

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)	Physics, Chemistry
Exchange Institution	Pennsylvania State University
VUW Tri & Year of Exchange	2015 Trimester 2

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	NZ\$500
Accommodation	Double traditional dorm room, NZ\$4300
Return Airfare	NZ\$1800 to NYC, \$350 for a one way flight to State College
Local Transportation	NZ\$100
Meals	Level 3 campus meal plan, NZ\$3300
Visa	NZ\$500
Health & Insurance	PSU Health insurance: NZ\$1800, Travel insurance NZ\$500
Personal Spending	
Communications (phone, etc.)	AT&T prepaid phone plan - NZ\$60 per month
Other fees (specify)	Temporary accommodation at PSU before semester: NZ\$250
What unexpected costs did you encounter? What items were more or less than expected?	

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

I ended up spending more than I had planned to. There were lots of sports events and concerts going on and I went to those. I was surprised at how expensive the football tickets were, usually between US\$40-70, depending on the game. I also underestimated the cost of travelling after the exchange.

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 PNC, who were recommended by the university, and transferred money with an international bank transfer. I paid the university bill with an online transfer from PNC, so I could avoid their 1.5% credit card fee. I also got a Visa card from PNC which was useful as some websites required a US billing address (particularly the Ticketmaster website for buying university sports and concert tickets).

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

Plan to spend more than just the travel and accommodation costs, because there's always events and sports games happening which are lots of fun, and add to the whole exchange experience.

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

A bottle of Pepsi cost US\$1.50, and a cup of black coffee cost US\$2

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 had to apply for a J1 visa, which wasn't too difficult, but was a pain. I had to send my details to Penn State and they mailed a DS160 form to me about a week later. I paid a US\$180 SEVIS fee and a NZ\$200 visa fee online to book my visa interview. The interviews are at the consulate in Auckland and the times were early in the morning. The actual interview wasn't even 5 minutes and they mailed my passport back when the visa was done.

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

Get it done sooner rather than later - I was lucky because I booked my interview before the global US visa application system went down for a few weeks.

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?

The government requires that you have health insurance while in the US. The university recommends the Aetna student health plan, and although there are other providers which offer cheaper plans, the university makes you apply for a waiver to use other insurance.

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

I got the university plan, just because it was easy. I used it once, and the visit to the student medical center was free. It still has a deductible and coinsurance, so going to the hospital isn't free. I also got Southern Cross travel insurance for the 6 months to cover travel before and after.

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/YEAR					
Earth 150: Dinosaur Extinctions and Other Controversies		SCIE 100 level	15	2	An interesting general education course about the history of life, dinosaurs, and the meteor that killed them.

					<p>The professor was very engaging and the material was pretty interesting.</p> <p>Assessment was a combination of in-class clicker questions (Buy your own clicker unfortunately) and multi-choice exams. Would definitely recommend</p>
Meteo 3: Introduction to Meteorology		ESCI 100 level	15	1	<p>Good gen-ed course, gave a basic introduction to weather. Covered some material on severe weather which was interesting. The lecturer was good although he insisted on using degrees Fahrenheit. Assessment was in class quizzes, weekly workbook exercises and 3 exams.</p>
Physics 457W: Experimental Physics		PHYS 300 level	15	3	<p>Senior level physics lab course. We did 3 two week experiments in the first part of semester and wrote reports on them. There was also a fourth 'long' experiment (6 weeks) with more interesting physics, which had a presentation and a report.</p> <p>Lab reports were quite a bit of work, but there wasn't a lot of new physics. It was a bit different having a class that was entirely lab though. Assessment was based on the lab reports</p>

					and presentations.
Physics 412: Solid state physics 1		PHYS309	15	4	Senior level solid state physics course. We covered most of the first half of the textbook Solid State Physics by Kittel. The format was pretty much the same as at Victoria, with 3 lectures a week. The professor was friendly and helpful. Assessment was based on 6 fortnightly Homework assignments, 2 exams and a small research project and presentation.

Course Registration/Enrolment

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

I looked up which courses would be available on the registrar website, then entered my choices on the PSU exchange office website. The advisors at PSU were really helpful if there were any issues.

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 got all of the courses I wanted the first time.

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

Take something different that isn't offered at Vic. Penn state has so many subjects, and most of them have courses aimed at first year/introductory level.

Academic Experience

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

It was pretty much what I expected. The semester is 15 weeks and I thought that the classes covered material a bit slower because of it. There was more weighting towards in-course assessment than exams, which was different to what I've done at Vic. Some classes also had pop quizzes and clicker questions which meant that you had to go to class.

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 thought that the teaching style was pretty much the same as VUW. The workload was also about the same

or less.

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?

I took 12 credits, which is a full-time student load, and thought that I had a reasonable workload. There was still time for attending events and having fun.

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

-more focus on internal assessment, some locals surprised by amount of exams at VUW

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

Really good, there is Wi-Fi internet almost everywhere on campus and computer labs in the residence commons and around campus. The library is also very big.

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?

NA

E: Accommodation

What form of accommodation did you stay in?

Traditional dorm room in Hamilton Hall in West

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

Living on campus is really convenient, it's easy and quick to get to class and it's close to downtown. It was nice not having to worry about cooking and dishes.

Having a roommate was a big change for me. Some people got along really well with theirs, but mine was a bit strange and wouldn't leave the room very much. You can't really know until you meet them in person. Having to use the shared bathrooms was also weird, although you kinda have to get used to it.

What accommodation would you recommend to future students?

I would recommend the dorms just because it's part of the 'college' experience.

How early can you move into accommodation?

After arriving in State College, we got put into temporary housing in East halls for a few days with all of the other new international students. We moved into the permanent dorms the Monday before classes started. The housing office charged a \$20 a night fee to stay in the dorms for the time before the housing contract started, which was a bit of a surprise.

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

I was actually quite surprised at the quality of the dining hall food. It was all buffet style and some of the dishes were pretty good. The giant tubs of Penn State Creamery ice cream were nice too, along with the freshly baked chocolate chip cookie. There are fast food chains in the Hub which accept meal points, although they are pretty expensive compared to the dining hall.

There's not really any cooking facilities beyond the microwaves in the dorm room.

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

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

I picked West halls because it's mainly 3rd and 4th year students. I think West also had the best food. The whole area is really traditional looking and the plaza in the middle was a nice place to relax and play Frisbee during the summer.

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 wasn't too hard. In the orientation, you get set up with the other exchange students and make friends with them pretty quickly. I made friends with some of the local students in my classes as well, this was probably a bit easier in the smaller classes than in the larger gen-ed classes I took. People were interested when they found out I'm from New Zealand, and I had lots of comments about the lord of the rings.

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

It is pretty much the same as home. I was surprised that it is actually similar to the movies.

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

What parts of the culture did you most appreciate?

Definitely the School spirit. It was so much fun to go to a football game with 107,000 other fans and joining in with all the chants and songs.

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

Everyone was really friendly, my professors were really nice when I didn't know things taught in their previous courses, and were interested in how physics is taught in NZ. Some people had a bit of trouble with the NZ accent.

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?

From what I saw, it wouldn't be very difficult. There's lots of programs and assistance available to students and I think that the university would provide a lot of support if it's needed. There's also lots of clubs which people could join to meet other people.

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

Nope

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 are so many clubs running at the university. There's an involvement fair at the start of the semester where all of the clubs show off what they do and try and get people to sign up. I actually joined the Squirrel club, where we would go out and feed the squirrels that run around campus. It was a good way of making new friends. I also joined the physics club, and I think that most academic departments have clubs run by students in them.

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

In the weekend, there's usually sports going on, which are fun to watch and to cheer on the team. There's also lots of social events in the apartments and houses around campus.

On some weekends, I went to see other cities - Philadelphia and Pittsburgh are only a couple of hours away, and New York is about 6. I went on a trip to Chicago over the thanksgiving break, which was great fun. Most of the local students leave during the breaks, so the campus gets really quiet.

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

Exchange students are able to work on campus, I know one exchange student who cooked in the dining hall.

What volunteer or internship opportunities were there for students?

There are lots of opportunities to volunteer, a lot of the clubs are based around volunteering. There's also THON, which raises money for cancer research.

Some of my classmates were working in research labs for experience, which may be an option for people.

5 things to take to your host country or region

1	New Zealand things – Whittakers chocolate, All Blacks stuff, NZ money
2	Clothes for both seasons
3	A good camera
4	More money than you thought you'd need
5	

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

1	Pick some courses for fun
2	Don't be afraid to ask people for help
3	Pretty much everything in America is bigger than back home
4	The Freshman fifteen pounds is real
5	Learn to love American style filter coffee – espresso drinks there are pretty disappointing

Top 5 Things to do

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

- | | |
|---|--|
| 1 | Go to a Football game and an Ice Hockey game |
| 2 | Have a giant creamery ice cream |
| 3 | Join some clubs |
| 4 | See one of the big concerts that go through the BJC (We had Paul McCartney and Zedd) |
| 5 | Get a photo at the Lion Shrine |

H: Personal Experience

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

Going on exchange to Penn State was one of the best things I did at uni. It was really great to be able to experience American college life, and I had so much fun. Everything about Penn state was so big compared to what I had seen before in NZ. There were almost always things happening around campus, and I felt really included in all of the school spirit. Going to the football games and cheering on the team with 107,000 others was amazing, and it was great to be able to see sports like baseball and ice hockey that we don't really have in NZ. I enjoyed celebrating the holidays like Halloween and thanksgiving too. The semester seemed like it went by so quickly, and I definitely would have considered spending a whole year there if I wasn't finishing. I made lots of amazing friends, both from Penn state, and the other exchange students. It was definitely a great way to finish my degree.

