

Victoria Abroad Evaluation Form

PLEASE TYPE THIS EVALUATION FORM & EMAIL IT TO VICTORIA ABROAD AS A WORD DOCUMENT

A: Student Information

| | |
|----------------------------|---|
| VUW degree(s) | BCom |
| Major(s) | Management, Information Systems |
| Exchange Institution | The University of Texas at Austin |
| VUW Tri & Year of Exchange | 2nd Semester, 2 nd year (180 points completed prior to exchange) |

B: Finances

Please detail your basic costs in New Zealand dollars. This will help future students plan their own budgets. (Enter your number rounded to the nearest dollar.)

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| Books | \$400 |
| Accommodation | \$4200 |
| Return Airfare | \$1500 |
| Local Transportation | \$0 – Busses within Austin are free for UT students. |
| Meals | \$300 – mostly included with accommodation |
| Visa | \$400 – including travelling to Auckland to obtain approval |
| Health & Insurance | \$1000 – mandatory insurance for exchange students through UT |
| Personal Spending | \$1000 – doesn't include travel following the exchange, because this will vary per person |
| Communications (phone, etc.) | \$150 - \$30 per month with T-Mobile |
| Other fees (specify) | |
| What unexpected costs did you encounter? What items were more or less than expected? | Some textbooks have mandatory online codes that cost as much as the book. If your classes have these you won't be able to buy second hand books or borrow books; you need the code to do the homework. Without this I could probably have saved at least another \$200 on textbooks. |

How did your financial expenses compare to what you originally expected to spend?

My expenses were roughly in-line with what I expected to spend.

By what means did you maintain your finances? What would you recommend? (Credit card, foreign bank account, travelers checks, etc)?

I opened an account with a credit union (UFCU) account as soon as I arrived in Austin, and transferred money directly to this account using an app called TransferWise. This method of transferring money is significantly cheaper and more convenient than any other, and the exchange rates you get are better than any bank, travelers cheque or wire service rate. You literally get the market rate, less 0.25%. I saved \$150 - \$300 doing this.

What financial advice would you give students attending the same university as you?

Stay in Co-Op housing. You will not find a cheaper, more fun way to stay in Austin.

Use TransferWise to move your money to a local account – a credit union will typically be happy to open one for you.

Beg, borrow or steal your textbooks. For some classes there are mandatory online codes that you can only get with a textbook (one of these made up \$200 of the \$400 I ended up spending, another was \$75). I took 7 classes, and had I bought all of the books new it would have easily cost \$1,000.

Remember you get your student allowance / loan while you're overseas, but if you're staying abroad for more than six months you'll need to get a waiver (because you're studying) or you'll begin to incur interest.

What was the average cost of a can of coke or coffee in your host country?

"Food is cheap and the portions are huge!" – said no-one who's actually been to Austin. Food is just as expensive as it is in New Zealand, and the portions are no bigger. This goes for coke and coffee too. If you go to Target or Wal-Mart you can buy multipack coke much cheaper than you can in NZ, but that's the only place it's cheaper.

C: Visas & Insurance **Please note this information is recommended by VUW students & current at the time of their exchange. For all up-to-date visa information you must check with the embassy/consulate of your host university.*

Did you have to apply for a visa? If so, was it difficult? What was the process, how long did it take and how much did it cost?

I needed a J1 class visa from the US consulate in Auckland. It costs around \$300.

Do you have any advice for future students when applying for visas to your host country?

Apply early. TAKE EVERY POSSIBLE PIECE OF DOCUMENTATION YOU OWN. Even if you think you don't need it, take it. Leave an extra day or two so if something goes wrong and you need to go back, you won't have to make an extra trip to Auckland. Expect to wait a ridiculously long time in lines.

Did your host university have a mandatory insurance? Or a particular insurance they recommended? If Yes, what was it and how much did it cost?

UT has mandatory insurance for exchange students through Blue Cross / Blue Shield. It costs around \$1000 NZ. I didn't need to use it (beyond getting a free flu shot – highly recommended). The cost difference between this and regular travel insurance is less than you'd think for a 6 month trip to the US, so don't feel too frustrated that it's mandatory.

What insurance company did you use and would you recommend it to future students?

See above. Blue Cross / Blue Shield. Cover automatically backdates to when you enter the US, and I think it also lasts for 30 days after the end of term. A friend broke his collarbone before term started, and they still covered him, so it seems fairly effective. He still had to pay \$2,000 out of pocket, but that's better than the \$80,000 the hospital was asking for.

D: Academics at Host University

Which courses did you take while on exchange? Please rate the difficulty of each course (1-5, 1 = Very Easy & 5 = Extremely Difficult) and leave any comments you may have.

| Course Title | VUW course equivalent or elective | VUW points/credits value | Difficulty Rating (1-5) | Comments |
|---|-----------------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------|---|
| ECO 304L Intro to Macroeconomics | ECON 131 | 15 | 3 | Homework was extremely easy, exams were more difficult. Fairly US focused, but still informative. |
| MAN 328 Consulting & Change Management | MGMT 317 | 15 | 5 | Unique lecturing style, intense practical work, but one of the best classes I've ever taken. Don't be put off by the challenge. |
| MAN 337 The Art & Science of Negotiation | | 15 | 2 | Fun lectures with lots of in-class simulated negotiation. Great professor. A fantastic elective for any business degree. |
| MIS 373.19 Enterprise Computing | INFO 386 | 15 | 4 | Fun lecturer and practical work. Exams are doubtless easier if you can compile code in your head. |
| GEO 347 K Gems & Gem Minerals | | (15) | 2 | Fairly easy – this class hasn't changed much in 20 years! Includes a fantastic lab component where you can cut & polish your own gems. |
| CW 325 Fiction Writing | | (15) | 1 | Small class with a charming lecturer. Easy as long as you show up, do the readings and assignments and contribute in class. |
| PED 106C Weight Training | | (5) | 1 | Weightlifting for academic credit! Ok, so it doesn't transfer back, but it's effectively free so you should definitely take some sort of physical class while you're there. |

All classes were delivered in English. I took 7 classes in one semester, and still had plenty of time for socializing – but many of my classes were quite easy. Several of these classes were “for fun” and may not have VUW equivalents; I took them for the experience rather than the points value.

Course Registration/Enrolment

Please describe the registration process at your host university. What kind of help was available?

Ah, course registration. Guaranteed to make your first week extremely stressful. On the general exchange program you are absolutely lowest priority for any classes. If a class fills up you can get onto the waitlist, but you then need to rely on someone dropping the class so you can make in in.

Initial signup occurs online, but some classes are only available to exchange students on the second day of actual classes (!). There are advisory services available for the faculty under which you are enrolled (mine was economics, despite this not being my major – this is typical for commerce students on general exchange).

How successful were you in registering/enrolling for classes you wanted? What advice would you offer to next year's exchange students about registration at your host university?

I was able to get onto all of the classes that I wanted – and more besides!

My approach was to apply for classes where I had guaranteed acceptance and wouldn't mind taking if I had no other options, and swap them out for classes I actually wanted as they became available for me to register for, or as I was able to convince admissions to let me onto them.

I ended up taking three classes in the McComb's School of Business – despite that fact that I was only allowed to take a maximum of two classes, and one of the classes I took was also specifically not available to students on the general exchange program (which would be any undergrad from Victoria). I managed this by going to classes before I was officially enrolled and making friends with the professors, and by asking politely and repeatedly if I could be allowed into the classes. You may have more or less success with the method depending on how nice the professor is and how full the class is, but it worked for me!

Because I had also met professors from the more fun classes I had registered for in case I couldn't get in to the business classes I wanted, I didn't really want to drop the classes. As a result, I had to ask a student advisor for permission to take extra classes, but they were happy to let me do this.

Do you have any advice for future students when choosing and applying for courses?

Make sure you keep asking for the classes you want. Go to lectures even if you're not enrolled and make friends with the professor. Figure out who the gatekeepers are and bug them, politely, until you are accepted or given a really final no. I kept asking even when I got told no, and struck a compromise deal which got it turned into a yes, so don't give up!

TAKE EXTRA CLASSES! UT has an unusual cost structure where any classes you take after the first 4 are FREE. You can take 85 points (or "17 hours" as they do it in Texas) worth of classes without needing any special permissions. That's five full time classes and one or two smaller classes. Getting permission for extra hours is fairly easy if you have good grades.

Take a physical education class. Swimming, weightlifting, dance – they're effectively free and fun, and will also appear on your transcript! They're also a great way to meet new friends.

Academic Experience

How did your academic experience differ from your time spend at Victoria? Did the academic experience meet your expectations?

Many of the classes I took had less emphasis on tutorials, and most actually had no tutorials at all. Tutorials are just about the best value-add at Victoria, and they really help cement the knowledge gained in lectures. I missed them in some classes, though they wouldn't have worked in others.

Professors seem to do whatever they feel like when it comes to exams and assessment! Exams were frequently written the night before they were given, and on-the-fly corrections were fairly common. Assessment criteria were extremely varied – Victoria is much more standardized.

There's less hand-holding – don't expect Blackboard to have all the information you need, or indeed anything beyond the syllabus for some classes. Expect to have to deal with irritating third-party websites for some classes. The Texas textbook industry has figured out that selling online codes for one-semester "learning experience packages" that set and grade homework for the professor is much more lucrative than selling textbooks that can be used over and over again. These websites are not integrated with Blackboard or it's equivalent, so keeping track of assessment deadlines can be a bit of a hassle.

Overall the academic experience was great. I enjoyed the lectures, the practical work was fun and interesting and the exams were challenging.

How did the style of teaching at your host university compare with that at VUW? How did the workload compare to what you would expect at VUW?

The teaching was generally pretty good. One class had some hiccups, and another was sometimes hilariously out of date (slides were displayed from a carousel projector that still referenced the USSR at one point!) but this just added to the charm. Exams were a bit hit and miss, but generally easier than I was expecting. The harder ones seemed to be pretty aggressively curved so I still got good grades!

The Fall semester is long. 15 weeks, with the only break being four days for Thanksgiving. There's no mid-semester break anywhere in the calendar except for spring break, which I wasn't there for. The long semester could grind you down, but I didn't find the workload too onerous. I think I did get lucky with my classes in terms of workload, however.

What would you recommend as an appropriate course load for other VUW students visiting your partner university? What specific courses would you recommend to visiting VUW students? Why?

Take 5 classes and a physical education elective. If you plan on spending all your time partying you could take four classes, but I spent plenty of time partying and had time for 6 classes and a physical education class! Your academic experience at UT is limited, so make the most of it.

I would recommend The Art and Science of Negotiation to any business student, and it could be great for a lot of non-business students as well. The Consulting and Change Management class I took was also fantastic – it may well end up being my favorite class in my entire degree.

What advice would you give VUW students about succeeding academically at your host university?

Go to all your lectures. Go to any tutorial or extra classes that are offered. Make a master list of all your deadlines and don't miss any. Grade boundaries are TOUGH at UT – 93% is an A, 90% for an A-. You have very little room to drop marks. Don't expect to have access to a lot of (or indeed any) past papers – make the most of any you get given.

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

Many students didn't seem that thrilled with the library, but I thought it was fine. I didn't spend a lot of time there, I have to say, but it had plenty of computers and quiet space, and bookable study rooms for group work.

If you went to a country where English is not the native language, how did you prepare for this? Were there any intensive language courses provided by the host university?

Not applicable.

E: Accommodation

What form of accommodation did you stay in?

I stayed in a student housing cooperative called Taos, which is part of the College Houses student cooperative.

What were the pros and cons of this form of accommodation?

Taos houses 117 students, so there's a huge group of people to make friends and hang out with. There's always something going on.

You have to do 4 hours labour contributing to the house each week. Some people inexplicably grumble about this, but it's a fantastic bargain.

In exchange, you get 17(!) hot, cooked meals per week (you might be involved in cooking one or two of them if that's the labour you sign up for). Someone cleans all the common at least weekly, with the high-traffic areas being cleaned daily.

Taos also has a computer room with decent computers – you don't even need to bring a laptop if you want to travel light. There's also unlimited free printing.

The co-op also features a games room, party room, TV room, industrial scale kitchen, dedicated ice-cream freezer, sundeck, gym, and access to the pool at one of the other co-ops in the organization.

I got all this for \$606 USD / month. You just can't do better.

What accommodation would you recommend to future students?

Stay in a co-op. There's really no contest with any other kind of accommodation.

How early can you move into accommodation?

You can move in about a week before the start of the semester, but they do take people earlier than that if you ask nicely. It's actually quite cheap to get in early, because they won't be providing meals at that point.

What options were available for meal plans or cooking facilities? How satisfied were you with the food?

Not having to cook and having meals on a regular schedule was a godsend. There's a huge kitchen at Taos and all members actually have to get a food handler's license in order to be in the kitchen (because it serves over 30 people - Texas rules). You technically "own" all the food in the building (along with everyone else), so you can go make yourself something at any time the kitchen isn't in use for a main meal.

The food was generally good, occasionally average and very rarely bad. At an effective cost of less than \$2 per meal, it was incredible.

If you lived in off-campus housing, how easy was it to find? What should future VUW exchange students know about living off-campus?

All co-ops are off campus. None of them are far away – campus is at most 10 minutes' walk away. Living off-campus is significantly cheaper than living on-campus, so unless you're rich, extremely lazy and enjoy sharing a tiny room with someone, off-campus is the way to go.

Do you have any tips of advice for future students when applying for accommodation?

Apply the moment your exchange is approved. Do not wait. The co-ops can be in high demand, and the good / cheap accommodation goes fast. You should spend more time outside your accommodation than in it, so don't worry about it too much! I opted to share a room and spent the money I saved having fun. I pretty much only went back to my room to sleep!

F: Personal & Cultural Connections

What was it like making friends? How successful were you at making friends with local (i.e., not international) students?

Making friends was easy. UT is a big school; you are guaranteed to find people you get on well with unless you are a particularly ornery misanthrope. I'd say my friends were around 2/3 local to 1/3 international students – about the same makeup as the population in the co-op I lived in, though I had friends outside the co-op as well.

What was it like to adjust to the culture of your exchange country/university?

American culture has pervaded the world, so there's not really much of a culture shock. Austin is a very liberal city compared to Texas (and, apparently, the US as a whole right now). If you have liberal social values and enjoy the heat you might just feel like it's the best place in the world.

What, if any, cultural differences did you find particularly challenging? How would you recommend students to prepare for these differences?

I didn't really run into any personal challenges. Anecdotally, the frat / sorority scene can be a bit grotesque at times, and despite being liberal it IS Texas, so there is racism, bigotry and latent theocracy lurking below the polite smiles of some of the people you will meet.

The "Young Conservatives" on campus held an "affirmative action bakesale" to protest what they see as preferential treatment towards minority groups which generated a fair amount of controversy. Anti-Trump protests were all the rage after the election, and I imagine will be for a while yet.

If you were to experience discrimination in Austin, however, you are guaranteed to have ten times as many people telling you that they love you and accept you for who you are. It's that kind of city.

What parts of the culture did you most appreciate?

As above, Austin is a very open, accepting and liberal city. The opportunity to experience both that and the "rugged individualism" of "real Texas" that surrounds it makes Austin a great place to visit.

How were you treated by local people? By university staff and faculty? By students?

I was treated very well by everyone. Local people were warm and friendly, and university staff and faculty always made time to talk. A fellow student invited me to Dallas for Thanksgiving, which was a great experience.

As far as you could tell, how easy would it be for students with disabilities to study at your partner university? For students who are visible minorities in your host country? For students who are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered?

This question is obviously particularly pertinent given the discriminatory leanings of the present US administration. Austin is always going to be a liberal bubble in the heart of Texas, and the university is a bastion of free speech and mutual support. Does the US (and especially Texas) seem like a scarier place to visit right now? Absolutely. But you can be sure than in Austin at least, someone will be looking out for you.

Did you face any issues regarding discrimination in your host country? What were they, and what advice would you give to future students?

I didn't face any personally, but as above – there is help available to you. Your peers, professors and university staff are there to support you if you need help. If you need help, ask for it, and if you see

someone who needs help speak up.

G: Extra-curricular/Social Activities

What organized activities (clubs, sports, etc.) were available to students? What extra-curricular activities would you recommend to future exchange students?

The university has the usual range of sports and social clubs. Some are VERY cliquy and require interviews to get into (think: Mean Girls).

There's guaranteed to be one that works for you. If you're not taking a physical education class like I did, make sure you join a sports club. You'll keep fit, go to cool places and meet new people.

The university has an Outdoor Recreation arm of its RecSports facility that runs weekend kayaking and hiking trips. Go on at least one of these – they are fantastic.

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

Go on a RecSports kayaking or hiking trip – they are really cheap and great fun.

Go to Frederiksberg for the beer festival!

There's often stuff happening in the park at Austin – music festivals, light festivals etc. Go to these!

There are some fantastic national parks in Texas – I visited Big Bend national park and it was a highlight of my trip.

What opportunities were there for students to work on-campus? Off-campus?

There's the usual range of on-campus positions available, and you can do a bit of work (limited by your visa). Off campus you'll probably be looking at restaurant work – but tipped minimum wage in Texas is \$2.13 per hour, so make sure you have a particularly engaging personality if you want to actually earn decent money.

The best gig I saw was working the music festivals in Austin – I don't think people actually got paid, but they did get free entry to the festival in exchange for working one day!

Ultimately the main goals of your trip should be study and have a good time. Working is going to take up time that could be much, much better spent. Go have fun instead.

What volunteer or internship opportunities were there for students?

There are plenty of volunteer activities out there, and many big companies recruit or offer internships at UT. I wasn't quite far along enough in my degree to make the best use of these, but if you fancy getting some international experience or moving to the US they might work out for you!

5 things to take to your host country or region

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| 1 | Light clothing – it's hot as hell in Texas. |
| 2 | Sunscreen. |
| 3 | A decent camera / cameraphone. |
| 4 | An open mind and sense of adventure. |
| 5 | As little physical stuff as possible! Buy stuff for cheap at Target if / when you need it. |

5 pieces of useful advice would tell a VUW student going to your host university

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|---|--|
| 1 | Apply for accommodation early – and live in a co-op! |
| 2 | Keep pushing until you get the classes you want. |
| 3 | Take as many classes as you can – particularly a physical ed. class. |
| 4 | Take advantage of all the awesome stuff to do in Austin... |
| 5 | ...but also get out of Austin and see Texas! |

Top 5 Things to do

What are your 'Top 5 Things To Do' future VUW students at your host university or city/country?

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|---|--|
| 1 | Spend time in Zilker Park – try tubing the river. |
| 2 | Explore the history of UT – visit the tower and museums. |
| 3 | Visit Big Bend National Park. |
| 4 | Go to crazy college parties, but don't get too caught up in them. |
| 5 | Make some friends you can argue with about different points of view. |

H: Personal Experience

I came away from my exchange with some great friendships, a rich and varied academic experience and memories that I'll carry with me for the rest of my life. My exchange at UT was a fun, challenging and rewarding part of my degree, that allowed me to build on my skills and knowledge in a new environment. The friendships and connections I made helped me to grow and develop as a person, and figure out who I want to be and what I want to do when I graduate.