



My Exchange Evaluation

Basic Information

Host University	University of Alberta
Semester & Year of Exchange	Fall Semester/ Sem 2 2024
Otago degree(s)	BSc
Major(s)	Geology

Academics/ course load

Which papers did you take whilst on exchange?

Course title	Language of instruction	Otago equivalent
EAS207 Mass Extinctions and Vertebrate Evolution	English	GEOL2XX
EAS225 Earth Surface Processes and Landforms	English	GEOL2XX
PALEO418 Evolution of the Vertebrates I	English	GEOL4XX

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

Any comments about these papers?

Being in Canada, 225 was cool to learn about as you got to understand how the Canadian landscape around you formed, and there was some fieldwork. The other two papers were taught by the same prof. He was a bit harsh in the 200-level paper, often pulling small details with tricky MCQs. The 400-level paper had a lot of content but was quite flexible with intense learning in labs. Overall, I found the papers to be generally better structured with a more natural flow than some of my previous classes at Otago, which made it easier to follow the content and engage with learning.

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

You have to keep up more, with consistent work spread throughout the term. Midterms are common and weighted fairly equally, which takes pressure off finals but sometimes makes study feel less worthwhile. However, the regular assignments helped me learn better. Lectures aren't recorded, which was a surprise, but professors clearly focus on helping students succeed and highlight key exam content

Accommodation

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

I stayed at International House (I-House), a traditional dorm costing around \$6,700. It has six floors, with two wings per floor and about 20 residents per wing — housing around 120 residents in total. The room was small, with a fridge, a private bathroom, and a shared kitchen. It was just a 2-minute walk from campus, making it super convenient. The hall was not catered, so I cooked for myself, though catering at a hall just a short walk away (PLH) was quite popular.

One downside of living in residence was that you had to provide everything yourself. On my first night, I ended up just sleeping in my clothes because I had no bedding! Needless to say, I bought bedding the next day, but you need to bring or buy everything — from pots and pans to toilet paper. When leaving, you have to decide what to do with everything — whether you give things to a friend in need or try to sell them.

The residence was right next to campus, just a 2-minute walk away. Transport into downtown or to the mall via train was easy, and buses to wherever you needed to go were super accessible and free for students, which was a huge bonus.

I-House had more facilitated events than other international halls, including group study nights, cookie-making sessions, and other fun activities that helped you connect with people living on different floors. Compared to other options, Nipsy is newer and flashier with its own smaller gym (accessible to all exchange students), while Hub, being much less social and possibly pest-infested, was cheaper and not as well-regarded, making it my third pick overall.

I would definitely say you're more likely to become friends with other exchange students in halls, but many of my Canadian classmates were welcoming, and I formed great friendships with them. I often hung out with my Canadian friends on weekends or weekday evenings when I wasn't busy studying or just wanted to have fun.

Money matters

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

- Accommodation for fall semester at International House: 6,700nzd (you need to put down 500 of this as a deposit when your application is successful)
- Flights there: 2,100nzd
- Visa (Eta for less than 6 months, or a student visa for more than 6 months): Less than 10 CAD for the ETA, while the student visa was about 150 CAD
- Student Travel Insurance with university discount: 600nzd (if you're doing lots of skiing or hiking, it might be worth spending a little more for extra coverage)

Generally, the CAD is slightly stronger than NZD (1 CAD = 1.2 NZD), so keep that in mind when looking at prices.

Food Costs: Food in Canada is quite expensive, and you have to account for taxes and tips when eating out. The tax is included in the price, but in large groups (6+), you'll often face a surcharge for "large parties." Tipping is expected, which was new for me, usually around 10-15%. I went through phases where I ate out, but then I cooked, and meal prepped for a few weeks. While I don't have an exact estimate, I found that the meal plan at I-House (3.6k for breakfast, lunch, and dinner 7 days a week) was popular among residents. Many people, however, just bought individual swipes (16-18

NZD each in a bundle of 10-40 meals) when they didn't feel like cooking, which I now realize was a pretty good strategy.

On average, groceries at No Frills (a budget grocery store) cost around 60+ NZD a week. Safeway, on the other hand, is quite pricey, so it's better to avoid it if you're trying to save. However, Safeway is closer, so it can be hard to resist. Even better, if you have a Canadian friend with a car, getting a ride to Walmart or Costco every couple of weeks will save you a lot as they are drastically cheaper but further away.

UHIP and Compulsory Fees: UHIP (University Health Insurance Plan) and compulsory fees: 450 NZD. This covers health insurance for international students and is the reason why public transport is free for students.

Travel was more expensive than I initially expected. The costs add up, especially if you're traveling solo, but traveling in larger groups helps reduce the cost per person. A good way to save money is by participating in activities that don't cost, and cooking together as a group can also keep costs down. If you plan to travel a lot, make sure to set aside some money for it, but budget for it carefully.

Estimated Total: ~9,800-10,500 NZD at least (depending on food choices, travel, and personal spending – winter clothes...)

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

I mostly used my debit card during my time abroad, but apps like Revolut and Wise were also helpful for transferring money to friends and managing expenses. Tricount was great for tracking group trip costs. If I had stayed for two semesters, I probably would have signed up for a local card or foreign bank account, but for shorter stays, I found the combination of debit and money transfer apps sufficient.

Visas & Insurance

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

I applied for an **eTA** (Electronic Travel Authorization) to enter Canada. The process was quick and done entirely online through the Canadian government website. You just fill out a short form, answer a few questions about your travel and background, and if you're approved, you get your eTA linked to your passport. It was a simple and fast process—approval was often received within minutes, though I'd recommend applying a bit in advance just in case.

Did your host university have a mandatory insurance?

Yes I paid it – idk if you can opt out if you have your own insurance, but my friend looked into it and I can't remember what he came up with.

Extra-curricular/Social Activities

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

There are plenty of organized activities and extracurriculars available for students. I recommend checking out Clubs Day, which takes place during the first two weeks of the term. You'll find a wide variety of clubs, so there's truly something for everyone.

Some notable clubs include the Ski Club, which offers gear discounts and organizes a few ski trips. The Outdoors Club is also very popular, perfect for adventure seekers. The International Student Organization hosts fun events like potlucks, Christmas celebrations, and quiz nights, along with one or two trips each semester. However, it's often better to organize trips with your own friend group for greater flexibility, freedom, and lower costs.

While RAs in residence aren't usually the best at organizing events, I encourage finding friends to keep busy or taking the lead to organize activities yourself. There are also great group fitness classes at the university—something I wish I had signed up for!

What was the university/ city like?

Edmonton gets surprisingly warm despite the cold winters. The River Valley is beautiful and perfect for exploring. You can even see the northern lights from the city, which is an unforgettable experience. While there isn't too much going on in town, it's great to be relatively close to the Rockies for weekend trips and outdoor adventures.

The University of Alberta has a pretty impressive campus. Many buildings are connected by indoor pathways, which is a lifesaver during the winter months. The facilities, like the gym, are well-maintained and offer plenty of opportunities for staying active.

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

If you're looking for activities in Edmonton, I recommend heading to Cook County to try line dancing for a fun and unique experience. For outdoor enthusiasts, the driving range at Victoria is a great option, and you can't miss the West Edmonton Mall, which features an indoor waterpark, ice skating rink, and even a ship—though it's quite large and can be overwhelming. During the winter, the Christmas market is a must-visit for its festive atmosphere. For stunning natural beauty, consider road trips to Banff and Jasper—I've visited the Rockies three times and it's always an amazing experience. Be sure to stop by Tim Hortons for a taste of iconic Canadian Timbits and try poutine for a true local delicacy. For sports fans, attending free school games in ice hockey, football, basketball, and volleyball offers an enjoyable way to mix things up. Catching an Oilers game is another highlight for sports enthusiasts. If you're visiting in winter, check out Rabbit Hill for skiing or enjoy ice skating. For wildlife lovers, a trip to Elk Island to see bison is highly recommended. Lastly, if you have the time, consider popping over to the States or Eastern Canada during reading week for a change of scenery and new experiences.

Any tips for future students?

say yes to as many things as possible. Saying yes to everything is the best way to meet people, explore new experiences, and push yourself outside your comfort zone. I found it incredibly rewarding, and I feel like I made the most of my exchange.

It's definitely worth arriving a month early to travel if you're coming for fall semester and explore during the summer. The Rockies are breathtaking, and I wish I had done more hiking while I was there. Lake Louise is beautiful, but it can be overcrowded, so I highly recommend visiting Lake Moraine instead—it's one of the most stunning places I've ever seen. Make sure to organize your transport early though, as you can't drive there yourself. Also, be sure to save up before you go—Canada can be more expensive than you might expect, so it's a good idea to have more money than you initially estimate.

Be prepared for the cold—after early October, the temperature drops fast. The Canadian winter can be tough at first, but once you adjust, the experience will be unforgettable. If you can, make sure to embrace the colder months too—it's all part of the adventure!

Overall Experience

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

Being an exchange student made it easy to form friendships—everyone was in the same boat, eager to connect and share experiences. And who doesn't want to make friends and learn about other countries and people's lives? The friends I made during this time are ones I hope to keep for life.

The Canadian winter was a whole new experience, with temperatures dropping to -27°C , so warm clothes are a must! On the other hand, the summer was beautifully warm and inviting. Going on exchange was absolutely worth it. If you're debating whether to do it—just do it! You won't regret it one bit. The adventures and stories I gathered will stay with me forever: witnessing the stunning Rockies, catching an NHL game, marvelling at the northern lights, and hiking up a mountain on Vancouver Island to catch a breathtaking sunrise. Canada is massive, and I only explored the western side!

I found a good balance between adventure and academics, making the most of my time outside the classroom. I went with the intention of growing, and I did—pushing my comfort zone left me feeling confident that I can take on anything life throws my way.



