

Vic OE Evaluation Form

PLEASE TYPE THIS EVALUATION FORM & EMAIL IT TO VIC OE AS A WORD DOCUMENT

A: Student Information

VUW degree(s)	Bachelor of Arts
Major(s)	Spanish, International Relations
Exchange Institution	Universidad de Oviedo
VUW Tri & Year of Exchange	Tri 2 2013 to Tri 1 2014

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	\$100-\$150 approx.
Accommodation	\$3500-\$4000+ depending on flat and expenses included
Return Airfare	\$1200.00 approx. depending on date of purchase and airline
Local Transportation	N/A lived in city center; \$2.00 to use inner city bus
Meals	\$50+ per month
Visa	\$90-\$100
Health & Insurance	\$1100.00 approx.
Personal Spending	\$100+ per month
Communications (phone, etc.)	\$20+ per month
Other fees (specify)	Visa extension/application for foreigner's identification card: \$30
What unexpected costs did you encounter? What items were more or less than expected?	Unexpected costs: buying more passport photos and costs related to my visa Accommodation is cheaper and also includes more (electricity, internet, water all included depending on flat; everything is furnished) Food was about the same, maybe slightly cheaper

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

I had expected that I would get by with just my student allowance and loan, and that was exactly what happened. The grants from VILP and VicOE that I received at the start of my exchange were necessary to set myself up in Oviedo (get accommodation, etc.) My expenses would mostly directed at buying food, paying for my accommodation, buying university materials (books and photocopying), and going on trips (field trips and student trips organized by international student organizations) around Spain; I did not really buy much of anything else.

By what means did you maintain your finances? What would you recommend? (Credit card, foreign bank

account, travelers checks, etc)?

Nearly all of the exchange students that I knew opened up Spanish bank accounts (these students were European students anyway), but I decided not to do that and instead I got the ANZ Cash Passport Card which already had euros loaded onto it and other currencies as well if I needed to (good when you're in transit at a foreign airport). Every week I would transfer my student allowance/loan payments onto the card or money that my parents would send me, ANZ only charged me \$1 to load money on and I wouldn't get charged fees for taking money out or paying for things with the card. This was really convenient for me and simple to use. Opening up a bank account over there would have become one extra thing that I had to worry about.

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

I would recommend that future students use their money to buy/invest in things that are worthwhile: for example, instead of going to a cheap clothing shop and buying a whole new wardrobe or lots of material things, why not invest that money to go on a trip around the country? Or, if not trips, ensure that you eat well/stay healthy or invest in learning about your host country (attending different courses/activities, etc.)

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

A can of Coke I believe was more or less the same price, if not slightly more. Coffee on the other hand was much cheaper (the cheapest coffee I found was at the campus cafeteria which was just under \$2. Having said that, it wasn't good coffee, so if you want good coffee, then expect to pay what you would normally pay in NZ and also go to larger cities.

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 did have to apply for a visa, but it wasn't extremely difficult to apply for. I had to email the Spanish embassy in Wellington about applying for the student visa. They then sent me the necessary documentation that I needed to fill out, as well as a list of other documents that I needed to provide them. This included: photocopy of my travel document (passport), proof of accommodation and enrolment details at host university (this came with my host university's acceptance letter), proof of funds to live in Spain (copy of bank account balance), medical certificate, criminal record/police clearance certificate, copy of insurance policy certificate, the visa application form and a passport-sized photograph. I also had to pay a fee of around \$80-\$90.

From what I can remember, I received my visa a week earlier than I had expected, which was a month, but I don't recommend taking chances and sending the application late.

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

I would also note that with regards to the proof of funds, if you let the embassy know that you will be receiving a student loan and/or allowance plus the Vic OE and/or VILP grants, they will take these into account so you won't have delays with receiving your visa (seeming as you only receive these payments 3 weeks AFTER you arrive in your host country and that is the time period when you need money most!).

Furthermore, if you are a student applying for an exchange to a Spanish university for two semesters, then your visa application becomes a little bit more complicated. Students staying for more than 180 days must apply within a month of being in the country for a foreigner's identification card which will eventually replace your visa in your passport (this is because the Spanish embassy in Wellington will only issue you a 3-month visa, and will tell you to apply for this identification card). Although I was aware of this, the Embassy did not inform me of the other steps that I had to take in order to get this identification card, which I only found out through the university's international affairs office. This included getting a certificate of registration as proof

of living in the host city (Certificado de Empadronamiento), which I needed to apply for after having found a flat as well as copies of my passport, more passport photos, travel insurance details and another fee that I had to pay (this cost me approximately \$28-\$29) via bank deposit in person. I think it would have been better if the embassy had informed me about all this before leaving so that I was prepared, rather than worrying about it when I arrived amidst doing other things to get settled into my life in Oviedo.

So, be aware that the visa will cost a bit more than you expect, especially if you are staying for than half a year, and that you get the identification card and complete all the necessary steps with the right documentation. Remember, if you have problems, ask Spanish friends to help you by coming with you to the police station and city council to get the visa procedure finalized.

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?

From what I can recall, the university did not talk to me about any kind of insurance.

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

I went around various insurance companies before I left, and I got one year's comprehensive travel insurance from AA, which was fine with a \$100 excess. I thought this insurance was good and the most comprehensive, which I believe is paramount. Make sure that you have unlimited medical cover, but that if you decide to, for example, hire a car or do outdoor recreation, such as skiing or snowboarding, that you are covered for those as well.

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 2/2013					
Geography of Asturias	SPANISH	GEO313	20	4-5	Required some knowledge of Asturias, but a lot was learnt throughout the course; interesting field trips; course with PowerPoint presentations.
(Physical) Geography of Spain	SPANISH	GEO313	20	5	Difficult course; prior knowledge of physical geography necessary; complex terminology; interesting field trips;

					PowerPoint presentations but presentation of class content was rushed due to so much information to cover in class.
Contemporary History of Spain	SPANISH	SPAN113 and beyond	20	5	Required quite a lot of prior and in-depth knowledge of Spanish history; class was quite often unorganized due to lecturer and student strikes; no PowerPoint presentations and class content was presented through lecturer dictating and students writing; little time for student discussion during class.
Spain and the Present World	SPANISH	SPAN113 and beyond	20	5	Also required a lot of prior and in-depth knowledge of Spanish history; class quite unorganized due to lecturer and student strikes; teaching style mainly consisted of lecturer dictating and writing down; no PowerPoint presentations; little student discussion during class time.
Spanish Readings: Texts and	SPANISH	SPAN213	20	4-5	A lot of reading required to pass course (books and

Contexts					extracts); lecturer often quite hard to follow (only talked and would often become sidetracked within his own conversation); lecturer would not write anything apart from names of foreign authors on the blackboard; lectures often dull; no PowerPoint presentations.
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VUW Trimester 1/2014

Urban Geography	SPANISH	GEO216	20	2-3	Interesting course, but less content compared to Victoria course; often there were holdups in class due to the conduct of the lecturer (would begin to unnecessarily argue with students while rest of class had to wait); interesting field trips (within Spain only, and mostly within the host province); practice work in class was relatively easy.
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(Urban) Geography of Spain	SPANISH	GEO216/GEO313	20	2-3	Interesting course with content based on history of Spanish urban settlements, their development and external influences; Practice work was rather easy
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					(colouring in areas of urban plans, identifying certain buildings in urban plans, writing an historical report about urban development of city visited on field trip); interesting field trips. Professor was not very organized (we would have to wait for him to look for images of Spanish cities on Google, when ideally he could have prepared them beforehand and not waste class time).
Modern and Contemporary History of Ibero-America	SPANISH	SPAN113 and beyond	20	5	Interesting content of class, but was a last-year course and course content was ridiculously crammed into 1 month of class. For the rest of the trimester, the Spanish students had to complete practice work in other learning institutions; this was not known to me and the other international students until halfway through the trimester, when it was too late for course changes. Unorganized as professor was on leave from the very beginning of class (we had to wait for a substitute to be found

					during the trimester, not before the trimester started). Class often hard to follow as substitute professor dictated information; little student contribution; required a lot of prior knowledge of Spanish history. No visual material (PowerPoints, etc.)
Past and Present of Spanish in the World	SPANISH	SPAN213 and beyond	20	2-3	Interesting sociolinguistics course about varieties of Spanish throughout the world, their history and development of the language. Two professors taking the course. At times unorganized due to sudden changes in trimester structure and too much content to cover. One professor would sometimes become distracted with other topics that were only slightly related to the course content.
Hispano-American Literature (16 th – 19 th Centuries)	SPANISH	SPAN113 and beyond	20	4-5	Could not attend most of the classes of this course due to course clash with Urban Geography. Interesting content but too much to cover during the trimester. No visual material.

					Professor dictated while students wrote information. Seminars allowed for student discussion of material, but clash prevented me from attending them. Content similar to SPAN113, but with many more texts.
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Course Registration/Enrolment

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

The registration process at Oviedo was hectic and unorganized. International students had to first enroll through the International Affairs office and then present themselves to the International Student coordinator at the campus, and then to the secretaries to finalize courses. I had to change my courses twice due to not taking into account which trimester they were available in (ended up with 3 in the first trimester and then 7 in the other) and possible clashes with other subjects. The secretaries in the campus office did not speak English, which made things difficult to organize properly and quickly, especially if the student's level of Spanish is of a beginner's level, or has not been utilized on an everyday basis. The process was also slow and I had to go back and forth many times. Not all of the secretaries attended to the international students (1-2 secretaries for the international student population on the humanities campus, which amounted to between 50-100+ students). Fortunately, I got help from the International Student coordinator on campus, and in the end sorted out my courses and enrolment.

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 more or less successful in registering and enrolling in my courses, but I definitely believe that this process could have been done in a quicker and more efficient way. I recommend to future exchange students at Oviedo to choose their courses very carefully. They need to become very familiar with the course outlines and the content offered on the website, and to make inquiries by email at the chosen campus before going to Spain about the current course offers (I found that the website alone was hard to navigate and quite confusing, with out-of-date information regarding courses and the enrolment process). Make sure that each trimester has the correct amount of courses and no clashes. Make sure that you know what paperwork is required for the registration process, and try to get it done as soon as possible so that you don't have future problems, as this can sour your exchange experience.

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

This would include everything that I have previously mentioned regarding the registration/enrolment process. I would also mention that if your Spanish is a bit rusty, and you are just plain confused about the whole process (which I was indeed), then it is a good idea to team up with another exchange student or get a Spanish student to accompany you and help you with communication, as the secretaries are unfortunately

not bilingual, when ideally they should be when dealing with international students (at least in English). Preferably team up with an exchange student who would study similar subjects, and even better if they are from New Zealand as well (the registration process is slightly different for ERASMUS/European exchange students). Do enquire at your chosen campus about the subjects offered and make sure that the course information is up to date before you go on your exchange, so that the registration/enrolment process is smoother and with less hassle.

Academic Experience

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

My academic experience at Oviedo was certainly different in comparison to my experience so far at Victoria in a variety of ways. With regards to my prior expectations of my academic experience in Oviedo, I believe that what I had experienced to some extent had failed my expectations. I had thought that the running of the university was going to be considerably more organized, and that university life and the institution itself were going to be taken more seriously. This, as I had found out, was a big failure, and I believe that it had a lot to do with the current financial crisis, which has affected Spain terribly in all areas of society and in all ways of life. The university, in particular the Humanities campus which I had studied at, was lifeless. I had met many Spanish students who merely attended university because they were unable to do anything else: they had no immediately-available, reasonably paid work opportunities to apply for, as there were no work opportunities; they also could not leave the country in order to find work, as they had no money. They therefore attended university, hurriedly choosing courses after finishing high school, that they were not entirely passionate about, to find out in their 2nd or 3rd year that they regretted having entered into university to study their chosen courses.

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?

I found that the teaching style at Oviedo was rather inefficient, antiquated, and unorganized. Due to the teaching style structured this way, if I had the chance to return to Oviedo to complete the rest of my studies, I would turn down the opportunity. Again, I don't want to sound overly critical, as I believe that the financial crisis and the Spanish government's own policies regarding education had a lot to do with this. For example, there is no retirement age for teachers or professors: they can keep teaching until they die. While this makes sense with respect to the crisis and the idea of keeping as many people employed as possible, there is a downside: little turnover in professors and other teaching staff results in the course curriculum remaining the same year after year, in some cases up to 20 years. There are no fresh and innovative ideas being introduced to the courses each year, as professors and directors on campus seek to maintain the status quo, as it is easier and economically safe in the short term. Furthermore, I didn't see any system of evaluation for both the course and the professor. I had heard from Spanish students in my classes that appealing for a course overview was discouraged by both professors and the campus directors. This, of all things, I could not believe. Such reluctance towards changing and improving course structure and content gave me the impression that the university (in this case, the Humanities campus, and moreover, within the schools of Geography, Spanish Philology and History), was structured to serve the staff working there, rather than the very students that

attended it.

During the 1st trimester, I had two history papers, Spanish Contemporary History and Spain and the Present World, which were both taught by the same professor. This guy had obviously been teaching at the university for more than 20 years, but it was made very clear that he did not get along well with the directors of the Humanities campus. Often he would turn up late for class and would begin by complaining about his relation with campus directors before teaching. One day, he turned up to class half an hour late, and for the remaining half-hour, he complained to the class about his troubles with the Humanities B.O.D. Half-way through the 1st trimester, this professor disappeared. He did not turn up to class for a few weeks. I was told by the Spanish students that this particular professor was notorious for disappearing and not turning up to teach. After a few weeks without class we were signed up with a guy who wasn't exactly a professor but more a campus researcher. He didn't know what we had been learning about in class, and so he provided us with some practice work that wasn't worth anything for the final exam. We later found that the final exam would be administered by the professor that disappeared, and that there would be the possibility that the exam would contain content that we had not studied with him. The exams in Spain usually count for a higher percentage towards the final grade; these two exams would be worth 80% each. In the end, I decided not to sit the two exams, as I thought that it would most unlikely that I would pass. This was because of being penalized by 1) not being a native speaker and, 2) having to put up with the rebel professor who was interested in his own needs rather than the academic needs of his own students. Overall, I did learn a lot in his classes, but the way that the class was conducted definitely soured my academic experience.

Regarding the workload that I had for both trimesters, I could say that the compulsory workload of 5 papers per trimester was quite a lot of work, perhaps even too much at times. I would suggest taking 4 papers per trimester. When compared to studying at VUW, it would seem crazy to try and complete 5 papers per trimester, even 4 papers in my opinion is pushing it. You cannot dedicate enough time to each paper, and therefore it is difficult to achieve an average, let alone an above-average grade.

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?

As I had written above, I would recommend that exchange students at the Universidad de Oviedo enroll in a maximum of 4 papers per trimester.

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

I would say that it is necessary to remind yourself regularly that you are not studying at your home university. It will take a certain amount of time to grow accustomed to a new university system, accompanied by a new studying routine, on top of a new way of life. This adaptation develops slowly, and the amount of time it takes to get used to everything is exclusive to how you are as a person. Each exchange is an individual experience; no two exchanges are the same. Some may find it easier to assimilate into their new way of life, and therefore may appear to be more ahead when it comes to study. Others, on the other hand, may take longer to adapt to their new life, but over the exchange period will also accept their new way of living and studying, or alternatively, some will refuse it all together. This depends entirely on you, and there is nothing wrong with taking extra time.

I would also mention that you should not compare yourself to the other exchange students that you meet; the exchange is a personal experience. You will find that most of the other exchange students that you meet in Oviedo are from other countries in Europe. How they would study back home would have more similarities to the Spanish system, than our own one. Continue to focus on how you are doing, and worry about yourself when it comes to your assignments, but do not hesitate to ask your professors for help.

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

The computer facilities, library and internet access was another area which disappointed me, while studying in Oviedo. I found these facilities to be rather out of date and inefficient. The computer lab, which was one room inside the old military academy building, was huge, despite the fact that there weren't many computers inside. Furthermore, the lab didn't appear to be used a lot by the students.

Photocopying was also a slow process. There were only two photocopiers for the whole campus that the students could use, and unfortunately there wasn't the 'follow-me' system, allowing a student to print something off via a computer in the computer lab, and print it off themselves by using the photocopier somewhere else with a wireless connection. Instead, there was one photocopy room, where two ladies worked. They processed all of the photocopying for the students daily. This was slow, and everyday there were long lines of students and teaching staff outside of the photocopying room. Often the teaching staff were slow to provide the photocopying room with the course material that was needed by the students for class, and so students would have to wait a whole day or more to access that material, instead of being able to get it photocopied directly before or after class.

The library was used more than the computer lab, but didn't seem to update its material often, due to a lack of funds. Many books were falling apart and were out of date, despite these books being part of the course reading requirements for numerous subjects. The library also had a couple of computers, which were used to search for books, but the system was slow and at times convoluted. The library issuing system was also old-fashioned, and the student ID card that I had received to issue books didn't work, and so I was given a paper slip with the due date for the book each time after issuing. This was often lost and I ended up having some problems with returning books in late because I had not been explained how the library system worked during the international student orientation.

The internet access on campus was okay, although it wasn't available throughout all areas of the campus and was most often a weak connection. From what I can remember, it was available in the cafeteria, in some parts of the departmental building (the old military academy building), and the common areas inside the other buildings with classrooms.

Depending on the subject, I found that the internet was heavily underutilized, with more emphasis given to obtaining information for research from the out of date books in the library. In addition, the university's version of Blackboard, called Campus Virtual, was also underutilized. Professors who weren't very tech savvy, did not use it at all to upload course content or to collect assignments, while other professors only partially used it. One of my geography professors from trimester 1 uploaded course material and the PowerPoint presentations onto his personal website, rather than through Campus Virtual.

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?

Before leaving for Spain, my confidence in my Spanish was not as high as it had been, and so upon arriving

into Oviedo, I signed up for a one-month intensive Spanish course. This, in the end for turned out to be a waste of time and money, and after a few classes, I dropped the course all together, as the course wasn't as intensive as I had expected it to be. To start with, the class sizes were very big: I was put into the top class, and there were around 40 of us in that class. Secondly, despite having to attend the course every weekday for 2 hours, there was little contribution from the students; mainly we read out passages from the work sheets that we were required to photocopy for each class. Having said this, another student in the future, who has very little confidence in their Spanish-language skills, might want to spend some time refreshing these skills in an intensive course. On the other hand, as I found SPAN 315 at VUW easy, this intensive course covered very much the same material, if not material that was even easier. In my opinion, the best intensive course in improving one's Spanish is being completely immersed in an environment which surrounds you in the language. Not being able to escape it is the most effective tool for improvement.

E: Accommodation

What form of accommodation did you stay in?

Throughout my time in Oviedo, I lived in a flat very close to the center of the city. I flatted with 2 other exchange students from Germany and France, and a Spanish girl from the city of León.

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

I found that the biggest pro relating to flatting that it was rather cheap, in comparison to flatting in New Zealand. I paid on a monthly basis 185€ (approx. \$280, exchange rate depending), and this included water and internet expenses. On top of that, I paid every two months the bill for gas and electricity, which, split between the four of us, amounted to approximately 35-40€ (\$55-\$65, exchange rate depending). The gas and electricity was already set up, along with the water and internet, and so there was no need to choose an energy/phone/water company before moving in. The expenses I paid into my landlord's account each month via bank account deposit in person, but payment options could be different depending on the landlord. The prices of flats in Oviedo (and I imagine the rest of Spain), had dropped, and this was consequently due to the financial crisis. As well as the bills being cheap, the flat was a bit old-fashioned, but fully furnished, and so there was no need to worry about having to buy extra things, unless I wanted to. My flat was based in the city center: 10min walking to university, plus 10min walking to the old part of town. There were plenty of supermarkets around: in fact, every 150m I would come across one. This was also the same for pharmacies and other shops. My landlord was easy-going and not controlling. She would always let us know when she would be coming to the flat, and there were no hassles regarding the rent or expense payments.

I can't really think of any cons, apart from those that depended on my personal taste. I didn't get along really well with the Spanish girl that I lived with, as I found her to be quite cold towards me. Also, the idea that the whole flat was already furnished, made me feel not entirely 'at home', so to speak: for example, I didn't really use the living room, as it didn't feel homely. But these cons depend purely on personal taste and so I can't say that they would occur in another flat environment.

What accommodation would you recommend to future students?

Personally, I would recommend flatting, over the other types of accommodation available in Oviedo. I had heard from my French flat mate about her experience living with a family, and it didn't sound enjoyable. I also had an experience living with a host family on my previous exchange to Argentina, and so I was looking

for something different. Living in the university residence would have been a problem as it was located on another campus entirely, not close to where I was going to be studying. I was also used to living in a university residence while studying at Vic, and so again, I wanted a different experience. Flatting is easy and appealing as it is considerably cheaper than flatting in Wellington. On top of that, there's a lot more freedom: no curfews to abide by, which you would have to deal with while living with a host family, and, to some extent at a university residence. You are in charge of yourself and how you live.

How early can you move into accommodation?

This depends on the student, and the amount of time that a student takes to look for a flat, as well as what characteristics they want the flat to have. I arrived into Oviedo and stayed in a hotel room for a week, and it wasn't until near the end of the week that I started looking around for flats. I had checked out a few, the first one being offered by my future German flat mate, and the rest just to make sure that I wasn't making a stupid decision by picking the first one. I later became impatient as I wanted to move outside of the hotel room as soon as possible, and decided to stay with my German friend. This, in the end, didn't turn out to be a bad decision.

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

As I lived in a flat, I bought my own food and cooked for myself, which I didn't mind. During the first trimester, I had shared food with my German flat mate, but at the beginning of the second trimester, she decided she didn't want to do that anymore, and so we began buying our food separately. I had the intention of feeding myself well while living in a flat, and would often spend a few hours in the kitchen per day just preparing my food, as I enjoyed cooking. I would sometimes try to make something special and try different recipes if I had time. Quite often I would prepare food that would last me a few days, which I would eat for lunch and dinner on alternate days. At times, I would eat with my French flat mate, but we would cook separate meals. I had also eaten at the university residence once, and the food was boring, which was what I had imagined.

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

Finding a flat was easy to find, but then again it's always best to start looking immediately, which was what I didn't do. When I visited the university's international office, they had a list of flats available: some offered full catering and some didn't, as well as some offering all expenses included and some not. The list wasn't the only available source to finding flats: a good website, www.pisocompartido.com, has also a lot of flats listed. If there is a flat that offers flat cleaning, this initially sounds like a good idea, but on the other hand, it is used as a form of control by the landlord to keep an eye on the tenants. At times, the person who cleans the flat often turns up unexpectedly to surprise the tenants. These flats also tend to have specific rules set out, which you would find out about upon checking the flat out. But in the end, with these rules in place, you never feel that your flat is your own space. Personally, I would prefer to not have my landlord turn up when they feel like it without letting me know in advance, as the flat is my personal living space, and not my landlord's. Regarding the cleaning, if you consider yourself a tidy person, don't bother with flats that offer this service. The rules, on the other hand, end up restricting your freedom of living in the flat.

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

Here, I would just reiterate the above points. It might also be a good idea to arrive into the city earlier before the orientation week (one of my friends from Austria arrived a month early just to get settled into her flat), so that you don't have to worry about searching for a flat and miss out on the orientation activities. Apart from that, make sure that you check out a number of different flats before you make a final decision. When you are near to moving out of the flat, make sure that all flat mates help to clean up a part of the flat, and so if you are the last one leaving the flat, that you don't end up being the one to clean up the whole flat. It is also a good idea to check in with your landlord and ask if your other flat mates have paid their part of the expenses. Some international students that I knew had some of their flat mates (also international students) leave the flat without paying some of their expenses. Finally, make sure that you sign a contract: this is crucial as not all landlords do this, so don't pick a flat that doesn't offer a contract. I knew international students in Oviedo that were exploited and were not given back their deposit money at the end of their tenancy.

F: Personal & Cultural Connections

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

I did not make many good friends with the Spanish students in my classes. In comparison to my exchange experience in Argentina, I found the Spanish people from Oviedo to be more reserved and not very open to meeting new people. As I had anticipated them to be similar to the Argentine people, lively and curious about foreigners, this came as a bit of a shock. The class sizes were small, and the students in my classes were very used to their own cliques of friends: consequently at the beginning, the students considered me as an outsider. On the other hand, depending on the course, some students were more used to being around international students, while some students in other classes were not (this was the case in my Spanish Philology classes, where there were usually around 10+ international students, compared to my Geography classes where I was the only international student). Having said this, this did not make them more open to communicating with and befriending the international students. I became good friends with a couple in each class who I talked to on a regular basis, but then the rest of the class would not really talk with me.

It had happened to me once in one of my Geography classes that I overheard two students talking about me in class. They did not bother to go up to me and ask me where I was from, immediately assuming that I was incapable of speaking Spanish. It wasn't until I had caught their attention by looking at them and saying that I was from New Zealand, did they start to acknowledge my presence. All in all, I spent more time associating with international students rather than Spanish students, as I could relate better to them.

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

At times, due to the inefficiency, disorganization, and antiquatedness of the university system, I initially found it quite difficult. In fact, I couldn't understand how the university could be run in such a way; it didn't seem to make sense in my mind. The adjustment process was definitely slow, as over time minute differences began to appear, and these caused the frustration. I found that I spent quite a bit of time disagreeing with the system during the first semester, but then throughout the second semester, I realized that I just had to accept the differences and make the most of my time in Oviedo. I needed the first semester to get used to everything, to get comfortable, and then later, in the second semester, I was able to focus more on university work, as I was more familiarized with the system by that time.

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

Siesta time was, and still is, a cultural difference that I don't agree with. This is when all shops, apart from supermarkets, close their doors for a few hours during the afternoon, mainly between the hours of 12pm and 5pm, sometimes later. People at this time go home to have lunch, and then sleep for a few hours, and so generally there are very few people in the street. Coming from a country where siesta doesn't exist, I struggled to accept it. I disagree with sleeping during the day. I think it's a waste of time. Period. Not only that, each store has its own timetable for siesta, meaning that not all stores close and open at the same time. The idea is to do all of your shopping before 12pm (or 1pm at the latest), and then find something else to occupy your time up until 5pm. On the upside, if you had a crap sleep the night before and had a class at 8 or 9am, then, naturally, this is a great time to catch up on sleep. To future exchange students, I would say embrace it, or if not, use the time to just do uni work or wind down, class time table depending.

What parts of the culture did you most appreciate?

One thing that I deeply loved about Spanish culture was their very long and very interesting history. On the various trips organized by my classes and the International Student Organizations, I was able to step inside different periods of time, whether it was walking through the Alhambra in Granada, following a guide through the replica of the Neolithic Cave in Altamira, or simply walking through the 'casco antiguo' of Oviedo by day or night. I also loved Spanish food. Each province has its own special dish (in Asturias, it is the 'fabada', which is a hearty (and heavy) bean stew served with pieces of chorizo sausage, 'morcilla' or blood sausage, and cured ham), as well as their own special take on a particular drink (Asturias is cider country, but it is not like cider that you would normally drink at home, and it also has its own special way of being poured into a glass).

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

I was treated fine by local people, and I never had any problems after I initially got used to living in Oviedo. After having finally enrolled at the university, I got along fine with the university staff. Although I did have some problems at the campus library, they were mainly due to me not having been explained important information about the library system by the library staff. I think that after those misunderstandings, the library decided to advertise the penalties for handing books in late better. With the students, as I had explained earlier, most of them didn't take much notice of me, but apart from that I didn't have any troubles with the Spanish students.

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?

All of the buildings on the Humanities campus are constructed with ramps and there are elevators as well in each building. Apart from the obvious problems associated with entering into the campus buildings, I don't think that any student with disabilities would have trouble attending the Humanities campus.

Regarding students of different sexual preferences, I don't think there would be any problems whilst attending university here in Oviedo. However, it becomes a bit trickier outside of university life. I say this because of what I had heard from my exchange partner from Oviedo who is currently studying at Victoria.

Spanish people, although having approved same-sex marriage years before New Zealand did, still regard homosexuality as slightly strange, particularly in areas that are not so cosmopolitan (Oviedo is not so cosmopolitan like Madrid or Barcelona would be). My exchange partner had told me of being given funny looks and hurtful remarks when she would hold hands with her partner or kiss her in public places. I would also mention that the university does not have any recognized students' association like Victoria's UniQ on campus, and so, LGBT relationships follow a sort of 'don't ask, don't tell' policy. Despite this, I believe that it is necessary to have more recognition for the LGBT student community on campus and in the city of Oviedo, and so I applaud any student that travels to challenge the current mindset regarding treatment of the LGBT community in their host country.

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

Fortunately, I did not have any issues regarding discrimination in Oviedo, or any other place that I travelled through in Spain.

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 in Oviedo has a sports club and gym that you can sign up for to attend classes or play team sports. In order to attend the hiking excursions, you have to be a member of the university sports club. I would definitely recommend doing the hiking excursions (be prepared for waking up on Saturday morning, as the group always leaves at 8:30am). This is a group comprised of local students, international students and middle-aged and older local hiking enthusiasts. Really good fun!

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

As I wrote before, the hiking excursions are a must. I would also recommend going on the trips organized by the international student associations. Hiring a car if you've got your driver's license and doing little day trips to other provinces is another great idea.

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

I don't think there were many opportunities to work on-campus, although I do believe that there was a service that aimed to organize employment for students. Unfortunately, due to the financial crisis, such opportunities would be very slim. This would also be the same for off-campus work. However, there were opportunities for international students to teach English or other foreign languages in an informal one-on-one setting, or to work as an assistant at a primary school.

What volunteer or internship opportunities were there for students?

I didn't see many volunteer or internship opportunities advertised for the students. Upon completing the last year at university, the domestic students are required to do practice work in various institutions, whether

they be schools or research centers. There was also the possibility of becoming a volunteer for the international student organizations, such as AEGEE or ESN, which would lead to the students completing an Erasmus exchange in another EU country.

5 things to take to your host country or region

1	Passport photos when completing the rest of the visa application and for the professors at the university (for each course that you take you have to fill in a 'ficha', which is a piece a paper with your details that is kept by the teaching staff – this is because they call the roll as attendance counts as part of the final grade).
2	Adaptors for charging your electronic devices (buying them overseas is more expensive)
3	A raincoat (or you can buy an umbrella) as it rains a lot in Asturias
4	Hiking gear if you're into doing any tramping routes
5	An appetite! The Spanish love to eat good food, and so you must be prepared to indulge in the different dishes that Spain has to offer. Go to Tierrastur (written below), and also enjoy a <i>cachopo</i> at the Mesón Casa Pedro!

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

1	Make yourself known to the Spanish students in your class. People from Asturias are more reserved and less open to new people, and so won't really go out of their way to introduce themselves to you. Don't be intimidated by the cliques of students in your classes!
2	Ask for information about how the university services work: for example, the library system at the university in Oviedo is totally different when compared to VUW (it's more old-fashioned), and sometimes this information is not communicated to the international students well.
3	Be prepared for student strikes, late professors, and delays regarding timetables and finding substitute professors. If these problems persist, try and change your courses ASAP, as there are deadlines for course changes. If you choose 4 th year courses in the second trimester, the domestic students will have practice work in the second half of the trimester, which is of no use to international students and so you will be stuck with a subject that you cannot cross-credit well.
4	Ask your fellow students for help with class work: it is difficult completing work when you have no idea how to complete it. You also won't know what standard of work is required of you and where you can find information in order to complete the work. Asking your classmates for help is a great way to start, as well as communicating with your professor. In some cases, the professor may have a separate assessment for international students.
5	Know the difference between <i>ordinaria</i> and <i>extraordinaria</i> exams. There are two timetables for the exams at the university the <i>ordinaria</i> being the normal, first set of exams. The <i>extraordinaria</i> set of exams are taken if you do not have enough time to study for all of your exams and complete your class assignments on time. In the <i>extraordinaria</i> set of exams, you can choose to take your exam later whilst you finish your assignment by the usual due-by-date. This helps a lot if you want to give yourself more time to complete your work and still have enough time to study (international students need this, as they are penalized by studying in a foreign language, and also being unfamiliar with the university system). You can apply for taking exams in the <i>extraordinaria</i> and also apply for your visa to expire after the <i>extraordinaria</i> exam period, rather than after the <i>ordinaria</i> set of exams.

Top 5 Things to do

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

1	Pick subjects that offer field trips – If you study Geography or any other science, field trips are a great opportunity to see parts of the country that you wouldn't really see on the trips organized by the student associations.
2	Watch free movies at the Teatro Filarmónica – every month, this theatre offers free movie/documentary sessions once or a couple of times a week. Great if you hate the movies at the cinemas being dubbed in Spanish, as movies are NOT shown with subtitles. Also, the Humanities campus offers free screenings of foreign, classic, and alternative movies every week, once or a few times a week, with subtitles. Check out https://www.facebook.com/auladecine.uniovi for the weekly movie timetable and pre-movie and post-movie discussion.
3	Go hiking! Every two weeks, the University's hiking team organizes trips of varying levels around Asturias. This is a great opportunity to get out of the city and explore some beautiful parts of the province.
4	If you've got your driver's license, rent a car and go on road trips with your fellow international students. This is a great idea if you've got no class on a Monday or Friday!
5	Check out all the local festivals, fairs and celebrations in Asturias. During the month of September, there is a week of celebrations dedicated to the patron saint of Asturias: San Matéo. Make sure not to miss this out! They also have a big fireworks display in Parque de Invierno (Winter Park). There is also the famous Carnival, where you can dress up and hit the old part of town for a night of fun with friends until morning. There are also plenty of other festivals dedicated to Asturian culture and cuisine, whether it is for <i>sidra</i> (cider), <i>quesu</i> (cheese), traditional dancing, music, and clothing, among other things. A must is to go with a group of friends to the <i>espiche</i> held every Thursday at the well-known Asturian restaurant, Tierrastur, which specialises in delicious local dishes.

H: Personal Experience

In Oviedo, Spain, I created a new life full of both positive and negative experiences. Both sets of experiences were eye-opening and mind-changing. Studying in Oviedo certainly made me change my idea of what a university should be like, as well as how it should function. Consequently, I was forced to take my mind out of VUW for 10 months and bring it to where I was going to be physically present, in Oviedo. I knew that it was going to be difficult getting used to everything, but the act of saying that will always be totally different compared to living that difficulty, and trying to find a solution that would help me adapt to the difficulty. This mental transition also applies to everything else outside of university life. If your wellbeing is not 100%, how can you expect yourself to perform well in your studies? Looking back on all those moments when I thought that the system was ridiculous, I'm happy that I decided to make that extra effort to adapt myself to the situation. Although there are still things that I don't agree with, I now look at it as part of the challenge of the exchange; of becoming attuned to the rhythm of one's host country, and living one's life to that rhythm.

