



My Exchange Evaluation

Basic Information

Host University	University of Texas at Austin
Semester & Year of Exchange	S2 2018 (US Fall Semester)
Otago degree(s)	BSc
Major(s)	Genetics and Psychology

Academics/ course load

Which papers did you take whilst on exchange?

Course title	Language of instruction	Otago equivalent	Otago credit value
PSY 337 – Psychology of Language	English	PSYC 327	18 pts
PSY 333 – Cognition	“	PSYC 313	“
BIO 370 – Evolution	“	GENE 312	“
BIO 321G – Principles of Computational Bio	“	GENE 315	“

Any comments about these papers?

I most enjoyed Psychology of Language and Evolution. Psychology of Language was a very comprehensive introduction to the topic (although this meant it was dry at times). The lecturer Dr Reeves was very engaging and knowledgeable, although quite disorganised (always moving deadlines around). I found Evolution interesting and challenging with topics ranging from evolutionary/population genetics (equation heavy and theoretical), to the history of life on earth and human evolution.

I least enjoyed Cognition and Computational Bio. Cognition seemed to overlap with a lot of content I had already learnt in the compulsory 2nd year Otago Psych classes and was not as interesting or challenging as 3rd year Otago Psych classes (although this made for a good grade). This class had the same professor as Cognition (Dr Reeves), which was nice as I felt like there was a staff member that knew me. I would not recommend the Comp Bio class that I took as the professor and peer mentors were still in the process of figuring out the best programs for our projects – apparently there are other very interesting Comp Bio classes though!

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

The biggest difference was probably that all of my classes had a constant workload with no large final assessment. This was good as it meant that I didn't have to spend my last weeks in Austin cramming, but did mean that there was always work to do. This format also made it hard for me to judge whether the content was easier or harder than Otago, I think it was easier but definitely more work.

In 3 out of 4 of my classes attendance was a significant part of the grade, but I managed to work around this for a couple of long weekends away. The level of student-professor interaction is also way higher than I was used to and has its pros and cons.

Accommodation

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

I stayed in Pearl Street Co-op, a "cooperative house" run by the College Houses Organisation and can't recommend this place enough. I chose to live in a co-op because of the affordability and the large number of people (there were about 110 in my house). I can't imagine having spent a Semester at UT living in any other co-op, let alone any other student accommodation. This semester the house was around 60% exchange students and 40% American. Besides making friends from all over the world, the high international ratio meant that I was surrounded by people equally excited to make the most of their time in Austin. There are also plenty of organised social events (various sized parties) to get to know other residents.

The main difference between a co-op and an Otago hall is that it is entirely governed by the residents. This means that by attending house meetings you have a say in all house decisions, from the weekly menu to budget expenditure. The comparatively low rent is achieved by the cooking, cleaning and maintenance all being completed by residents who all chip in four hours of labour each week. There are 7 College Houses co-ops to choose from and plenty more run by other organisations. This allows you to choose one from varying sizes and levels of studiosness, socialising and internationality.

The way that co-ops like Pearl are run means that people who enjoy cooking for themselves, having things cleaned to a high standard, or lots of quiet hours may find it hard. As I was only staying for a semester, none of these were problems for me and I'm so so glad I got to stay at Pearl!

Money matters

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

Pearl double room rent - \$2885 US

- More expensive for a single room
- Includes all food, power and utilities

Flights - \$980 NZ one way

Travel documents:

- I9101 (homeland security fee) - \$265 NZ
- J1 Visa - \$240 NZ
- Flights to Auckland for visa interview - \$120 NZ

Insurance:

- Compulsory UT Medical Insurance - \$800 US
- Southern Cross Travel Insurance (Aug to Feb) - \$600 NZ

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

I got an Air NZ OneSmart card which acts as a debit card that you can load with multiple currencies using the OneSmart Website. The benefit of this card was that you get air points every time you use it. Also by loading it with USD you avoid conversion fees when you use it in shops. I got lazy with loading it and ended up mostly using my ANZ debit card to pay for everything then got a shock when I saw the conversion fees.

ATM's will charge upwards of \$4 to get cash out. To avoid ATM charges you can get an account at one of the banks on campus, this way probably gives you better exchange rates and some will give you \$100 for opening an account.

Visas & Insurance

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

I had to get a J1 student visa which required organisation at least 3 months before to ensure I had proof of admission to UT etc, as well as an interview at the US consulate.

Did your host university have a mandatory insurance?

UT recently introduced a compulsory medical insurance plan for international/exchange students. This was expensive but comprehensive and covers a range of services.

Extra-curricular/Social Activities

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

There are so many groups and societies which you can find out about at the fairs held on campus in the first few weeks. Groups include frats, sororities and spirit groups – spirit groups are more inclusive and affordable social groups which would be a good way to meet people if you aren't in a co-op. Friends living in apartments recommended joining Planet Longhorn, which hosts lots of open bar nights and social events for international and local students.

Intramural sports are also very social and fun, you can sign up for teams with friends or by yourself.

What was the university/ city like?

The UT Austin campus is much larger than Otago and has some really beautiful buildings, as well as very highly ranked school for business, engineering and law. There are lots of nice spots around campus to get food, sit in the sun or take an afternoon nap. At first the size of the campus and the number of people was pretty daunting but most of my classes ended up in the same general area and you get used to the foot traffic.

Austin is a super cool city which is known for breaking Texan stereotypes, culturally and politically, whilst maintaining the Texan reputation of Southern hospitality. Being the capital of Texas there is also plenty of opportunities to learn about US politics if that interests you. I was most surprised by how green and pretty the city is, with lots of parks as well as modern downtown and a beautiful sky line.

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

If you're arriving in summer a great start would be a day at Barton Springs, a huge spring fed outdoor pool just outside of downtown Austin. On your way home you can stop at South Congress Bridge around sunset to see the bats (google to see what I mean).

Be sure to check out a football game, the bigger games will have a better atmosphere but will cost much more. You can buy a Big Ticket which gets you into any UT sports team's home games but will only pay off if you want to see multiple games. The best part of a game day is tailgating where different clubs and societies offer free drinks and food in carparks around the campus.

For a night out check out the different bars on 6th street, they range from fancy beer gardens (Easy Tiger) to cheap student bars with \$5 pitchers (Shakespeare's).

South Congress is a great street for filling in a day eating and looking in nice shops, including a historic and famous cowboy boot shop. Bangers sausage house is also great for lunch on Sunday as you can sit in the sun and listen to live jazz bands.

San Antonio is a great day trip less than 2 hrs on a bus, you can see lots of history and old buildings that you don't see in Austin. From experience Dallas wasn't the best city to visit for activities, but if you do go the JFK museum is really good! It would also be worth going for a UT vs OU football game, but you should book ahead as tickets and accommodation sell out quickly and get very expensive.

Any tips for future students?

Buy return flights even if you're not sure when you'll be heading home, I bought a one way ticket on sale and ended up paying \$1000 US to get home again. It saves a lot of money to get a return flight with an approximate date and to pay the date change fees.

Overall Experience

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

Going on this exchange has been the highlight of my studies and I am so glad I chose to go to Austin. I have made friends from all over, two of which I travelled the US and Mexico with in the month following the semester. Besides the experiences of seeing the US and American college life I have learned that I am capable of moving to a different country! This trip was amazing and makes me look forward to travelling and living overseas in the future.

Pictures: Texas State fair, UT football, Texas capitol building, UT campus, Colorado river with Austin skyline

