

Exchange report: University of Western Ontario (Western University)

Home institution and program of study: **University College Freiburg, Liberal Arts and Science, Earth and Environmental Science**

Host country: **Canada**

Start and end date of the stay abroad: **September 1st, 2019 until April 30th, 2020**

Host University: **University of Western Ontario**

Identification code: **CA-2019-1WU19-w**

WHY WESTERN?

I am an Earth and Environmental Science major at University College Freiburg (UCF). The last two semesters I spent on an exchange at the University of Western Ontario in London, Canada. Western University is located in Southwestern Ontario, which is blessed with milder, as for Canadian standards, winters, and perfect location, with Niagara Falls, the Great Lakes, and the U.S. border just around the corner. The University is ranked one of the best both in the province and in Canada. Western provides rich academic opportunities and course offerings in both natural and social science-related disciplines. The University is also famous for its vibrant student life, sense of belongingness to its community, and countless student organizations, clubs, and events



Western University campus in early September

APPLICATION PROCESS

I started to prepare for my exchange a year before I attended my first class in Western. The application deadline for study abroad programs for North America is approximately a year prior to the start of the program. It is important to keep this in mind, that students are often required to submit an English Proficiency certificate along with their application. Since taking the test and having the result shipped to you might take some time, it is important to start preparing well in advance. A few weeks after I submitted my application, I was informed that I was admitted to the Ontario-Baden Wurttemberg Student Exchange Program. I was then required to choose 3 universities in the program and write a motivation letter for each of them. Around the end of March, I received the long-awaited notification that I was accepted to do my exchange at Western. Finally, to travel to Canada, I was required to apply for a student permit, which took approximately 1.5 months and involved having to travel to Dusseldorf to submit my fingerprints. Another important step in preparation for my study abroad was the application for Baden-Wurttemberg Stipendium. The application deadline was in early February and my placement for the scholarship was confirmed in early June. The scholarship provided me with an opportunity to fully concentrate on my study abroad experience without the associated financial pressure, especially since living costs in Canada are considerably higher as compared to Germany.

GENERAL IMPRESSION OF WESTERN UNIVERSITY

General differences between Western and UCF

My experience of studying at Western was certainly quite different from that back in UCF. Firstly, the workload for the courses is certainly higher in Canada: The grade for an average course usually consists of multiple small assignments or laboratory works, a bigger assignment,

one or two midterms, and a final examination. While this does add considerably to the overall studying time, having multiple graded assignments and examinations throughout the semester gives students more flexibility and control over their final mark.

Another major difference, which I especially appreciated, was that professors at Western tend to give more frequent and elaborated feedback on each of the submitted assignments. Having regular feedback certainly makes the studying process more effective and allows students to improve over the course of a semester.

Finally, as compared to UCF, Western has more scientific labs, instruments, and equipment, which are frequently used in practical classes. Despite these differences, the study environment in Western is generally very similar to that of UCF: The professors are very supportive and helpful, and the courses are informative, engaging, up-to-date, and often based on group works and projects.

Western on-campus resources and services

Western has countless advisory resources, some of which are specifically designed to support exchange and international students. In my first days at the university, I was provided with all the necessary information needed to settle down in a new place: e.g. where to go shopping, how to open a bank account, how to access medical help, and what resources are available to students. Moreover, already before my arrival, Western provided me with all the necessary information concerning finding a place and signing the lease. The University even has its own OffCampus Housing Service, which is meant to help students to find accommodation and provides support in different issues that might arise when students live off-campus.

Beyond the orientation, I was truly amazed by the number of helpful resources available to students at Western, ranging from learning support to entrepreneurship advice and mental health counselling. All of the support and advice services are easily accessible and students are encouraged to make use of them regardless of whether they are facing academic or personal challenges. Some of the resources I benefited most from during my exchange were the International and Exchange Student Center, the Writing Support Center, and the Learning Development and Success Center.

Relationship with fellow students and colleagues

Western is generally known for its strong and supportive community, which I greatly appreciated during my exchange year. The fellow students were always extremely friendly, thoughtful, and supportive. Consequently, during my exchange, I was able to build strong, meaningful, and long-lasting friendships with both Canadian and international students. Since I did not meet any of my colleagues in more than one class, I have met most of my close friends outside of the classroom – in student organizations/clubs and during university events. I would advise exchange students looking to meet new people to actively engage in on-campus events and join a few of the countless extracurricular activities. Moreover, I would also highly recommend checking out the

Global Café – a weekly event organized by the International and Exchange Student Centre where international students have an opportunity to meet, connect, and share their experience in a relaxed informal setting.

Extracurricular activities

Western University offers a rich choice of extracurricular activities both for entertainment and professional/academic growth. For example, throughout the semester, students are encouraged to attend one to two hour long workshops on learning and writing skills, leadership, entrepreneurship, career education, and others. These workshops provide a great opportunity to develop key skills to succeed both academically and professionally. Moreover, every few weeks Western organizes events such as Wellness Week, International Week, Waste Reduction Week, etc., which are at the same time informative and entertaining.

Finally, the University has a great number of student clubs and organizations, ranging from volunteering to sports to education to entertainment. Many of the clubs organize workshops and training for its participants. Joining such clubs is a great opportunity not only to actively engage in the Western community and meet people but also to acquire new knowledge, skills, and experiences.

CONTENT AND PURPOSE OF THE ACADEMIC EXCHANGE

As I am strongly convinced of an inter-disciplinary and holistic approach to solving environmental issues, one of my main motivations to apply for the exchange to Western was to build an in-depth understanding of different disciplines that are closely related to environmental science and sustainability. Among others, this included meteorology, climatology, hydrology, environmental engineering, and agriculture. Therefore, during my exchange, I took eight courses from four different departments: (1) CEE 2217A Introduction to Environmental Engineering, (2) COMPSCI 1046B Approachable Apps JavaScript, (3) COMPSCI 2035B Data Analysis & Visualization, (4) EARTHSCI 2240G Catastrophic Events in Earth History, (5) EARTHSCI 3340A Watershed Hydrology, (6) GEOGRAPH 2010B Geography of Canada, (7) GEOGRAPH 2310A Weather and Climate, (8) GEOGRAPH 3445F Global Agriculture and Food Systems.

What I particularly liked about the courses at Western is that many of them had a considerable amount of laboratory or practical/field works, and thus provided me with valuable hands-on experience. For example, one of the practical components of the Watershed Hydrology course was to measure streamflow in a creek near the University using different measurement methods. These skills can certainly be useful in my future academic and/or professional career.

The exchange was also an incredible opportunity to immerse into Canadian culture for the entire 8 months and gain an insight into people's values, lifestyle choices, and habits. I found it surprising that this new cultural experience was as beneficial for my personal growth as for my future professional career. For example, while I was aware that Canada is generally not as environmentally conscious as Germany, I did not realize how deep this issue is rooted in the culture itself. I believe that the understanding of people's motivation for environmentally-unfriendly decisions that I gained during my exchange will be of great use in my future studies

and work. I have also greatly benefited from the Geography of Canada course, which provided me with an understanding of Canadian history, culture, economy, natural resources, and environmental issues. This course was, thus, a great addition to my personal experience living in Canada.

CRITICISM AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Personal assessment of my stay abroad

Overall, spending a year abroad in Canada and in Western was an invaluable academic and personal experience. Firstly, I had a chance to take engaging, up-to-date courses in Environment-related topics and acquire valuable hands-on experiences and skills that will certainly benefit me in my future studies and professional career. Secondly, the exchange provided me with an opportunity to gain an insight into Canadian culture, which can certainly be beneficial both on the personal and academic levels. Thirdly, I had a chance to study and live in a uniquely diverse community and make good friends from all across the globe. An important personal lesson I learned during my exchange is to always be open to hearing people's opinions no matter how objectively irrational it might seem: Understanding people's motivations, intentions, and choices is an invaluable competence in the globalized world we are living in. Finally, I took some time to travel around Southwestern Ontario and enjoy the breath-taking natural sights, such as the Great Lakes, Bruce Peninsula, and the Niagara Falls. Consequently, the expectations that I set for my exchange were not only met but by far exceeded. I would highly recommend students to consider doing their exchange at Western.

Impressions of Canada

If you asked me to describe Canada in one sentence before going on the exchange I would probably say that it is a country of the breathtaking natural landscape, flourishing wildlife, unhealthy but delicious food, and freezingly cold winters. While I was not wrong, there is one key point missing in this description: people. Starting with my very first day in London and throughout the whole exchange, I have been meeting people who would go out of their way to help others. Canadians are one of the most welcoming and hospitable nations I have encountered so far, and this is definitely what made my exchange such an incredible experience.

However, it goes without saying that spending a year in a new country comes with many cultural surprises and sometimes even challenges. The first major difference that I have discovered within the few days after arriving in Canada was unreliable and infrequent public transportation. Busses in London often come late or sometimes even not come at all, and there are no electronic boards to indicate the estimated arrival time. While you might not find it as relevant in early fall, waiting for the bus for an extra 15 minutes when the temperature is well below freezing was certainly not my favourite experience. Another surprising difference concerned parties: At the weekend, students usually go out to small bars, which barely have enough space for people to dance, are always extremely crowded, and always close at 2 am. And while I still enjoyed my time, the spacious dancefloor and night-long parties were something I missed about Freiburg.

Fears and worries

The main worry that I had before going on exchange was, unsurprisingly, the climate, in particular the famous Canadian winters. A famous Quebec's chansonnier Gilles Vigneault once said: "My country is not a country, it is winter". Although London is located in the southernmost part of Canada where the climate is much warmer than anywhere else in Canada except British Columbia, this past winter was certainly the coldest I have ever witnessed. The wind chill temperatures sometimes fell below -20°C with occasional freezing rain, snow squalls, and blowing snow. Extremely cold temperatures, however, would not persist for longer than a week. Average winter temperatures ranged between 2°C and -10°C , with snow staying on the ground for just a few days following a major snow squall. I personally loved Canadian winter, especially on the snowy days, when the white-brick Western campus is so incredibly charming.



Western campus on a snowy winter morning with -19°C windchill

Suggestions to future exchange students

1. *Number of courses.* Since the workload at Western is considerably higher than at UCF, I would recommend students to take 4 courses to leave more time to travel and engage in social/extracurricular activities. While the purpose of the exchange is primarily academic, I personally believe that it is also important to not miss out on social and cultural experiences during the exchange.
2. *Course selection.* You could find the old course syllabus (course outlines) for most of the courses online. Just search in Google *Your course name and number + UWO/Western + course outline* (for example CEE 2217a Introduction to Environmental Engineering Course Outline). This can be very useful when selecting the courses, as the course outlines provide more detailed information on the topics covered in the course and the workload. However, keep in mind that the content and workload can of course change from year to year, so old course outlines might not be exactly applicable for the course you are registering for. Moreover, you can visit the "Rate my professor" website (<https://www.ratemyprofessors.com/>) to read the feedback that students wrote about the professors. While this can be a useful resource when selecting the course, you should use it cautiously. I took some courses with professors with a very low rating on this website, and I still enjoyed it a lot.

3. *Finding accommodation (if you decide to live off-campus).* You can look for housing listings on the Western Off-Campus Housing Service or in unofficial UWO Off-Campus Housing Facebook groups. It might be helpful to arrive in London early to secure accommodation, as approximately one week before the start of the semester housing offers start to disappear and the prices for the remaining rooms rise. That being said, I have arrived in Canada on August 23rd and still managed to find accommodation albeit quite expensive. I would also recommend looking for accommodation next to a direct bus route to the University. Busses in London are often delayed, which can cause problems if you need to change a bus every day on your way to University. It would also be a good idea to look for a house close to a bus stop: You will appreciate it when going to class on a winter morning with -27°C windchill.
4. *Preparing for winter.* I would recommend future exchange students to buy warm winter coat and boots already after arriving in Canada, as winter clothing that you will find in the stores there has been designed for Canadian winters.
5. *Preparing for a cultural shock.* While it might seem that Canadian culture should not differ much from that of Western Europe, you are still very likely to experience some degree of cultural shock. Therefore, be mentally prepared to experience it, try to not judge Canadian culture, and try to not miss out on any of the events, activities, and social life. While I have personally gone through a short period of time when I missed Europe and did not feel comfortable in Canada, later during my exchange I started feeling at home (now I am even considering moving there permanently after my undergraduate studies).
6. *Enjoy your stay and don't forget to keep a right balance between studying and socializing!*