

Victoria Abroad Evaluation Form

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

A: Student Information

VUW degree(s)	BSc
Major(s)	Chemistry, Biotechnology [Minor : French]
Exchange Institution	Université de La Rochelle (URL)
VUW Tri & Year of Exchange	T2 2014, T1 2015 (some awkward overlap with T2 2015 due to administration problems)

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	[For Uni : 0] [For Pleasure : More than I should have spent]
Accommodation	\$6600 (10 Months) – \$3600 (La CAF – French GOVT Aid) = \$3000
Return Airfare	N/A – Stayed in Europe
Local Transportation	N/A – Walked everywhere
Meals	~40 euro /weeks 60NZD
Visa	N/A – Have dual citizenship, one European
Health & Insurance	100 euro 160NZD
Personal Spending	~ 70 euro /week 110NZD
Communications (phone, etc.)	10-15 euros /month
Other fees (specify)	Holidays, Travels ~ I personally haven't finished and obviously travels are tailored to budgets and not the other way around so this isn't in any way an obligatory cost.
What unexpected costs did you encounter? What items were more or less than expected?	Accommodation cost less than expected though that is due only to the degree of aid the French government provided.

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

Compared to my original budget of around \$15000 NZD I spent around \$13000 during the academic year and Christmas holidays.

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

A French bank account, while somewhat difficult to set up, was by far the most convenient option for me during the year, but for just one semester other options might be easier – I also have two passports and staying in Europe after my exchange so depending on your personal situation pre-loaded credit/travelling cards could be more practical.

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

Try stick to a budget, nights out and trips around the region to make the most of the city and its surrounds

can be expensive.

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

1.50€ = \$2.50

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?

No – I have a British passport

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

No – as I didn't go through this process

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?

Yes, no recommendation, prices ranged from 80-250 euro for the year, I ended up paying around 100 euro for the year – these prices also change every year (generally increasing)

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

I used my bank to get insurance, this is usually the simple option and there isn't a lot of difference between the banks in this matter.

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.

I am going to provide a general commentary here because my particular situation is likely to be very different from any who follow and specific course feedback has very few specific points. First off, the difficulty of each of these courses will depend almost entirely on the language skills involved. At first it was very hard for me, regardless of the course, and got progressively easier and my French improved. As for the credit equivalents, I used this exchange to graduate and had no need of VUW points or papers exchange except for SCIE310 which was credited by two courses over two semesters. Thus the course choice and accreditation was done in a very arbitrary fashion designed purely to meet the exchange requirements for the expected workload and is not necessarily representative of the way in which it needs to be done for a following student: I will mention however the science department in general follows the VicOE and university guidelines for a workload whereas arts professors let the students decide, which often results in extremely light workloads and largely incomparable accreditation, turning the exchange into more of a holiday. The VUW guidelines for language competency needed to do an exchange are not properly examined, not in line with the European standards, and more often than not lead to students studying in foreign languages to struggle or fail purely due to a linguistic basis. Another note is the difference in the French education system, science professors here keep a distance, and will give 0 exceptions to exchange students (as so few students do science and they want to avoid extra work – arts/language/history etc. professors are much more accommodating. So basically, if you want to do science papers, make sure that you have at least a B2+ European framework grade (+ meaning you passed with a high-extremely high

grade) which has been properly determined or you risk failing courses due to language difficulties. Also, if you take many different subjects like I did here, expect to miss ~15 – 20% of classes as timetables change from week to week and will clash with each other and there will be no exceptions – laboratories will often require you to miss several full days of other classes. I had to change several courses to avoid much worse clashes.

Course Title	Language of Instruction	VUW course equivalent or elective	VUW points/credits value	Rating (1-5)	Comments
VUW Trimester 1/YEAR					
BIOTEC-15527C	French	300 Btec Pts.	6ECTS	F(language)	
ENV-14516C	French	200 Chem Pts.	2ECTS	F(language)	
ODP-15514C	French	Part of SCIE310	2ECTS	F(language)	
GEST-13505C	French	200 Gen Pts.	2ECTS	F(language)	
MATH-10104C	French	MATH142	6ECTS	F(language)	
ECH-FLE B2	French	300 Gen Pts.	6ECTS	F(language)	
VUW Trimester 2/YEAR					
BIOTECH-15620C	French	200 Sci Pts.	4ECTS	F(language)	
BIOTECH-15628C	French	Part of SCIE310	4ECTS	F(language)	
GP-15630C	French	300 Sci Pts.	6ECTS	F(language)	
CHIM-14609C	French	300 Chem Pts.	3ECTS	F(language)	
SGM-14604C	French	200 Sci Pts.	2ECTS	F(language)	
ECH-FLE	French	300 Gen Pts.	6ECTS	F(language)	

Course Registration/Enrolment

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

We were assigned 'buddys' to help us but mine was absent for the first few weeks so wasn't a lot of use, registration process is complicated if you have no idea how it works – French administration is horrible and the stereotype is well-founded – there is university level, administrative level and pedagogical level registrations each of which has certain requirements. It took me a full week of lining up and talking to people to figure out what I needed to do. Some buddies however, as I later learnt, were much more helpful and effective, so it need not be a nightmare – depends on your luck there I suppose.

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?

After initial registration I quickly realized that many of them clashed and had to change several off them. This is a likely outcome depending on the variety of subjects that you choose.

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

Be prepared to change them. Have back-up plans!

Academic Experience

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

French academic system is very different to our own, there is a big 'distance' between professors and students, questions are not encouraged, there is a lot more memorization and a lot less analysis and application of what we learnt to novel situations – this is just very French and takes some getting used to, many here want to change the system but the bureaucracy and in many ways I was expecting this.

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?

See above. The workload was largely augmented by my deficiencies in the language and I would estimate that on average the workload (assuming language fluency) is less than at VUW for a full trimester (bearing in mind we are encouraged to do just over a $\frac{2}{3}$ workload as an exchange student to compensate for the language – and that this depends on the individual). Also, study week does not exist, sometimes a final exam for one course will be just after a lecture for another course. Course dates can vary dramatically, some bridging semesters, others just being shorter. This is due to the fact that in France, students choose Programmes, not course, and each programme is organized according to the facilitator, in very different ways from one another.

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?

There are university guidelines for this, 20/30 ECTS as the foreign language means more work. If a student in question is adapted to the biology/chemistry/maths/physics VUW workload at 200-300 level (setting aside the arguments and comparison with arts degrees) with average grades of B+-A-, and if they have a solid B2+ level of French then this is a noticeable drop in workload, and following the exchange 'guide-lines' which are in fact at the complete discrepancy of the VUW heads of department who sign exchange contracts, and given that the current science coordinator follows these quite strictly, it is not possible to do any less than 24 ECTS to obtain 15 VUW credits and this I found to be an equivalent workload, the exchange is not a holiday, until the holidays.

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

Make notes, always, French science exams are a lot more about remembering every precise detail that was presented in courses than giving general analysis to show understanding or applying concepts in novel ways to new situations. Think learning marine biology genus/family style learning vs. analysis, discussion and application of principles in chemistry.

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

Perfectly adequate.

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?

No intensive language courses provided but proper long term language courses such as those provided at VUW were provided over the course of the exchange and were very useful, and taught in a very 'non-French' way – a lot more pedagogically sound.

E: Accommodation

What form of accommodation did you stay in?

University Hall.

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

Pros. Clean, individual, utilitarian.

Cons. French residences are EXTREMELY antisocial – you will struggle to make any friends due to your accommodation!

What accommodation would you recommend to future students?

The university will guarantee you a university accommodation (above) which is thus a very safe bet, but if you could organize a flat (rather difficult to do in fact) you would in all likelihood have a much better living experience.

How early can you move into accommodation?

End of august normally if arriving for beginning of September.

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

University restaurants/canteens are available, nicely subsidized and provide healthy, if not always the most tasty food. I was satisfied.

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

There is no on-campus housing, only university residences or private accommodations.

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

See above.

F: Personal & Cultural Connections

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

At La Rochelle, French science students, who are rarely exposed to exchange students are somewhat reticent, especially if they experience difficulties communicating with you at the beginning. French students doing arts subjects or languages are much more open. Also, there are several groups to meet people who are genuinely interested in meeting foreigner, sharing language etc.

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

Having spoken to several French people and other exchange students, I had a fair idea of what to expect as

so the 'shock' was minimal, but adjusting still took a solid 3 months before I felt at ease and comfortable in the knowledge of how everything worked.

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

Everything is closed on Sunday, plan ahead to do errands during the week XD.

What parts of the culture did you most appreciate?

Food and markets.

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

People you don't know are polite but maintain a certain social distance, staff members will avoid any extra work you want from them unless they are genuinely interested or are obligated to do so as part of their responsibilities. Students – see precedent – though when you go out, students tend to be 10 times friendlier, which is much more remarkable here given the 'wall' that is normally maintained for people they don't know. I have also been told that a lot of this comes down to the regional culture of La Rochelle.

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?

French society seems very egalitarian in this respect, to the best of my experience it would be no more difficult for a disabled student to study here than in NZ

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

No – other than the occasional, well-intentioned, NZ-based jokes, which is to be expected.

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?

There is an organization called SUAPSE which deals with almost all sports and extra-curricular but many of these are part of a course that is compulsory for French students that is not for exchange students and are actually marked, though I still believe you can participate.

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

Ile de Ré, have a walk around town, visit the aquarium perhaps, spend time at the port with friends and test the many kebab stores, then visit the rest of France according to what you prefer.

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

On campus, for exchange students, in French, almost none.

Off campus, a possibility as English is an asset, though must be very competent in French

What volunteer or internship opportunities were there for students?

For exchange students, none that I saw, I tried to add an academic internship to my courses officially and

was told eventually by the vice-president of the university that it was not allowed.

5 things to take to your host country or region

1	Power Adapter(s) + Multi-plug depending on how many things you normally plug in.
2	Laptop (or buy one once you arrive)
3	Camera (cellphone perhaps)
4	
5	

Other than these I found that nothing was particularly indispensable or otherwise that they are things that are too difficult to transport and must essentially be bought in France.

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

1	Change the language of all your devices into French to 'immerse' yourself better.
2	Search and join all the FB groups for international students or students study the same subjects
3	Be sure to research all activities for international students and cultural exchange, especially during the first few weeks and use this to start a friend base and meet many people which will ease the transition somewhat.
4	Don't be afraid to get involved, if it's daunting at first, getting involved in anything is the best way to start habituating.
5	Explore. The city. Yourself. Life and culture.

Top 5 Things to do

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

1	Ile de Ré
2	Activities, language cafes, sport.
3	The rest of France
4	Have a family meal (or 5) at a french friend's home.
5	

H: Personal Experience

Please write one paragraph about your exchange experience. Plus, don't forget to submit some photos to

the exchange office!!

Stories and snippets about my exchange experience are spread through this document to provide context to various answers, and lacking a more specific question I wouldn't have the slightest idea where to begin or where to stop, and certainly not how to limit myself to one paragraph. However, what I can say, is that my year abroad has been one of my best, and one of the few where I learnt as much about myself. Experiencing essentially equivalent things through such a different context, and learning to adapt to the slightly different way things work from administration to day to day life, one develops an appreciation for the subtler aspects of things and the common week 4-5 sentiments of solitude after such a move are apt for introspection. I feel that this experience has grounded me in some respects, teaching me as much about myself as my studies and I shall cherish that.

