, like it is at Uvic, so this is good to keep in mind as you'll be frequently commuting to the university.

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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:

Their registration system is very different compared to Uvic's, so I recommend asking lots of questions to make sure you're clear on how the process works. There are plenty of staff and students offering their services during the first two weeks and I definitely took advantage of this.

Please describe the registration process at your partner university. As we know from Uvic, you sign up for classes during the summer, so we are used to knowing the exact time, building, and professors of our upcoming courses. This is certainly not the case at Stirling University. Even though you sign up for classes well in advance, you are given the timeslots during the first week. At first, the class schedules are really tough to interpret especially compared to what we're used to (i.e. usource). It is worthy to mention that some classes have seminars/tutorials which are spread out throughout the semester and others which will suddenly end halfway. Thus, during the first week you'll want to choose your seminars wisely.

What kind of help was available? There was loads of people committed to solving any timetable issues. Not only is the international staff willing to help, but throughout the first week there are staff exclusively dedicated to deciphering the various timetables. Even the local students have a difficult time. Quite often there are timetable conflicts; therefore this first week is crucial for sorting anything out.

How successful were you in registering for classes you wanted? I managed to successfully register for all the classes I wanted. In addition, I got into all the seminar timeslots I requested as well.

What advice would you offer to next year's exchange students about registration at your partner university? I recommend selecting and signing up for the seminars/tutorials as soon as the professors post them. This way you'll get the timeslots you want according to your schedule. If you're having trouble signing up for the seminars/tutorials online, don't hesitate to get help, as there are all sorts of staff there to solve any issues.

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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: 3.5

Comments:

My favourite part about the academics was learning the material through a different perspective or mindset.

How did the style of teaching at your partner university compare with that at UVic? In general, the style of teaching was quite similar. Nevertheless, the actual grading scheme for my psychology courses was different compared to Uvic's. For instance, there was less focus on exams and much more focus on essays and research projects.

How did the workload compare to what you would expect at UVic? Overall, there was a similar amount of reading, but more emphasis on journal reading and less on textbook reading. They were definitely not as strict in terms of the readings, often deeming them 'optional'. Thus, there is less structure compared to what we're used to as they expect you to do a lot of independent reading and researching.

How many courses did you take in your first term abroad? 2 modules (i.e. 2 courses)

Your second term? N/A

What would you recommend as an appropriate course load for other UVic students visiting your partner university? At Stirling University, 3 modules is considered full time, therefore I would recommend taking 3. The workload is quite manageable.

What specific courses would you recommend to visiting UVic students? I would simply recommend taking modules relating to one's particular major, as it really helps to broaden one's perspective.

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

What advice would you give UVic students about succeeding academically at your partner university? I would certainly suggest getting a head start by reading immediately. As difficult as this is with all the activities going on within the first month, it really helps in the long run. It's worthy to note that contrary to Uvic, my experience at Stirling Uni consisted of no quizzes or tests. Many times your grades rely on a few assignments such as essays and projects, a midterm exam, and a final exam. Also, they don't update your grades throughout the semester as opposed to many Uvic classes.

What was your impression of the computer facilities, library, and internet access at your partner university? There were lots of computers available along with a monitor showing which labs were full or were occupied by a class. They even had a couple labs which were available 24 hours a day. During my exchange, the library was receiving renovations; therefore they crammed all of the material into a much smaller building. Also, many books were only available on request as they were stored in the lower level, which could not be accessed by students. Even though the library itself was small, the staff was extremely helpful in assisting you with looking for particular books. Wifi was also available within the main atrium, however, the signal was not always reliable and it was not really mac friendly (eg. They were unable to set up my itouch with the wifi system).

What electronic devices would you recommend a UVic student bring (laptop, PDA, etc.)? If possible, I would highly recommend bringing a laptop for your room. Each room on campus has a wired internet connection, so I only had to use the computer facilities when using statistical programs.

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COSTS

Please indicate currency: Canadian

Books - per term: \$70 (Most reading consisted of journal articles and for me the textbooks were optional)

Accommodation - per month: \$600

Meals - per month: \$180

Local transportation - per month: \$30

Health insurance - per term: N/A

Personal spending - per term: \$400

Communications (phone, etc.) - per term: \$200
Other university related fees - per term: \$100

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:

There are loads of social activities out there!...Sometimes you just have to hunt them down.

What organized activities (clubs, sports, etc.) were available to students? There are an extraordinary amount of clubs to choose from, especially to do with sports.

What extra-curricular activities would you recommend to future exchange students? Getting involved with sports is a great idea to keep you active while abroad; however, given that Stirling Uni is quite small, they often went away on the weekends to play against other universities rather than having intramural sports like Uvic. This is certainly a great opportunity; but keep in mind that it may take up a lot of time. In terms of other clubs, the international society is a great way to meet loads of people from all over the world and get involved in a lot of fun activities. Also, I joined the psychology club, which was a great opportunity to not only meet more local students, but engage with students in the same field.

What do you recommend other visiting students see or do on their weekends or holidays? Explore your own area. There are all sorts of activities going on within your own community! Explore the country which you are in. I found this really rewarding as I traveled all over Scotland and really got a good grasp of the culture. Also, most international students go away for mid semester break as you can get cheap flights flying out of UK.

What opportunities were there for students to work on-campus? On campus, there are hardly any opportunities to work. If you get in there right away you might be able to work in the cafeteria or one of the coffee shops.

Off-campus? There are loads of work opportunities in town. This is where most of the students work. There are many retail stores or restaurants/pubs where one could find employment.

What volunteer or internship opportunities were there for students? Given that I was there for one semester, I did not have time to volunteer; however, in Stirling there is an agency dedicated to filling a variety of volunteer positions around town which students can take advantage of. In addition, there are opportunities to volunteer around campus which pop up during the first couple weeks of class.

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: I certainly felt very safe walking around Stirling, even at night. I would say safer than walking around downtown Victoria. Perhaps this was due to the fact that I wasn't a local, but from what I hear Stirling is a very safe town.

What are the biggest safety concerns for future exchange students going to your exchange site? Perhaps the only safety concern would be ice and snow. It would often be very slippery around campus and town.

What are the biggest health concerns for future exchange students going to your exchange site?

The health concerns were the equivalent to issues here in Canada.

PERSONAL AND CULTURAL CONNECTIONS

What was it like making friends? For me it wasn't a problem. I wanted to make friends with both international and local students, so I reached out to both groups. I found that many people were really interested in learning about Canadian culture, so it truly made conversations easy. You typically make many close connections with other international students within the first couple weeks, so this means you can pick and choose who you want to hang out with!

How successful were you at making friends with local (i.e., not international) students? Good. Most of my closest local friends originated through the clubs I joined as well as through my Flatmates and their friends.

What was it like to adjust to the culture of your exchange site? Personally, adjusting to the Scottish culture was not a problem. Learning about a new culture was fascinating and it really helped to celebrate all the interesting differences. There are plenty of little differences which were quite intriguing and sometimes surprising. I enjoyed learning something new every single day.

What, if any, cultural differences did you find particularly challenging? Interestingly enough, the Brits used a lot of different words, idioms, and slang within their language. On occasion, I found it difficult to understand particular dialects, but this became easier with time. When it was difficult to understand what was being said I typically would ask a lot of questions. They were all more than willing to clarify what they meant when they realized I was not a local. In addition to the language, the Brits are known for their bluntness. Indeed this proved to be true, but I tried not to take offense to this as I learned it is simply a part of their culture.

What parts of the culture did you most appreciate? I would say the fact that the Scottish absolutely love Canadians! I think this really helped when interacting with others as I was under the assumption that others always enjoyed my company. I also liked their sense of humour. I think growing up watching British comedies helped me get along with them even more so.

How were you treated by local people? Good. Given that Stirling is a very student oriented town, I was told that the locals don't always hit it off with students. In my experience as an international student, however, I found the locals to be extremely friendly, especially when they found out I was Canadian.

By university staff and faculty? They were unreal. My professors were all willing to help me out and spend extra office hours when I didn't quite understand concepts.

By students? The students were all intrigued by international students as well, especially when participating in class discussion. I found this to be an automatic conversation starter as I ultimately I met many people this way.

As far as you could tell, how easy would it be for students with disabilities to study at your partner university? The disability centre at Stirling Uni was fantastic. I have a visual impairment, so I'm very familiar with how the system works. Not only were they incredibly prepared and organized, but they treated every student so well. Within the first week I had appointments set up and had my electronic textbooks all ready to go by week two! Amazing.

For students who are visible minorities in your host country? From what I could tell, Scotland had a very low population of visible minorities. Nevertheless, I got the impression that everyone was treated really well and that people were very accepting.

TAKING STOCK

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

1) Bring a couple of adapters for your electronics. Some students even brought one that has the ability to convert voltage for you. I heard many stories (myself included!) about international students destroying blow dryers and shavers because of this.

2) If bringing a credit or debit card, make sure the company/bank knows you're leaving the country. Also, ensure that your bank card is compatible overseas. As I only went for one semester, I chose not open a bank account and was very satisfied with the result.

3) Bring important or significant items from home to remind you of friends/family. It's worth it to make your room as 'homie' as possible as it can help to relieve homesickness. Speaking of which, a webcam was fantastic to have to keep in contact with and actually see friends/family!

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

1) Try something new. You've already gone this far... so why not keep going! I frequently tried stepping out of my comfort and was ultimately thrilled with the results.

2) Take advantage of every moment. This doesn't mean ignore your body if you're feeling ill; instead, you may have to push/force yourself in certain situations as you'll likely regret it later if you don't go for it!

3) Use your gut/intuition. I can think of numerous instances when being aware of your environment and listening to oneself certainly paid off.

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

Your professors are a great resource to have. I would recommend introducing yourself to your teachers right off the bat, so it'll be much easier to meet with them later on in the semester. Keep an ear/eye open for guest lecturers and university events. There's always something interesting going on around campus (and within the community as well) so it's worth it to pay attention. If you're hoping to meet new people, joining a club is a fantastic way. I recognize how tempting it is to only make friends with other international students, especially from similar cultures; however, I would highly recommend attempting to make friends with local students, as it really broadens your study abroad experience.

What was the most rewarding part of your exchange experience?

I would say making so many contacts and lifelong friends from all over the globe.

What was your greatest challenge on the exchange?

For me it was living with such a diverse group of people with various backgrounds and philosophies. At times it was frustrating, but in retrospect was a great learning experience.

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

I would say that this exchange has certainly helped me become more open to trying new experiences back home. Also, I'm more willing to strike up a conversation with people I don't know. It has also helped me recognize the potential challenges visiting exchange students face while here at Uvic. I notice that I'm much more interested in learning about other cultures than ever before. Overall, it really allowed me to broaden my knowledge and awareness about a completely different culture than I was accustomed to.