

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

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
Accommodation	4400
Return Airfare	1820
Local Transportation	100
Meals	3000
Visa	500
Health & Insurance	2000
Personal Spending	2000
Communications (phone, etc.)	200
Other fees (specify)	
What unexpected costs did you encounter? What items were more or less than expected?	Food which wasn't covered by meal plan- eg fast food- was a lot more expensive in terms NZD than back home. A meal at McDonalds may cost around \$10-12 NZD. However a night on the town here is a lot cheaper, a beer at a bar may be as low as \$2.

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

I did end up spending more than anticipated, though mainly on optional travel, like over Thanksgiving and after the exchange had finished. Accommodation and food when traveling can be very expensive, especially in cities. However once you've paid for accommodation and meals in State College itself at the start of the year, your weekly expenses can be next to none.

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

I used a travel card and my NZ Debit card the whole time, which I would not recommend. At first I thought it was not worth the effort of setting up a US bank account but I think it would have made things quite a bit easier had I done so. However almost anything in the town itself can be bought with "Lioncash" which is

basically credit you load on your ID card which makes things pretty easy.

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

Consider a low level meal plan at first- it's easy to upgrade if you run out. I ate cereal I bought from the convenience store for breakfast every day and probably saved upwards of US \$150 doing so. Also buying from the A La Carte restaurants for lunch saves money over the buffet. Other than that you can survive off this meal plan so don't be put off the initial cost for it, it's not too expensive averaged over a semester.

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

Coke from a vending machine is usually around 75c to \$1 from a vending machine. Coffee in America is pretty average compared to back home in my opinion but you can usually get a pretty large cup for \$1-2 depending where you get it.

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?

The visa was a bit of a hassle to apply to as you have to go to Auckland to the US consulate to apply which costs a bit. It takes a long time and many steps to set up as the US is quite strict on that sort of thing. However it's fairly streamlined and mostly done online which makes it a bit easier. The interview itself was only about a minute so it's nothing to worry about. Including the plane tickets this ended up being quite expensive, probably around NZ \$400-500.

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

Book your appointment early. There's usually a big wait time for an interview and you want to book your plane tickets as soon as possible, which you shouldn't do before you get your visa.

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?

In America you need health insurance, no questions. It ended up costing around \$2000 for me, as I used the university recommended insurance. However one of the other exchange students managed to get an alternative program for much cheaper so I'd definitely recommend investigating that. It just needs to be approved by the university. Travel insurance is also a must in case you lose anything. Southern Cross covered the entire trip for around \$300 which wasn't too bad.

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

See above

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	VUW course	VUW	Rating (1-5)	Comments
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	Instruction	equivalent or elective	points/credits value		
VUW Trimester 1/YEAR					
VUW Trimester 2/YEAR					
Environmental Geology (GEOSC303)	English	ENVI 314/ENSC 301	15	3	A good course with a few fieldtrips- good way to see some of rural PA.
Advanced Seismology (GEOSC488)	English	ESCI302 GPHS 446	20	5	Lots of maths and advanced calculus, though a great instructor.
Hydrogeology (GEOSCI 452)	English	No equivalent	15	3	Lots of calculations and formulae but very interesting.
Forensic Geology (GEOSC 111)	English	No equivalent	15	1	An odd but fun course, investigating how geology can help solve crimes. Very easy course.

Course Registration/Enrolment

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

Course registration was simple and done online. Course changes were easy too, course drops could be done online and emailing professors was an effective way of getting into courses even if they appeared full.

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?

At first I only got in to three of the five courses I applied for- some classes are in hot demand. However if you email professors they often make allowances for a few extra students and there's always people who drop the course so it's possible to get in.

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

It's a good idea if possible to take courses not offered at VUW to maximize the benefit of your stay- I took a class on hydrogeology which was fascinating and not offered as a course at Vic which made coming here a lot more worth it educationally.

Academic Experience

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

Overall the courses seemed a bit easier. While the requirements to pass were higher- 70% is the cutoff for a C, there's lots of internal work. No exam was worth more than 25% for my courses. Participation often played an important role in the marks and most work seemed to be marked more generously than back home so 70% here is not necessarily harder than 50% back home. However A+ grades are very hard to achieve, often cutting off at 97% or something similar. I did receive better grades here than the last semester I had at Vic though.

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

The style of teaching in the classes I were in tended to be a bit more involved than back home, with more student participation. It's still quite informal, and in two of my courses there was a lot more use of blackboards and chalk than back home and less powerpoint use so good notes are important. The workload was similar, perhaps a little bit less than back home as the exams are not so important thus less stressful.

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 13 credits here which is the same as 65 back home and felt I had plenty of spare time. I'd say 5 courses in a semester would not be too many if they're not 300 or 400 level classes. I'd recommend especially GEOSC 452 as it's not offered back home but all the courses I took were interesting and well taught.

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

Essentially the same as back home, just talk to professors during office hours if you're stuck. Don't be afraid to ask questions, the professors want you to as it will help contribute to your participation.

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

Internet was extremely fast, though Wifi a bit patchy in my building. There were plenty of close by computer labs wherever I was and you get 110 sheets of free printing per semester. I didn't spend much time in the main library but there's a great geology library to study in.

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?

E: Accommodation

What form of accommodation did you stay in?

A "Renovated double" in the South Halls. Essentially a medium sized room you share with someone. It has a fridge and a microwave but no cooking facilities. Bathrooms are shared, with a few per floor.

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

The main pro is the convenience, you're literally on campus and never more than 10 minutes from any class. The costs were a lot less than a single room even though you're sharing. However sharing a room with

someone you will get on each other's nerves so the more time spent out studying or socializing the better. If you want a quiet place however there are lots of little study rooms in every residential hall. The lack of privacy is not ideal either, nor is sharing bathroom facilities with a lot of people.

What accommodation would you recommend to future students?

There's little choice really, as it may be hard to apply for off campus housing as a foreigner. The housing is fine particularly if you get a good room mate.

How early can you move into accommodation?

There was temporary accommodation available around 4 weeks before classes for a small charge (\$25/night) started but you couldn't move into your own room until orientation started the week before classes.

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

The food on campus was good enough, though a bit repetitive. There are lots of a la carte places to choose from which helps remedy this, and you can use your meal plan points at the on campus convenience stores. You have to buy a meal plan if you live on campus, but there are kitchens available if needed.

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?

It's fairly straight forward, but if you know someone going there you can apply to share a room with them instead of a stranger if you want.

F: Personal & Cultural Connections

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

Americans were always extremely friendly towards me and interested to learn about New Zealand. While I immediately made friends with lots of international students, it was a bit harder to become friends with the locals even though we talked a lot as those I met were mostly seniors who had already established 'cliques'. However joining clubs and talking to classmates is pretty much a guarantee of making some friends.

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

America is fairly hard to adjust to. There are a lot of differences, such as not being very suited to pedestrians and food portions being much bigger and less healthy. The imperial system also takes some getting used to. However I never had any cultural problems while here.

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

Practice basic unit conversions like feet to meters and ounces to grams/ml, and learn the temperatures- 50 F is 10 C for example. Also it's easy to forget just how much soda you drink with free refills everywhere! And remember to walk on the other side of the footpath and check both ways before crossing the street.

What parts of the culture did you most appreciate?

The friendliness and openness of the Americans. They're all very willing to talk to strangers, even waiting in line at the supermarket or on the street.

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

I never came across anyone who wasn't friendly. The university staff were more formal but still absolutely fine.

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?

There was always disabled access to buildings as far as I could tell. There were thousands of students from basically every race so nobody seems out of place. As for LGBT there were specific organizations dedicated

to ensuring everyone is treated fine and no discrimination takes place. I believe there are also specific hall floors for LGBT if that's desired.

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

None at all.

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 were more clubs than I could ever have imagined, from normal ones like ski clubs and geology clubs to things like Netflix club and squirrel club. I would particularly recommend joining a 'Thon' group which my friends did and thoroughly enjoyed- they're clubs dedicated to the charitable danceathon the university does to raise money for child cancer research. Activities ranged from tie dyes to 'canning'- collecting money off the street. All the people I know who joined them made lots of good friends doing so.

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

For those over 21 the night life is great, with many active clubs and bars and parties to go to, which are all much cheaper than back home. It's also awesome to see any of the home football games, even if you don't like American football. With a stadium that fits over 100,000 people, the atmosphere is absolutely incredible and unique.

On a holiday break, I would recommend visiting Hershey Park- a theme park in the state with some great rollercoasters and other rides that was very affordable- only \$20 or so. Washington DC, NYC and Philadelphia are all a few hours drive or bus away and well worth seeing.

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

I did not apply for any on campus work but I believe it is fine for students to work so long as they work on campus in dining halls or at commons desks. Students are definitely not allowed to work off campus as its forbidden by visa regulations.

What volunteer or internship opportunities were there for students?

I did not know of any internships though I know its possible to have your visa extended if you do find one. If you wish to volunteer for charity, as mentioned before, Thon is a great way to do so.

5 things to take to your host country or region

1	Power adaptor!
2	Travel debit card
3	Driver's License if you have one
4	Warm clothes!
5	Few bars of Whittaker's- chocolate is expensive here and not as good!

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

1	The climate is very hot in summer and very cold in winter- bring appropriate clothing!
2	Make the most of it by doing some courses not offered at VUW
3	Join clubs- makes making friends much easier.
4	Consider buying a cheap bike- the terrain is much easier than back home so you can get around much easier on a bike.
5	Get a Verizon or AT&T SIM card. The other carriers may be cheaper but their coverage is very poor outside of big cities.

Top 5 Things to do

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

1	Watch a Penn State football game at Beaver Stadium- the third biggest stadium in the world
2	Visit the big cities nearby- Washington DC, NYC, Philadelphia etc.
3	Try out some of America's amazing theme parks- Six Flags, Disney World, Hersheypark (a Pennsylvanian one) etc.
4	Go on a road trip. America is best seen from the road.
5	Make the most of cheap shopping!

H: Personal Experience

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

The exchange I did at Penn State was the most fun semester I've had at uni. Not only that, but the quality of education at Penn State was exceptional and the university is renowned worldwide. I met many amazing people, both locals and fellow exchange students, and the United States was such a huge, diverse, exciting place to visit- from the golden sands of California and Florida to the massive cities of New York and Chicago, to the wide open spaces of the hundreds of national and state parks, there's so much to see and an exchange is a perfect platform to do so. Totally recommended!