

Victoria Abroad Evaluation Form

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

A: Student Information

VUW degree(s)	Bachelor of Arts
Major(s)	International Relations
Exchange Institution	Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México
VUW Tri & Year of Exchange	Trimester 1, 2016

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.)

Books	\$0 (readings were online or available to photocopy across street from uni)
Accommodation	\$340/month
Return Airfare	\$2646 (but I changed return flight a couple of months before leaving, so would have been \$2175)
Local Transportation	\$2/week (basically only used metro, extremely cheap – about 40c gets you anywhere in the city)
Meals	\$60/week
Visa	\$15 (only for ESTA to get through United States – I used a tourist visa for Mexico, since I was staying less than 6 months. Tourist visa is the default and costs nothing)
Health & Insurance	\$570
Personal Spending	\$40/week average, mostly for out-of-city travelling or day trips in the city
Communications (phone, etc.)	\$15/month for a basic Telcel cellphone plan (with data)
Other fees (specify)	2.5% currency conversion charge on Visa, hefty fees on cash withdrawal
What unexpected costs did you encounter? What items were more or less than expected?	Spent more than expected on ATM fees. Spent less than expected on transport, which is extremely cheap (metro, bus)

Overall I kept my finances pretty in check. I had allowed \$100 a week for living costs, and generally kept to it. I dug into other funds for a few weekend trips and a big week-long trip to Cancún during Semana Santa.

I paid for nearly everything in cash in Mexico. This is advisable for two main reasons. Firstly, you want to avoid paying fees on your Visa every time you make a card purchase, even if the fees are small. Secondly, a lot of stores, especially taquerías (taco joints), don't take cards. So you actually have to pay in cash for a lot of places. Warning: DO NOT get a Mastercard Multi-Currency Cash Passport. I was advised to get one by my bank, and it was a complete waste of money. The Mexican Peso is not a supported currency on the card, so you end up paying 6% surcharges on every purchase, which is far worse than the 2.5% on your normal visa. Just take a visa debit and use that to withdraw cash.

Speaking of withdrawing cash – withdraw a month’s worth of cash each time, to avoid paying the ATM base fee too often. You’ll get hit pretty hard with conversion fees, but it’s the only way. It’s not worth opening a Mexican bank account – the process is meant to be extremely time-consuming and tedious. I advise carrying a money belt to the cash machine – you’re unlikely to be robbed, but if someone tries, they won’t get your cash if it’s in the belt. And it goes without saying that you should not withdraw cash alone at night.

ITAM has few or no unexpected costs – if you’re going to ITAM, just follow the general financial advice I gave above.

I never drank coke or coffee in Mexico, but I’d guess a can of coke would go for less than \$1, and coffee for about \$3.

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.*

I did not have to apply for a visa for Mexico, since I was staying less than 6 months. If you’re staying less than 6 months, you can just be on a tourist visa, which requires no paperwork beyond what you get handed on the aeroplane. You don’t get a card – it’s more just like a status. And it costs nothing. I did have to get an ESTA just to transit through the United States though. MAKE SURE YOU GET THIS, because I didn’t know I needed it before getting to the airport – STA Travel didn’t tell me about it – and I nearly missed my flight out of Wellington because they wouldn’t let me out of Auckland without it.

If you’re staying for more than 6 months, you’ll need a student visa. That process seems more complicated, and has to be completed within 30 days of arriving in Mexico.

Insurance is compulsory at ITAM. Their policy is quite basic and is the default if you haven’t arranged your own policy. It’s around \$350 per semester. It’s better to arrange your own, more comprehensive policy.

I used 1Cover, a company recommended by Victoria Abroad. I would NOT recommend this company. I made a single claim of less than \$100 and it took me over two months to get compensated, because they mucked me around so much. Without going into details, I’ll just say that I would go for a different company, even if you have to pay a little more. You don’t want to go through the never-ending hassle of claiming with 1Cover.

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	Language of Instruction	VUW course equivalent or elective	VUW points/credits value	Rating (1-5)	Comments
VUW Trimester 1/YEAR					

Medio Oriente (Middle East)	Spanish	INTP level 300	15	4	This is a very interesting course all about the Middle East. It covers history, culture, language, geography, politics, and international relations. The professor is a French guy called Sberro, and is very knowledgeable, albeit an enthusiastic talker. Expect to learn a lot but participate not so much. I'd recommend it overall, and Sberro's Spanish is clear and easy to understand.
Japón, China & El Sudeste Asiático (Japan, China & Southeast Asia)	Spanish	INTP level 300	15	4	Self-explanatory. Covers many countries in Asia – politics, economics, international relations etc. Professor talks clearly but quite quietly, and he talks a lot. Minimal visual stimuli. Some classes were kind of boring, while others were really interesting. You have to keep up with the readings, because he regularly discusses them in class. An average course overall.
Relaciones México-Estados Unidos-Canadá (Mexico-US-Canada Relations)	Spanish	INTP level 300	15	3	Mostly about Mexico-US relations, which is an interesting topic if you're living in Mexico. It's also something you can't study at Vic. One long class per week. The professor's speaking style is less than clear, so if your Spanish isn't pretty fluent, don't bother. Some interesting issues come up, and it's topical. Assessment is pretty easy, and there's not much of it. Readings can be dull. Worth a look if you've

						got good Spanish and are interested in the relations between Mexico and the US.
Methods in International Relations	English	INTP level	200	15	3	Great course covering the scientific method, philosophy of knowledge, and other such broadly applicable topics. It is taught in English. Half the course is writing a research paper and presenting the various parts of it to the rest of the class along the way. The professor, 'Saki', is very entertaining and humorous. You cover interesting material and get to write a full research paper, which is great practice for further study. Definitely recommend this course.

VUW Trimester 2/YEAR

Course Registration/Enrolment

You'll have to submit lots of documents, but they state everything they want clearly in an email.

I got enrolled in every class I applied for. Knowing Spanish was a definite advantage, as most of ITAM's courses – especially International Relations ones – are taught entirely in Spanish. If you don't speak the language before going, your options are significantly limited.

A piece of advice is to be aware that many courses are taught EVERY semester, something I wasn't aware of. So I basically didn't even look at half the courses that were available, assuming they were the following

semester only. Browse through ALL the courses, and courses that are taught only one semester per year are exceptions to the rule, unlike Vic, where all courses are bound to a particular trimester.

Academic Experience

ITAM doesn't have tutorials, so there is overall less participation in class. But classes are usually interesting and you learn a lot. Like at Vic, there is a lot of reading to do, though some of it is of questionable relevance. The quality of education is pretty good, but lectures can get long, since they are a minimum of 1 ½ hours each.

A lot of the teachers talked a lot, and didn't expect too much participation in class. This contrasts with Vic, where more questions are asked in lectures. There is some participation, but it is less. As for the workload, International Relations courses almost universally involve a lot of reading, but the amount of assessment varies from class to class. You will be studying a fair bit to get good grades, but you won't be studying all the time, which is good.

The appropriate course load for an exchange student at ITAM is four or five courses. I started off with six, because Vic Abroad hadn't calculated correctly, and ITAM told me to drop one or two courses. I was left with four, and four was definitely enough. I suggest you take exactly four courses – more than that is a LOT of work, especially for reading-heavy subjects like IR.

The key to succeeding academically at ITAM is to engage critically with the themes you learn about while also memorising specifics. Also, you have to do most of the assigned reading to get a good mark, as the reading often goes into more depth than the lectures, or is outright referenced in assessments.

I hardly used the computer facilities or library, but my impression was that they were pretty good. If you're looking for online publications, just do so through Victoria's Library. The ITAM online search system is pretty hard to use.

Obviously the language spoken in Mexico is Spanish, and it is the language most of ITAM's courses are taught in. I had conversational Spanish before I went on exchange, so that when I got to Mexico, I was able to choose any course I wanted. Going with at least a basic level of Spanish is highly advisable – it is far easier to build on a pre-existing foundation than to try to learn in Mexico from scratch. However, ITAM does offer Spanish courses for exchange students. The consensus on those courses is that they are OK, but not that great.

E: Accommodation

I stayed in a student house called Hidalgo 92, a 10 minute walk from ITAM. The house was half exchange students and half Mexican students.

Living in a big house meant there was always someone to talk to, and having so many Mexicans was great for using Spanish on a day to day basis.

I would recommend a student house like I had. ITAM sends out an email a month or so in advance of the semester start, which gives you a range of student accommodation near the university.

Since you pay rent by the month, you can generally move in at the start of the month or a couple of days before that, like me. I arrived in Mexico on the 29th of December (2015) and was in my permanent accommodation, with no extra charge, by the 30th. Just make sure you talk it over with your landlord.

There were no meal plans. You buy all your own food. I actually didn't cook at all during my exchange – I just ate out each day. It's reasonably cheap to do so, as long as you don't buy anything lavish.

Off-campus housing is fine – ITAM doesn't have on-campus housing anyway. I was grateful to live so close to the university, and I recommend you live close to your university too. Unless living in a nice neighbourhood is really important to you, there isn't a lot of point in living hours away from the university, because you have to go there every day. Living close also means you can easily duck home for lunch when you want to.

Apply for accommodation as soon as the housing email comes out. I didn't, but I got lucky.

F: Personal & Cultural Connections

Making friends in Mexico is pretty easy. I found I was able to have more meaningful relationships with Mexican people by speaking Spanish, but other students who spoke little or no Spanish were also able to make plenty of Mexican friends from the university (because all ITAM students have to have good English). However, as I once discussed with a Mexican girl, you have to make an effort to deepen the relationship and not just talk about superficial stuff all the time. Mexicans require a bit of warming up when it comes to discussing more profound topics.

I think I adjusted to Mexican culture quite quickly. It isn't hugely different from New Zealand culture in terms of the attitudes/openness of the people, although there are obviously stark differences in cuisine, art, and history.

One cultural difference I found challenging was the tendency of Mexicans to be late for meet-ups. Even adult professionals would do this too. You have to get used to people not showing up at the agreed time, unfortunately.

I adored the food, got sentimentally attached to the music, and loved the laid-back but hardworking nature of the Mexican people.

I was treated as well as anyone else by the locals – speaking Spanish helped a lot in this regard. Many shopkeepers, vendors, artists etc. don't speak English, so you can have a much more rewarding experience in Mexico if you speak Spanish. Professors treated me decently, and fellow students were more or less the same as at Vic – student culture wasn't particularly different.

I did not see any disabled people at ITAM, and I'm not sure that it would be the best choice for a disabled student. There are a few elevators around for people who would have difficulty navigating the stairs, but infrastructure for disabled people is not extensive. I was also not aware of any department or support team for disabled students. In terms of the suitability of Mexico City for those with different sexual orientations, it is a great city. It is very liberal and no one cares whether if you are gay or bisexual or something other than straight.

I did not face any discrimination in Mexico, though I was probably ripped off by a few taxi drivers (that'll probably happen if you don't look Mexican, regardless of whether you speak Spanish or not).

G: Extra-curricular/Social Activities

ITAM didn't have a huge range of extra-curricular activities, but there were a few sports and some artistic/cultural groups as well. I played piano in the university jazz band, which I would recommend if you like jazz or rock – it's pretty laid back and you just get to jam a couple of hours a week. And at the end of the semester there's a concert. There are also salsa dancing classes which I didn't go to in the end, but which would be enjoyable for a lot of students.

There is so much to see in Mexico City it's ridiculous. I was going out into the city every weekend and seeing new things, but at the end there was still a lot I hadn't seen. For museums, I recommend the Museo de la Antropología, Museo de la Tortura, and at least of the Frida Kahlo museums. Make sure you see some archaeological sites, such as Plaza Mayor in the city centre, Teotihuacán an hour outside the city, and some of the ruins down the Yucatán Peninsula. Speaking of the Yucatán, make sure you go – there are some fascinating things to see, including the ruins at Tulum and the famous cenotes (freshwater pools).

Oaxaca, Puerto Vallarta and Xochimilco are worth visiting. There are many more places I didn't get to which are meant to be incredible – I highly recommend buying the Lonely Planet guide to Mexico and getting inspiration from there.

Mexico City is not a place of great natural beauty. Towards the end I made an effort to see more natural stuff, like the Parque Nacional Desierto de los Leones (national park) on the outskirts of the city, and a volcano called Nevado de Toluca, which was spectacular.

You cannot work in Mexico on a tourist visa. On a student visa, I think you can. Work opportunities were pretty scant anyway, and I didn't know of any exchange students who worked during the semester.

ITAM advertises a few internships and Master programmes – volunteer opportunities are limited. It is probably more word of mouth than advertised.

5 things to take to your host country or region

1	Trousers – no one in Mexico wears shorts, even in summer!
2	Good camera – you will regret it otherwise
3	Diary – preferably in Spanish. Helps to solidify the memories
4	Lint brush – seriously, you'll appreciate having it every time you do the washing
5	Lonely Planet guidebook!

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

1	Don't slack on course work – it's more fun if you engage with the content, and you get better grades
2	Do at least one extra-curricular activity at ITAM
3	Don't always pack lunch; there are many nice food joints around the university!
4	If you get sick, go to the ITAM doctor. It's free, and he can help with many non-serious medical problems
5	Realise that ITAM students usually come from wealthy backgrounds, and are not representative of most Mexicans

Top 5 Things to do

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

1	Yucatán Peninsula
2	Oaxaca & surrounding towns
3	Nevado de Toluca (volcano)
4	Parque Nacional Desierto de los Leones (national park – see the Carmelite convent!)
5	Teotihuacán

H: Personal Experience

My exchange in Mexico was without a doubt the best experience of my life. The culture really captured me and I loved it right from the start. Eating tacos four nights a week, traveling around the city on the metro, being an exchange student, seeing the same shopkeepers and workers every day around the neighbourhood, always having a new excursion planned, hanging out with Mexicans all the time, learning

first-hand about a different part of the world, making jokes in Spanish...all of these are things I will miss, but I'm incredibly grateful to have experienced them. And I had some wonderful friends and housemates who contributed to my semester being so unforgettable. My time abroad wasn't without its trials and tribulations, but the good far outweighed the bad. It's difficult to express what a fantastic and valuable experience this was for me, and what it is for everyone who does it – I was just nineteen when I left for Mexico, and the entire experience of being away from family for five months made me far more responsible and gave me a sense of freedom I had never had before. To anyone considering doing a semester abroad, and also to those who aren't considering it, do it! It will be one of the best chapters of your life.

I: University Support

Support from my host university was pretty good. The International Office is helpful and available to assist you with whatever you need. Lecturers were varied in their helpfulness – I won't make any generalisations, because it is quite dependent on the individual teacher.

The Victoria Abroad office was helpful when I needed to change courses, and on all other occasions. They are there to help you, and do a great job. Prior to my exchange, I was able to get courses signed off by faculty members quickly and without a problem.

I would suggest that some more information be added to the description of ITAM as a university on the Vic Abroad website. It would have been useful to know, for example, that the recommended number of courses for exchange students was 4-5, and that most courses ran every semester.



