

University of Essex
Semester 1 2016
LLB and BSc Neuroscience

Accommodation

The university accommodation rent at Essex includes all electricity, heating and internet, as well as a cleaner (who cleans the communal spaces once or twice a week). In terms of location, ALL the university accommodation (except the Quays and Meadows, which I don't think are available for international students?) are incredibly close to everything you could need on campus, nothing more than a 5minute walk away!

I had a really hard time working out which accommodation to choose.



3 of the 4 North Towers, from left Tawney, Keynes, Rayleigh

For a one-semester exchange, the options available to me were (in increasing order of cost):

- 'South Towers': There are 2 south towers (Bertrand Russell and Eddington), each consisting of 14 flats, with 16 people per flat. Those 16 people share one kitchen, and 4 toilets and showers (I think). These are very similar to the North, except slightly scruffier and louder, and more people per bathroom.
- 'North Towers': There are 4 north towers (Rayleigh, Keynes, Tawney and William Morris), each consisting of 14 flats, with 13 people per flat. Those 13 people share one kitchen, and 4 toilets and showers (one shower between 3 or 4).
 - Personally, I finally decided to rank North higher than South, because 12 flatmates sounded slightly more reasonable than 15 (especially for sharing only a few bathrooms and one kitchen!), so thought it was worth the marginally higher cost (which I also hoped might mean they were in better condition as I'd heard pretty bad things about the South Towers online).
- 'The Houses': These are flats of only about 4-6 people, who share a kitchen and each bedroom has an ensuite bathroom. The (very tempting) ensuite makes these the most expensive.

I had actually applied for the Houses (after 4 years of shared bathrooms in uni halls and flats the idea of having my own bathroom was too tempting!), but between Essex Abroad and the Accommodation office (see my comment below on the poor communication between different university management systems) they 'misplaced' my application, so I missed out on a space in the Houses and was put in my second choice, North Towers. However, in the end, I am glad. North Towers have the benefit of 12 instant friends, and so there are always people around to do things with.



A North Towers bedroom – quite bare initially!

Also, of course you are always going to have at least one odd-ball flatmate (I actually had three!) but, the others were incredibly lovely, and I now have some lifelong friends (we are planning to try to meet every 5 years). Also, I am a 5th year, so was really pleased that the

university accommodation was not just all first years (Essex tends to group them together in flats) but rather my flat was mainly 3rd and 4th years, but ranged from one first year to a few 5th years. It worked really well.

So I would really recommend staying in the campus accommodation, because it saves you the hassle of finding somewhere and someone to flat with, you are literally right on campus, a 2-5 minute walk from every lecture theatre, student services, and many cafes, restaurants and a bar, pub and club. There are so many things happening on campus, literally every day, both general university ones and in the uni flats, and so your proximity to events and a wide range of social opportunities is invaluable.

Student Life

Essex really cares about its students. Not only with the large student support department (including finances and wellbeing), but the Student Union is really active. There is a huge range of sports on offer (including lacrosse, rock climbing and ultimate Frisbee!), but also many many clubs and societies, as well as a theatre right next to the library! Another really cool thing was 'Cine10' – they screen new release films once or twice a week in one of the lecture theatres for about £2.50, a lot cheaper than a normal cinema. Although, some things were a bit more difficult to get into due to arriving halfway through their academic year (e.g. I wanted to join a language course but wasn't allowed).



Local football match paid for by Essex Abroad – really fun!

England really knows how to look after the health of its students; there is a medical centre right on campus (30 seconds walk from my flat!) where you can register (this is a bit more difficult if you are one-semester only, but do persist, it IS possible). Once you are registered, your GP and nurse appointments are at no cost to you! Just be warned that some of the medical centre receptionists can be really unhelpful (again, quite bureaucratic) so it can be very difficult to get an appointment.

Something I loved was a weekly market right in the middle of campus every Thursday. Fantastic breads, cakes, fruit and veges, fish, sausages (sold by the man who makes them himself!). It is obviously a great deal smaller than the Otago Farmers' Market, but you really appreciate it because the Tesco supermarket and Colchester town centre are a bit far away. Another neat thing they offer on campus is called the 'Think Series' – about once a month, they host a big discussion on a contentious topic, and invite speakers who have a lot of expertise in the particular topic. Any students can attend (free juice and sweets or biscuits!) and have opportunities to question the speakers. One was on the Syrian Refugee Crisis, and another on whether Britain should stay in the EU (which will have been established by the time you get there!) and I found these really interesting.

I only went out once in Colchester town which wasn't that great, and you have to be careful and always stay with a group because there are some interesting (dodgy) characters around. But there really is no need to bother with the bus and taxis into Colchester – there are two nice bars and a club right on campus, which are very popular and frequently used. There is something to entertain you every night (e.g. karaoke in one of the bars every Monday, flat

parties then the on-campus club every Wednesday when all the sports teams have a 'social', and Fridays and Saturdays are very busy nights for the campus club too). Essex students know how to party (and have a lot of stamina)!

Travel

I had incredibly difficulty working out my visa. The laws had just changed and the British High Commission website sent me round in circles. The website (and Otago exchange office) recommend contacting the British High Commissioner, who was bizarrely difficult to get hold of, then in the end my scanned letter and phone call to him simply told me to contact someone else! Anyway, under the law at the time I went, if you remain in England for no more than 6 months, you can obtain the 'Short-Term Student' visa by printing all the documents listed on the "gov.uk" website. As long as you have all the necessary documents, you can apply at the UK border (e.g. at Heathrow airport) free of charge. (Important tip: always make sure you have your Essex acceptance letter with you whenever you leave the country, because you'll need it to get back in! The UK officials are pretty strict about that). This is just to give you an idea of what the requirements for me were (and how difficult the process was...so start early!), but of course it is really important that you thoroughly find out what the specific requirements are for you.

This leads nicely into another warning: prepare to get familiar with 'bureaucracy'! I found it quite exhausting how poor the communication was between different university departments (e.g. Essex Abroad and Essex Accommodation), and even different parts of the Student Support (although the support available to students at Essex is very good). You often have to go through about three different people before you get someone who will start to help you. But in the end you've just got to be patient and accept that this is how it is over there (and makes you forgive little annoyances about NZ).

From the airport: the 'National Express' buses ('coaches') are great, and will take you from any London airport out to Colchester. This was fairly straightforward to book from the airport. However, the information I wish I'd had in advance, was how to get to the university after arriving in Colchester. You will be dropped off at the 'Bus Station', but to get to the university, you actually have to walk all the way up to High Street (5-10mins), then look for the shelter with 61 or 62 written above it (outside a bar called Liquid, opposite Marks and Spencer). But the drivers are quite used to being asked if they are going to the university. I also asked the driver when to tell me when we were at the university (sounds obvious, but on a heavily jet-lagged cold January evening it was rather challenging!).

Domestically, the National Rail system (website: <http://www.nationalrail.co.uk/>) is great – your one stop shop for any train anywhere in the UK. I used this a lot. The downsides are that it is relatively expensive, and delays are not uncommon. The closest station to the university is 'Hythe (Essex)', which means you can walk (20-30mins) instead of having to catch the bus to Colchester. But it is far more direct to just go from Colchester North station ('COL', as opposed to 'Colchester Town', which is close to Colchester town centre, but always has to go through the main Colchester (North) Station anyway). Buses 61 and 62 can take you to either station straight from the university (but remember to leave plenty of time as the bus is unlikely to come when it is scheduled to!).

Naked Bus and GoEuro are usually cheaper, but take a lot longer, so I actually never used them (I decided time was actually more valuable in the end).

The closest supermarket to the university is a Tesco; around a 20 minute walk, and there are also regular buses (around £2 return). There are regular buses from the university to Colchester town itself (61 and 62 are the most direct), which take about 15-30minutes (depending on the traffic and the number of people getting on and off at each stop). These are £3 return. If you have to be somewhere at a specific time, it always pays to leave plenty of time because the buses are notoriously NOT on time (often late, but sometimes early...so you can miss it!).

Discount travel cards: if you are planning to travel a bit around England, a National Railcard is a real investment. For £30 (occasionally there are deals offering for a bit less), you get a third off the cost of every train ticket around England. Mine had already paid for itself after about 2 weeks! Whereas for the buses, none of the international students got bus passes. Many locals have a bus pass that they can just show to the driver and hop on any bus at any time (which really appeals when you are fumbling around with change!), but it costs over £100, so is definitely not worth it for a one-semester exchange, and I'm not sure about a full year (none of my full-year exchange flatmates had one, so I assume they did the maths).

General University

On the whole, I found life at Essex far more cruise-y than Otago. For an Otago semester 1 exchange (the second half of their academic year), you will be there for their 'Spring' and 'Summer' terms. Autumn goes from the beginning of January until 18 May, and consists of all your classes. You then have an entire month off for 'Spring break' (travel, travel, travel!), revision lectures around 20 April, then just exams from the beginning of May until the beginning of June. With only two hours a week per subject (they call papers 'modules'...no one knows what you're talking about if you say paper, but I kept forgetting right until my last day!), the content of exams for a one-semester exchange only come from about 20 hours of lectures. My full-year flatmates had a bit of a hard time though, because most of their first semester ('Autumn term') modules were examined in May, so one unlucky flatmate had 8 exams!

I took two law and two psychology 'modules' – Essex offers many really interesting law papers, but the only science papers considered Neuroscience-appropriate by the Otago Science department were psychology (one of Essex's largest departments). I didn't find the teaching amazing, but the modules weren't terribly challenging, and the lecturers really encourage you reading broadly and find your own material (instead of just learning and regurgitating what they tell you).

So in this respect I found the classes quite flexible.



The Ivor Crewe lecture theatre

Hopefully things are more straightforward for you, but when I was trying to find Essex papers ("modules") that the Otago departments would approve, I found it very difficult to find the paper details that I needed. So the following is a link to information that helped a lot for choosing papers for my learning agreement: <http://orb.essex.ac.uk/departments.aspx> Just click on the department relevant for you (e.g. here is the link specifically for law: <http://orb.essex.ac.uk/lw/>).

A really substantial proportion of Essex students are international (40% I think). Initially I was disappointed as I was looking forward to meeting lots of locals. But, I quickly realised that this strong international dimension to the university can really enhance the whole exchange experience. For example, only 4 out of my 12 flatmates were English, and they are the ones I had the least in common with! In contrast, I got on incredibly well with my flatmates from Spain, Germany, Austria, California...and Australia. As a consequence, I now have friends all over the world!



Some of my lovely flatmates in our (uncommonly tidy) kitchen

Another big benefit is that, while the locals had no interest in travel, other international students can make wonderful travel companions. Especially for the first few bus and train trips, it is great having other people to try to navigate the foreign public transport systems together.

Overall, I am so thrilled that I went on exchange to the University of Essex. Its proximity to London AND Europe (via cheap flights from Stansted Airport) puts you in a fantastic position to really explore this (incredible!) part of the world. I am so grateful for the wonderful friends I now have (from such a diverse range of backgrounds!) I'll leave you with a quote from the Essex Chancellor which I love: "Aim to be anyone's equal, but no one's superior".



< 'The Pieminister' bus – a permanent café on campus offering drinks and a large selection of meat and vegetarian pies (+ accompaniments).



↑↓ Some of the adorable locals on campus



< The 'Wivenhoe Trail' – a beautiful scenic running or cycling route.

