

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)	Political Science
Exchange Institution	Texas A&M University
VUW Tri & Year of Exchange	2013, whole year

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	\$700
Accommodation	First semester (on campus) – \$2787 Second semester (off campus) - \$4025
Return Airfare	\$2500
Local Transportation	Free (all the buses in College Station are free for College Students)
Meals	Meal plan - \$866 (first semester) Groceries were \$40-60/week in the second semester
Visa	\$200 (plus flights to Auckland for the interview)
Health & Insurance	\$1008 (A&M has compulsory health insurance for international students)
Personal Spending	Around \$150/week
Communications (phone, etc.)	\$70 / month (unlimited texting, calling, data and international texting and calling)
Other fees (specify)	Sports pass - \$225 General deposit - \$100 Electric bill (second semester only) - \$50 / month
What unexpected costs did you encounter? What items were more or less than expected?	Things like food and flights were less expensive than I thought, but electricity and phone bill were way above what I estimated. My books were very expensive, and I had to buy a lot of them. They add tax and tips to a lot of things too.

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

My exchange was more expensive than I had originally expected, because there were fees that I was not aware of before I arrived, such as the compulsory school health insurance (I was already insured). Things like electricity and my cellphone bill were more expensive than I planned, but food and transport were cheaper.

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

I had a bank account with Wells Fargo, an American bank. It was difficult to set it up because I had to have a permanent address, so had to pay for a post box at school. Once it was set up, it was easy to use and they were very helpful. I could also use the card overseas. The only problem was they charge fees for everything, so you have to watch where and when you use your card.

What financial advice would you give students attending the same university as you? Arrive with plenty of money, because they expect up front payment of fees and stuff before you can do very much. Also, get to know the bankers at your bank – they will be more helpful if they know you personally. I would recommend getting a bank account in the USA because otherwise you pay huge fees at ATMs.

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

Coffee (not Starbucks) – between \$0.80 and \$2. Starbucks costs the same as it does in NZ.

Coke - \$1.50

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?

I did have to apply for a visa. It was not difficult, but you do have to pay close attention to how you are filling out the form and what the requirements are. They do not help you at all. I had to go up to Auckland to have an interview with the visa office. Processing probably only took 3 weeks in total, but I would recommend planning it in advance and allowing 8 weeks just in case.

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

Give yourself plenty of time. Follow up on your visa if you are not sure. Ask the visa people questions. Make sure you have all the information right on your forms. When you arrive at your school, get a travel signature from the international student office (allows you to leave the country and get back in with no hassle).

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, there was mandatory insurance. The first semester I was there it was \$369, but they put it up to \$639 in my second semester. You have to pay for it both semesters, and you do not get refunded if you do not use it. I believe it also only covered things that happened near to school, so you would want to have travel insurance if you

were planning on travelling a lot.

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

I used the House of Travel insurance. I would recommend it, they are very helpful and have a 24 hour open calling line with not too much of a wait. However, it was confusing for me because I was double insured the whole year (I had to get school insurance as well as personal insurance).

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 points/credits value	Rating (1-5)	Comments
Philosophy of Language	All courses were in English	15	4	I had a professor who was pretty crazy and super old. He had really high standards of his students, and his class didn't have any physical notes, so you had to turn up and pay full attention to learn anything. He had a resubmit policy though, so you could make your grade better if you wanted to. Writing-heavy class.
Philosophy – Contemporary Moral Issues		15	1	This was a first year level class. The hardest thing about it was they tested you on the readings every class, so you had to do them thoroughly. The professor made fun of my accent the whole semester. Testing was a mix of multi choice and written.

Comparative Politics		15	3	The professor had never taught the class before, which made it harder because she could not answer questions we had. The material was easy, and the final exam was multi choice.
Modern Political Thought		15	4	Best professor at A&M (Brad Goodine). Really well taught class, interesting material, professor was keen to help students out of class time too. All testing was written, and we were also graded on our participation in class discussions and debates.
Sociology of Sport		15	2	The students in this class were mostly the school athletes. The professor expected us to do the readings in detail, and discussion was the most important part of the class. All testing was multiple choice, and the questions were designed to trip us up. I took the professor (Reuben May) again in the second semester because I enjoyed his class so much.
Philosophy of Religion		15	3	This class had a lot of reading. The course work itself was not difficult, but the testing was very, very hard because we had to know the names of all of the authors we read, and had to

				<p>be able to identify quotes from them (there were ~25 authors that we read). The professor was often away sick and class got cancelled. The students were mainly Religious Studies majors, so there wasn't a huge amount of actual philosophical discussion, which was disappointing.</p>
Environmental Ethics		15	1	<p>This class was not good. The whole course was online, but there was a strict attendance policy so you dropped a whole letter grade if you didn't attend all the classes. There was a mix of multi choice tests and essays, but they were not difficult. The class was 5.45-7pm, Monday, Wednesday and Friday, and it was clear that none of the students wanted to be there, nor did the professor, which made the class environment not good.</p>
American Presidency		15	1	<p>This class was not what I expected at all. It was assumed that all students would have a strong base knowledge of American politics, so I was playing catch up all semester. The readings were interesting, and the professor was open to questions. The tests were multi choice, but we had written assignments and</p>

				essays across the semester to.
Theories of Democracy		15	4	This was an amazing class. It was discussion based, so we all had to attend in order to understand what was going on. It was limited entry (20 people) which made the discussion better and also helped socially. We had a final paper, and all of the testing was written. There was a huge amount of reading – we read 6 books in the semester.
Sociology of African Americans		15	4	I took this class because I had taken the professor in the first semester. There were 30 people in the class, with a range of ethnicities. We were expected to do a lot of reading, but it was very interesting stuff. The testing was entirely multi choice. The professor told me at the end of the semester that he was glad I had taken the class, because the other students would never have had the opinion of someone from so far away from Texas.

Course Registration/Enrolment

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

Registration was annoying. You can't register for classes until you arrive on campus, because they have to clear holds on your account, but by that time the majority of

the classes are full (in BA subjects, the classes are smaller – the average size I had was 30 people). It is relatively easy to sort classes out because international students can be “forced” into classes by academic advisors, but it is quite stressful. If you are able to register at the right time, however, it is much like getting into tutorials at Victoria – you have to rush to get into the classes you want and they fill up quickly.

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 into all the classes I wanted, but it was because I emailed all of my professors and was forced into all of them. I would say that exchange students should try to secure their places in classes they want by talking to the international advisor, their faculty at A&M, and their desired professors, just to make sure they can get what they want.

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

It is hard to know what classes to take unless you know someone already at the school who is taking your major. The only thing you can really control is the way that they test, so check whether its writing-heavy or multi choice tested. It is very easy to switch in and out of classes during syllabus week. Choose classes that you would take at Victoria, and chances are they will be similar at A&M. Make sure you take 12 hours because otherwise your visa is invalid.

Academic Experience

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

I did really well at A&M. The workload was bigger, but there is an expectation of hard work from the professors and your fellow students. Classes have compulsory attendance, which is strange. There are no tutorials, because the classes are small. There is less material online, and I wrote fewer essays. The only expectation I had was that it would be easier to get good grades, but that was only true for essays that I wrote, because American students are not taught how to write essays until they reach university, so my essays were much better than theirs. Multi choice testing is hard.

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 teaching was more formal, we were expected to address our professors as “Professor” and it was a more high school like situation in class – teacher at the

front, students at desks behind. Many professors did not allow food, computers or cellphones in class and strictly enforced that rule. We were downgraded if we did not attend class, or did not participate fully in class. The workload was bigger, because readings were like homework and we had to do them (penalties if they were not done). However, I had less physical work (essays etc).

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?

4 classes is a good amount. I took 4 classes each semester, and “audited” one (I asked the professor if I could sit in and listen to the class without being graded). I would say take classes that you would take at home, they correlate nicely.

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

Do your homework, make detailed notes on your readings. Make friends in class, and study with them. Talk to your professors if you are confused at all in any way, and go to their office hours – if they know you they will grade you higher on things like participation and attendance (which can be up to 20% of your overall grade). Be polite to everyone. Listen and take notes in class, even if the information is online. Make yourself known as the foreigner in class and people will be way more inclined to help you, study with you, and will want to hear your opinion in class discussions, which helps you learn more.

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

We had 5 libraries (that I knew of) on campus, three of which were tailored to specific subjects. There was wifi in every building on campus. There were quite a few computer buildings, all of which had printers and people who could help you. All the libraries were open almost 24/7 during regular campus weeks, and were completely 24/7 in the two finals weeks. The classroom buildings shut at night, but there were tons of places on campus to study that were open until midnight, or all night. The libraries also had librarians who were there all the time, and coffee shops that were always open. You could get food delivered, and rent out movies for study breaks, and during finals weeks there were sections of the main library that had free massages, free Starbucks, free Victoria’s Secret underwear, and puppies that you could cuddle with to ‘relieve stress’.

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?

n/a

E: Accommodation

What form of accommodation did you stay in?

In the first semester I was in an on campus dorm, and in the second I was in off campus apartments.

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

Dorm

Pros: on campus, easy to access, all bills paid upfront, lots of people around, cleaned weekly.

Cons: roommates live in the room with you, noisy, can't have friends over, no kitchen facilities at all, small space, bad beds, laundry is never free, on campus food is bad.

Apartment

Pros: kitchen, own bedroom and bathroom, plenty of space, complex had pool and gym, easy bus ride (free) to campus, can have friends over, nice neighbours, on site maintenance.

Cons: bills can be very expensive, far to walk anywhere, noisy Thursday-Saturday nights.

What accommodation would you recommend to future students?

Depends how long you are there. I would do off campus for a whole year, because its easier and you can have your own space. The majority of people live in apartments, in which you get your own bathroom and bedroom. It can be hard without a car though, because you cannot walk anywhere in College Station (no sidewalks, too far) so you become reliant on others. For one semester, definitely a dorm is better (choose the middle price one, they are nicer and more spacious)

How early can you move into accommodation?

1 week before the beginning of the semester (for both on and off campus).

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

Meal plans were compulsory if you lived on campus. There was a variation of amounts you could buy, and there were guidelines that said how many meals per day you could get out of which plan. It is done by dining dollars, so you can buy things like bottled water and aspirin as well as meals. The food on campus is not good, and

more expensive than off campus. In some dorms there are places to cook, but there was not in mine. My roommate had a microwave.

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

It was hard to find accommodation for only one semester, and I ended up paying much more money than I would have otherwise. I would say start looking early. It is much easier to find full year leases than half year ones. You may have to pay two months rent in advance if you don't have a guarantor in the country.

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

Check whether the accommodation has things you want/need (wifi, laundry, bus route, etc). Make contact with your roommate (if you have one) before you arrive.

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 found it easy to make friends. The majority of my friends were from Texas. All of the people at my school were hugely interested in New Zealand and were very curious about me, which made it easier to make friends. It was interesting to find people who had mutual friends with me, even in a school of 58,000 students!

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

In some ways it was hard, but I adjusted fairly quickly. The strangest and hardest thing right up until I left was that I could not walk anywhere, because there were no sidewalks so it was too dangerous.

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

The food is very different, and hard to get used to. The coffee is terrible. The hardest thing to learn is your place in social gatherings – you have to be very polite to adults (never call them their first names) and generally restrained. The best thing to do is to go into social situations prepared to be super polite. Another difference is the attitude to drinking and partying – it should only be done on the weekend. Texas is a very conservative state, and you have to be prepared to be more conservative yourself, otherwise people can get quite annoyed.

What parts of the culture did you most appreciate?

Men are really gentlemanly in Texas, as a woman this was nice because we get called ma'am and have doors held for us. The politeness and southern hospitality element of the culture was lovely too – people go out of their way to help you, and invite you into their lives willingly and generously. There is food and water everywhere, even at the bank. The south is like a big family.

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

I was treated really well, people were fascinated by my accent and New Zealand. My professors and other staff were interested in my opinions, because they were different from my fellow students. I was often asked to talk in class, and professors would get me to discuss my exchange experience with others going on exchanges. Students were really nice, super helpful and kind to me. I was offered rides everywhere, and people wanted to show me Texas in its best light so I was given opportunities to go to things like football games and rodeos by people in my classes. I also joined lots of organisations, and had the same experiences. A&M is like a big family.

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?

I think that although on the face of it A&M could be a difficult place to study at if you fitted any of these categories, in reality people are very accepting and you would not have problems. Physically disabled students would have no problems, there is only one building that I know of that is not accessible, and there are dorms that are designed to cater to physical disabilities. Similarly, there services for students who are on every range on the spectrum, for the most part at no extra cost. Minorities would not have a problem. GLBT is a growing movement on campus, and there are two or three organisations that focus on supporting those students on campus.

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

I was not discriminated against, except by one professor who constantly made fun of the way I spoke. Basically students will not have a problem with it. The best thing to do is to try to fit into the Texan culture as best you can, because you will get to understand the ways that the society works.

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?

Every semester, all of the groups on campus host an “Open House” informational where you can see what they do. There is literally a group for everything, from the Quidditch Team to Habitat for Humanity, plus cultural clubs, clubs that are major specific (engineering, philosophy etc), film, sports of every kind, sororities and fraternities. All the groups on campus are available to all students, and they welcome new members and subsequent member participation. I found it really helpful to join clubs, I just joined everything that appealed to me and tried to be a good member. When you first arrive, groups are a great way to make friends who are not in your classes, which helps you branch out on campus anyway. Definitely try to do some philanthropy – most of the students at A&M do some sort of charity work and its worth the time.

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

Austin and Houston are only 1 ½ hours away by car, they are awesome places to go because they are both so different to College Station. If you make American friends, or have other friends who have cars, you can road trip to pretty much anywhere in the South during the weekend – New Orleans is a 9-hour drive, and Dallas is 5. I would recommend driving around the College Station area, especially the nearby towns which all seem to have foods that they specialize in. In the summer, Lake Bryan is an awesome place to escape the heat if you can find a boat. I also went to festivals and concerts in both Houston and Austin. On campus at the weekend there are always sports games, which are a great way to get involved with student life and show school spirit. Football games happen on Saturdays from August to December, and any exchange student to A&M would regret not attending a few of them (I went to every game!). At night you can go out to the bars if you are old enough – when its warm that is a lot of fun. A lot of apartment complexes have pools and hot tubs, and going to the movies is only \$4 with your student ID.

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

There is a website that all the students can access for on campus work. Generally it is minimum wage, but they fit your hours in with your schedule and there is a huge variation in things you can do. I knew people who worked in food, the library, in labs, at the gym and in the offices. Off campus it is very similar to here, there are always jobs going in hospitality and retail. The most common job amongst my friends was at the bars, either as a bartender or a bouncer. You need to get in early for bar jobs, because they are popular and go quickly. Off campus jobs are harder to get for international students because you need a different visa, whereas on campus the international office just has to sign it off.

What volunteer or internship opportunities were there for students?

Volunteering was readily available in all the organisations. There is also a day in the Spring semester called the Big Event, where most of the students at A&M participate in different volunteer activities around the Bryan/College Station area, to thank the locals for putting up with us. Internships are a big thing amongst the American students, and not difficult to find, but quite hard to get in to. I don't know the policy on international students taking internships.

5 things to take to your host country or region

1	Marmite (or other Kiwi foods that you like and know you can't find)
2	A New Zealand flag for your dorm/apartment
3	A camera or phone
4	A piece of clothing that reminds you of home
5	A nearly empty suitcase (you will take so much home!)

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

1	Get into the Aggie Spirit.
2	Have a wild American Spring Break, a 4 th of July with fireworks, a festival of some description, a football game, and a traditional Thanksgiving with friends.
3	Pretend you love American Football, and get people to teach you all the rules.
4	Make American friends.
5	Travel the USA as much as you can – make the most of your exchange!

Top 5 Things to do

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

	At Texas A&M:
1	Football/basketball/baseball games
2	Eat a Honey Butter Chicken Biscuit at Whataburger (Texas fast food chain)
3	Go to Silver Taps and Muster

4	Eat dinner with the Corps of Cadets, and march into a football game with them.
5	Watch the sun set over Texas from either the top of Kyle Field or the Rudder Tower.
	In America:
1	Visit as many states as you possibly can
2	Mardi Gras in New Orleans.
3	Watch the sun rise at at least one National Park (Badlands in South Dakota is a good option)
4	Eat pizza from New York, Brooklyn and Chicago, and decide which you like best.
5	In every place you go, find the highest point and stand on it. Look out at the ground below and around you.

H: Personal Experience

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

I find it difficult to write in words how happy I was for the length of my exchange at Texas A&M. It was undoubtedly the best year of my life. The Texas A&M Aggie family is the biggest, most welcoming and kind one I have ever had the pleasure and honour of being a part of. Every person I met was so lovely and eager to make sure I had the best time, people went out of their way to show me how amazing America and Texas really is. I was lucky enough to travel to 30 states over the course of the year, and met some of the best people while doing so. America is such a varied place, and there are so many things that you can do and see, within individual states, and across the country as a whole. Texans make you feel at home instantly. As they say around College Station; "If you lead a good life, say your prayers and go to church, when you die, you will go to Texas." Once an Aggie, always an Aggie.

