

University of Hong Kong
2016 S1 (Full year)
BSc CompSci

I would like to begin by letting you know that the Exchange Advisors and Departmental Advisors are wonderful people who are there to help! I managed to shoot myself in the foot with paper selection at HKU and the kind folk here at Otago helped me salvage a few credits. Also, when reading anything sent by your host University, reread it at least twice to make sure you completely understand what is expected of you.

Accommodation: Accommodation is slightly different in the fact that it is almost inevitable that you will be sharing a room with at least one other person. It really isn't as bad as you may think and they tend to group together people of similar interests and backgrounds. My roommates for both semesters were good as gold and really easy to get along with which made the whole experience just that much easier. I stayed at Pokfield Road Residences, a HKU affiliated residence. It was great because of its location and its relaxed atmosphere. Most students try to get into the Jockey Villages, however they are a lot more strict which is why I would recommend Pokfield Road. It's also around \$200NZD cheaper which is a bit of a bonus. Plus, it's right beside the gym and pool giving you no excuse! If you don't manage to get Uni accommodation then you'll be looking at flatting around Sai Ying Pun. Rent is incredibly expensive for what you get in return but you can apply for funding from HKU to take the sting off it all.

Money matters: For money, I simply organised a CashPassport with my bank before I left. This worked quite well, though there are currency conversion fees if you don't have HKD set as your default currency. I would recommend getting an Octopus card as soon as you arrive as they are really convenient and accepted by a lot of stores. If you are in HK for longer than a semester it may be worth opening up a bank account however I didn't bother with this and got by just fine.

Academics/Course Load: I found course load to be similar to that of Otago and of a similar difficulty. However, as far as content is concerned, the Science and Engineering departments of HKU really love their math, so expect it. I also found that the computer science papers at HKU were lacking in practical lab work which made life a bit harder. Instead, there is a lot of theory and rote learning is the norm, which local students are incredible at! Their work ethic in general is something to be admired so I'd recommend not comparing yourself to them. Instead spend a little of each day revising and head out to enjoy the rest of your time. What is convenient is that most exchange students take this approach so cramming becomes largely a group effort, making it a lot more bearable. Also, HKU works on a first come, first served basis, meaning that you aren't guaranteed a place in each paper you choose. Moreover, they have a habit of suddenly dropping papers from the syllabus which were advertised as available. What I'd recommend is getting as many papers signed off as you can before you leave Dunedin to make sure you cover all your bases and are not left annoying your Exchange Advisor trying to fix your disorganisation (which I may have done...oops). Also find out which day paper selection begins and get in as quick as you can.

Transportation: As far as getting to Kennedy Town from the airport, there are three options available. You can grab a taxi though this is the most expensive and it will set you back a good \$350HKD. You can hop on the Airport Express to Hong Kong Station, walk through to Central Station (five minutes or so) and hop on the Island Line heading towards Kennedy Town for around \$105HKD all up. This is what I did the first time and it's all pretty straight forward. The cheapest option is to catch the A10 bus from the terminal outside the Airport. This will drop you right into the heart of Kennedy Town and costs around \$45HKD. If you get off at any of the stops along Belcher's street, it's pretty easy to find your bearings (print out a map of where your accommodation is before you arrive). In terms of everyday transport, the MTR and buses will get you to 90% of the places you want to go and are both cheap as chips. If you get onto things early, try sort yourself a Student Octopus card (ask for a form at any MTR) as you can get half price on the MTR which comes in handy. Other than that, if you're feeling confident, you can use the mini buses. These are green and red roofed and work entirely in Cantonese, meaning you must call out for the driver to stop in Cantonese. I never worked up the courage to use them but they are cheap and can take you almost anywhere. Green mini buses follow a set route and red mini bus routes are determined by the first passenger - it's confusing so best to be avoided.

Weather: Hong Kong can get pretty uncomfortable in terms of weather. I arrived in the middle of winter which was ideal to slowly acclimatise to the conditions. We had the coldest winter in 60 odd years with temperatures getting down to low single digits. Because HK does not encounter such conditions regularly, insulation and heating is seemingly unheard of, so maybe take a jumper if you're heading over in first semester. In terms of standard conditions, the closer you are to June, the more uncomfortable you will be. I was amazed at just how much I sweated and how unavoidable it actually was. It didn't matter if you were only outside for a few minutes; you were going to get sweaty. It can be a good idea to carry a spare top/jumper around with you, as the temperature change from outdoors to indoors can be quite dramatic! Also, when it rains in HK, by god does it rain! Umbrellas are the way to go with the locals, however I found a cheeky wee poncho was the best to combat both the rain and the wind. Make the most of the beautiful weather by getting out to the beaches or swimming holes scattered around HK, they are all easy to get to. I would also recommend packing a whole lot of sunblock and insect repellent otherwise you are in for a bad time!

Eating: If there's one thing I was certain in, it's that one can never be hungry in HK. Food is literally everywhere! I would encourage you to visit a so-called "wet market" (essentially a food market) and experience the sights and smells that it has to offer. In terms of day to day living it is feasible to eat out most nights. The cheapest options will be to eat at campus (I'd recommend Maxim's on the far East side of campus) or in surrounding wet markets. I personally cooked at home most nights. The kitchen in my room wasn't much, just a single gas burner, but I still had no real problem cooking. Produce is cheap, as is pork, however most other meats are quite expensive and dairy is depressingly expensive. One litre of UHT milk will cost about \$15HKD (~\$3NZD) and a 1.8L bottle of fresh milk will run around \$44HKD (\$8.50NZD). This wasn't much of a surprise though it took some time to get used to. What helped replace dairy products was HK's love of bakeries and bread. From egg tarts, custard buns to rocky buns and coconut cream buns, I fell in love with several of the local Kennedy Town bakeries. If you're after a real adventure in terms of food, head to Chungking Mansions in Kowloon for some of the best Indian you'll have and make the effort to get to Tim Ho Wan's in Sham Shui Po for delicious pork buns.

Things to do: HK is full of opportunities. The big city life was somewhat of a shock for me but it certainly does open up a range of options. I'd certainly recommend just exploring the city. Hop on the MTR and see what you can find. It is quite hard to get lost in the sense that you're never too far away from an MTR station. HK also has amazing hikes providing fantastic view of the city and outlying islands. Certainly make an effort to walk up Lantau Peak though take plenty of water!

Places to visit: Because of HK's central location within Asia it is a perfect stepping stone to exploring the surrounding countries. Flights south are usually quite cheap and you can catch a train north to embrace China. If you do intend on going to China I would recommend sorting out a visa as soon as you can. You can go through the Chinese Embassy or an agency such as Forever Bright Trading (sounds sketchy but they'll get the job done). I managed to escape to China, Thailand and the Philippines and I loved every second of it.

Tips for future students: My biggest piece of advice probably goes without saying but you should be organised. Not only does that include getting all the paperwork signed off but also replying to emails promptly and keeping a soft copy of every document that you receive concerning your exchange and I do mean every document! A little organisation goes a long way to taking the stress off of your exchange. You can get by easily enough with English as I did however I regretted being so reliant on it. If you do head to HK, or anywhere where English is not the first language, take the time (a month or so beforehand) to start learning the basics of the language. I probably missed out on experiencing all of the culture HK had to offer because of my poor attitude to embracing Cantonese. English worked well enough for me so I became too ingrained in my ways and didn't push myself to pick up a few words here or there. You shouldn't do this! Trust me, even learning a few numbers and phrases will help to build your confidence while on exchange and it'll help you appreciate the culture more. Also, you should expect to feel homesick. I went on exchange thinking that I wouldn't be affected but it snuck up on me. Something as simple as seeing Whittaker's chocolate in the supermarket brought it on. But don't dwell on it all too much, instead remind yourself of where you are and what you're doing and embrace your time abroad and always say yes.

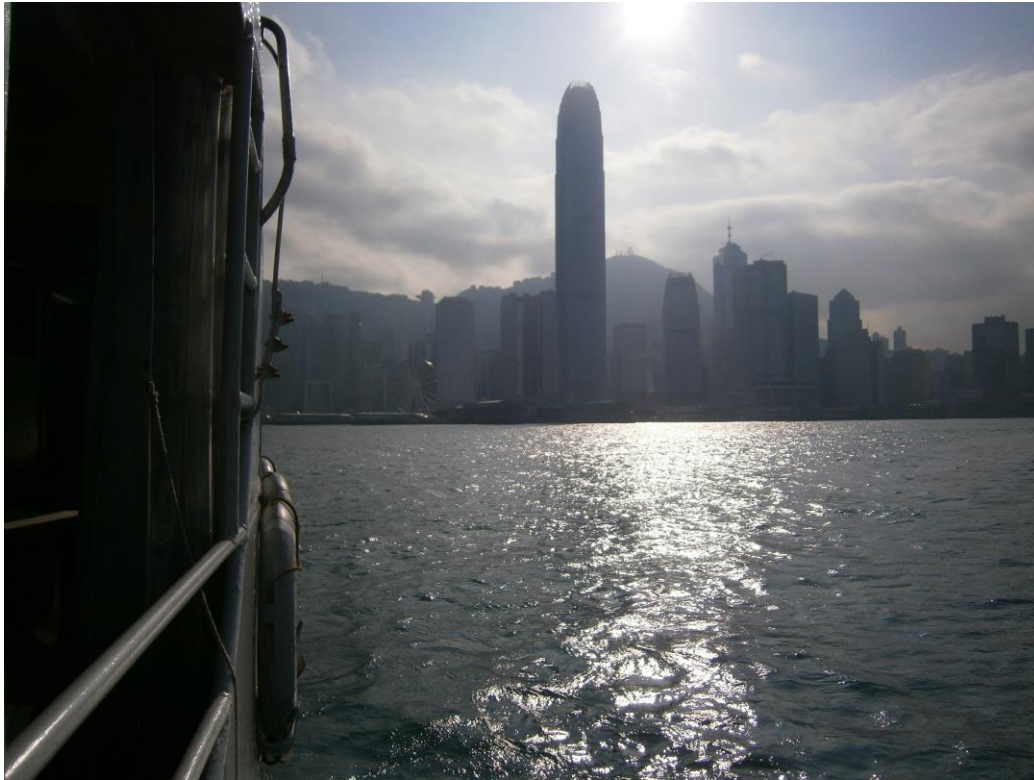
Finally, just a wee side note. If you are someone who needs to use Ibuprofen instead of Paracetamol I recommend that you take enough of a supply over with you. Not only will it be cheaper but Ibuprofen cannot be acquired without a prescription. Also, as a student you get free appointments with GPs and Physios, which is really convenient.



A view of a cemetery near Kennedy Town. I loved how efficient HK was with space.



Gorgeous view from atop the Ferris Wheel at Ocean Park



Catching the Star Ferry across the Harbour. A cheap journey and always an adventure!



One of the many fascinating buildings HK has to offer. I can't help but see headless koala bears clinging to a tree.