Exchange Report 2015  
University: Guelph, Canada

In 2015, I took part in a research project at the University of Guelph, in Ontario, Canada. The following is a report on my time abroad for the benefit of future exchange students.

1. Preparation

My initial inquiries started in November 2014. We had been encouraged to look for potential institutes at which we could complete our research projects early on, and Thomas Hoffmesiter had arranged for Dr. Glen van der Kraak, Associate Dean of Research Science to talk to the students at Bremen about potential exchange programs. I spoke to Dr. van der Kraak at the talk, and he asked me to get in touch with him in a month’s time when he was back in Canada. I did so, and he asked me to nominate a few professors I would be interested in working with. A few of the professors then got in touch with me, and I organised a research project with Dr. John Fryxell, to take place over the Canadian Summer Semester, from the beginning of June until the beginning of September.

Whilst this was occurring I had applied for a place through the University of Bremen’s exchange program. As the Canadian and German semesters do not line up, approval for this place came through rather late, and acceptance letters from the University of Guelph arrived at the end of May. There was still however, enough time to organise my flights. As an Australian resident staying in Canada for less than 6 months, I did not need to organise a visa, instead only having to show the customs officers in Toronto my letter of acceptance.

2. Formalities

Upon arrival in Guelph, I met Dr. Fryxell at the University and my other supervisors. I then visited the international office, whereby I was given a list of administrative tasks to complete registration. My experience at German universities thus far has involved requiring several different forms from several different offices, all of which have slightly obscure and limited opening hours. I am happy to report that all the offices I needed to visit upon arriving at Guelph were located in the same building (minus the bank), and they are open from 9am until 5pm.

The list I was given upon arrival at Guelph dictated which forms I needed to obtain first, and where I would need to obtain them from. The staff I encountered were far extremely helpful, and I had collected all relevant pieces of identification within two days, including student ID, a bus pass, a bank account and my insurance cards.

3. General information on Guelph

Before I comment on Uni Life in general I must mention that my experience of Guelph took place entirely during the summer semester, a time at which campus is occupied mainly by professors, students completing internships and those taking summer courses, which makes up a small minority of its regular year-round students. I have been assured that during the regular semesters the University is much busier.

The campus of Guelph is a very open space. You can get wifi access over nearly the whole campus. The University Centre is a large building filled with cafes and restaurants, and a couple of bars as well. The food here is far from cheap though, and I strongly recommend bringing food from home. By far the cheapest (and tastiest) option is the Bullpit, a bar/café situated in the middle of campus, which have daily specials and very good food.
Public transport is not as efficient as Germany, and you need to time your trip well if you wish to take a bus to University. Buses in Guelph may come up to 5 minutes before and as late as 5 minutes after their scheduled time, meaning you could be waiting up to ten minutes for a bus. The price of a bus pass is, however, quite reasonable. The city is quite bike-friendly, so finding a bike would be a good idea.

The winter semester can present a challenge though. It becomes too cold to ride to University, and the buses become very crowded, meaning that you may even miss a bus due to overcrowding. The two most obvious solutions are to car-pool to Uni, or to live within easy walking distance. Luckily, there are several student housing areas within walking distance of campus.

There was not much on in the way of campus activities during the summer semester, but during the regular semesters there are plenty of University clubs and organisations which run events regularly for international and domestic students alike.

4. Academic life

I was completing a research project under Professor John Fryxell, and as such had my own desk to work at for the three months. I was directly supervised by his post-doc, Gustavo Betini. Both Gustavo and John were extremely helpful and accessible. Canadian staff in general seemed very keen on the success of their students, and more than willing to assist them in shaping their individual research projects. I was in touch with Gustavo and John reasonably often before flying over, and doing this certainly helps foster a good working relationship before your arrival.

In regards to my project itself, we were able to start generating meaningful data about halfway through my time there. Whilst I did not have time to write the full report in Canada, both of my supervisors have been extremely helpful in assisting me to complete a comprehensive report since I arrived back in Germany.

As mentioned before, the University was relatively empty during the summer semester, however I still had the chance to work with several other students and foster good working relationships. There were numerous events organised that gave students from the faculty the chance to interact with each other.

5. Housing

As previously mentioned, there are several student housing complexes quite close to the University. Provided you apply in time, these places will be available, however they are quite expensive. The distinct advantage here is proximity to the University and the chance to meet new students upon arrival.

I decided to opt for private housing, and through the website https://www.places4students.com I was able to find a house with 1 roommate, which I thoroughly enjoyed living in. It cost a bit more, but I had considerably more space and privacy.

One thing to be cautious of: whilst prices in Germany for monthly rent are generally given in Warmmiete, monthly prices in Canada are often given kalt, that is to say, without things like gas, electricity and internet included. It is important to inquire about these costs before moving in.

If you have just arrived in the town and are looking for accommodation, there is a hostel in the centre of town, and couchsurfing.org is a good way to save a bit of money whilst looking for your new home.
6. Public transport
This is one area that Germany excels in, and in which Canada does not. Canadian towns are far more spread out than their German counterparts, and their public transport systems struggle. Buses along most routes only arrive every 10 minutes, sometimes only every 20, and the aforementioned five minutes before/after rule means you can be waiting for quite a while for a bus year-round.

Taxis are not too expensive in Guelph, mainly because Guelph is quite a small town. If you have a couple of friends, this obviously makes things cheaper. Über hasn’t made its way to Guelph yet, nor has Car2Go.

Having a bike is by far the best option, as Guelph roads cater quite well to bikes. Riding on the footpath is illegal, bike lanes in Guelph are almost exclusively on roads, so you will need to learn some basic turn/stop signals. However as previously mentioned biking can become quite tricky in winter.

Getting around Ontario is another story. For travel to other towns in the area, the Greyhound is the most convenient option. The bus leaves from the university bus stop, and travels at a reasonable price. A trip into Toronto is around 13 dollars, and a student discount is provided. There are also GOBus and train transit services, though neither were as convenient as the Greyhound. Most flights arrive at Toronto’s Pearson airport, which is accessible by bus and train, the bus being significantly cheaper.

7. Everyday life
Security-wise, Guelph is very pleasant. The crime rate is amongst the lowest in Canada. Incidents involving alcohol-fuelled violence are perhaps more common in the town centre than they are in Germany, but they are still nothing to be concerned about. Many students even leave their doors unlocked at night (though this is strictly a Guelph phenomenon, and would not be found in Toronto).

The majority of activity in the town centres around the University campus and the town centre. There are several other institutions clustered around the University, making it a hive for activity and social gatherings. The town centre is less than a ten minute bike ride, or five minutes on the bus from the University. There are a number of good bars and restaurants in town, however I found most places more expensive than German restaurants. Alcohol in particular is heavily taxed in Canada. Tipping is common in Canada, 10% generally a good amount.

Supermarkets are less frequent than in Germany, however they are much larger and their variety is significantly wider than your average Netto or Pennymarkt. Prices for food are similar to that in Germany.

There are also a few lakes close to the town, which during the warmer months make fantastic places to spend the day. Guelph Lake also has a beach, and there is a gorge nearby which is great for canoeing.

Canadians are extremely polite people. Whenever I was lost or in need of help in Guelph, I could quite comfortably ask for assistance from passers-by. However do not be surprised if a Canadian walks past you and asks “how are you?”, before continuing without waiting for an answer.

8. My experience
Overall I cannot rate my experience in Canada highly enough. I chose Canada to gain an understanding of scientific processes and attitudes in other countries, and to expand my
ecological knowledge, both of which I achieved. Being one of the first Masters students from
the University of Bremen to complete a research project at Guelph, there were of course
some bureaucratic hurdles, but these were easily dealt with and should make things
smoother for any students that follow.