



My Exchange Evaluation

Basic Information

Host University	McGill University
Semester & Year of Exchange	Winter 2023 (Otago's semester 1)
Otago degree(s)	BAppSc
Major(s)	Major physics and como, minor computer science

Academics/ course load

Which papers did you take whilst on exchange?

Course title	Language of instruction	Otago equivalent
LING445/COMP445 Computational linguistics	English	COSC 300 level
PHYS447 Quantum physics	English	PHSI331
PHYS339 Laboratory physics	English	PHSI381
MATH478 Computational methods in applied mathematics	English	COMO303/MATH 300 level

Total Otago credits gained: 54 points 72 points 108 points _____

Any comments about these papers?

These courses were all taught by very knowledgeable professors who were clear. The difficulty of these courses varied; McGill has 100 level to 400 level for undergraduate, but a 400 level course is not necessarily harder than a 300 level, it depends largely on the course and is quite unpredictable. I found the 2 physics papers to be as difficult as the equivalent 300 level Otago courses, math478 to be harder, and comp445 to be easier. Compared to Otago, they demanded a similar level of hourly input per week, but have less hours advertised on the website, largely because they don't do tutorials/workshops as we do in Otago. In this sense there was less hand-holding, and finding a work buddy was very useful. The professors were very approachable if I got too stuck however. I only had one final exam (for phys447), so the other courses were assignment heavy, or had a final project. If you have the chance to take comp445 or math478 I highly recommend both these papers.

How did the academic experience/ workload/ style of teaching differ from Otago?

McGill is a reputed university, and as an international student you can lean into this as little or as much you want. Plenty of international students were there precisely because of its reputation, and there was a strong academic culture. If this is important for you, you'll be in your element at McGill; you'll get a high level of engagement with peers and professors. On the other hand, if you prefer to sit back and cruise, there are plenty of other ways to engage in the McGill community and make the most of other things the university (and wider Montreal) has to offer.

As mentioned, the teaching style is more laissez-faire, but meeting with professors or teaching assistants is easy. The content seemed to be harder, but exam marking easier than in Otago. Regarding the workload, you can put as much work in as you like. Especially at a place like McGill, the more you put in, the more you get out.

Accommodation

What accommodation did you stay in? What were the pros and cons of your accommodation?

I stayed in a private accommodation found through the FaceBook page International Students in Montreal. I found it hard to find a place, especially being male (most places were sublets wanting females only). Entire apartments were advertised on this facebook page, and this isn't helpful as an international student knowing no one to team up with. I since heard that general facebook marketplace was a better way to find a single room.

I didn't want to go into the student accommodation that McGill provided, mostly due to warnings from past Otago students. I can't comment much since I didn't meet many people who were in the hostels; I suppose this confirms that 3rd years don't go into the hostels, just like in NZ. The only thing I heard was that the compulsory meal plan in the hostels was atrociously priced. Unless you're itching to relive the 1st year experience, I wouldn't recommend going to a hostel.

About the different areas in Montreal: I stayed just outside of Place Des Arts, which I found to be a great location since it was 20 minutes walk away from McGill, the Plateau, and the Vieux-Port. Before coming I had heard a lot about the Mile End being the coolest part of town, and maybe it comes alive during the summer semester, but I didn't find it to be too exciting. The plateau is beautiful, and is the French centre of Montreal. The McGill ghetto is right next to McGill, but I don't recommend you stay there; its expensive, and McGill is already going to be a big part of your life in Montreal, so I preferred to live elsewhere and make different sets of friends. The metro system is great, so living further out isn't an issue, but I liked being central.

Money matters

Please detail your basic costs, e.g. accommodation, flights, visa, food, insurance

I paid \$700 CAD per month for my accommodation, on a 4 month lease. This was relatively low, but you can definitely get cheaper. I wouldn't recommend living far away from the centre of town though, since you're only in Montreal for a short period of time and in my opinion its worth paying a little more to be in the thick of the action. I shared with 6 others in a big apartment, which I found really great; we came from different parts of the world, and were mostly new to Montreal so the place had a lively feel.

For the visa, I just got the eta since this allows you to stay for 6 months in Canada. You don't need a student visa unless you're there for a whole year. The eta costs \$7 CAD.

Food is a similar price in Montreal. The cheapest grocery store is called Segals. You'll run into other students shopping here. Eating out is much more expensive than in NZ, especially after tax and tip are added to the bill.

For insurance I got the StudentSafe Outbound insurance, as recommended by Otago. I did not make any claims. Unfortunately, McGill requires you to get its own health insurance, costing \$333 CAD. StudentSafe did not at the time have an option to leave out health insurance, so I had to pay double health insurance. However I'm not sure the McGill one would have covered any accidents whilst travelling, so perhaps it was safer regardless.

What means did you use to access your finances? What would you recommend? (Credit card, Cash passport, foreign bank account, etc.)

TransferWise. As far as my hours of research told me, it was the cheapest option. My ANZ debit card was OK as well, but TransferWise definitely won in the long run.

I also got a ScotiaBank card, but since you have to wire money to it anyway (and therefore pay the conversion fees), it doesn't save money. I got it since I found it was useful in paying other people in Canada, but had to close the account at the end since it would've cost \$3 a month to keep it open as a non-student.

Visas & Insurance

Did you have to apply for a visa? What was the process?

As above

Did your host university have a mandatory insurance?

As above

Extra-curricular/Social Activities

What organised activities were available to students? What extra-curricular activities would you recommend to future exchange students?

Living in a new city, clubs are your best way of making new friends. Everything is organised for you too, so it's an organisation-free way of having fun doing activities you love. McGill has clubs days, definitely go along to these to see what you want to join. I got heavily involved with the McGill Outdoor Club (MOC), since it allowed me to connect with others who wanted to do outdoor activities and, crucially, not have to worry about transport! Some trips I went on include ice climbing, snow shoeing, igloo building, dog sledding, skiing, ski touring, and many hikes. My one tip with regards to this club is to reply to an email immediately to sign up; spots fill up quickly. Getting onto the email list is difficult too, just go to an office hours at SSMU.

I also joined up to the tennis club, but it wasn't too active in the winter. I found a friend and we organised individually to play together. I think most clubs are more active in the summer term.

What was the university/ city like?

I could go on about this. I visited most of Canada's cities (Ottawa, Vancouver, Calgary, Quebec, Toronto, Montreal), and Montreal was by far my favourite. Its vibrant, historic, beautiful, and so much more. The only thing it lacked for me was a mountain range close by, like Vancouver has. Montreal has many different neighbourhoods, and exploring them was a lot of fun. Many Canadians told me I should have come in the summer term since the city comes to life with the outdoor parks and especially the nightlife. I never ran out of amazing things to do though, especially since I love the snow and snow sports. The city is adapted to the cold; I didn't find it to be an issue. Theatre, free ice skating rinks, winter festivals (look up igloofest) and more. I know that people living there for years on end eventually end up preferring summer!

Any recommendations for things to do, places to visit, places to eat etc.?

Cross country skiing in mont Royal, eat at patisserie Kouing Amann, Atwater market, mcgill gyms (huge facility with everything incl swimming pools, gyms, squash courts, etc), musee des beaux-arts... find your own favourites!

Any tips for future students?

Has anyone ever regretted an exchange?

Overall Experience

Please write one paragraph (or more) about your exchange experience. Please include some photos!

Had the best time. Whilst on exchange, I wanted to put myself outside of my comfort zone, and see what studying in my field is like outside of Dunedin. I already knew I would enjoy discovering a new city and all that it has to offer, but of course that's included. I feel thoroughly fulfilled in these goals. Perhaps the second aim is less evident than the first, but if you're at all doubting your academic pathway, placing yourself in an entirely different academic milieu is a great way to explore your options. I recommend taking courses you wouldn't be able to take at Otago.

Regardless of where you go, an exchange is one of the best things you can do for yourself in my opinion. After university, going away for 4 months becomes much harder and costlier, so make the most of the opportunity.

I think I've preached enough.

Photos:

