

**Durham University**  
**Semester two 2016**  
**BA, major in Music**

The Durham University system can be very confusing, but it does provide a number of different support systems. As an international student, you'll receive plenty of help from your department and your college.

I study Music, and I was in University College, and obviously my experience will be different to yours depending on your major and your college, but hey, if you happen to have exactly the same experience as me, this might be helpful!

Department:

- Within your department, you'll have a departmental advisor. You'll meet them in Fresher's week (if you arrive at the beginning of the academic year), and their job is to make sure all your classes (papers/modules) work and that you've completed the appropriate enrolment. If you're lucky, they might continue checking up on you throughout your stay.
- Your departmental advisor doesn't take care of your cross crediting, that is looked after by the department admin. Be nice to them.
- If you are studying music and have any worries at all, I would totally recommend asking the departmental office. I found them so friendly and willing to help with anything related to your exchange.

Clubs:

- The Fresher's Fair is like OUSA Clubs Day on steroids. It can be very overwhelming, and the building is often packed during the day. However, if you can brave the crowds (or go nearer to 5pm), it's a really good idea to attend. At the risk of sounding like someone's mother, clubs are a great way to make friends in a new place.
- The LGBT+ Association has lots of chill social events, but they also do a lot of work with the Durham Students Union, pushing for things like gender neutral bathrooms and trans student ambassadors. If you're looking for a queer inclusive space and/or to get involved in that side of things while you're in Durham, these are the people you want to meet. If you need more in the way of support while you're there, your college may very well have an LGBT+ group, or at the very least provide welfare officers you can chat with.
- The Erasmus (European exchange system? I think? They let me in, you should be fine) association is also really good if you want to explore the UK. They do weekend trips and sometimes organise a van to Newcastle for clubbing purposes.
- I also joined the Sci-Fi society, which holds sci-fi movie showings once a week. Would recommend.

College:

- Durham is a collegiate university, which means that every student is a member of a college, whether they "live in" or not. Think of them as Halls of Residence, except a *little* more culty. You don't have to live in your college, but you also don't get to pick. They can be really good in terms of easy socialisation, food provision, and security (you don't really have to organise it yourself), but if only a few of them sound like places you'd like

to live, don't be scared to opt out. Finding your own accom can be intimidating, but it can also be a *lot* cheaper.

- Each college is quite different, and I believe University College is the most formal/traditional/involved, so this next bit might only be helpful if you get accepted there:
  1. University College is referred to as “Castle”, because the main buildings are Durham Castle (!!!) (no one else seemed to find this as crazy as I did)
  2. When you get assigned to Castle, you get assigned “academic parents”. This practice is definitely carried out at other colleges, but at Castle it's a more encouraged relationship. Your “parents” are a pair of second or third year students who are also members of your college. They're supposed to show you around, look after you, and get you drunk. You know, like your actual parents. They can be really helpful as your first point of contact with Durham students.
  3. University College also has a mentor system. For domestic students, this is someone on staff who works/studies/teaches in your major, but international students get lumped together. Your mentor might organise meet ups, as a whole group or individually. They're just another person there to answer your questions. I attended Durham in the 2016 Michealmas (October-December) term, and the international mentor was Nancy. Nancy is an honest-to-God ANGEL. She organised tea parties for us, and we would go to her house and bake up a storm, eat as much as we could, and be driven home with Tupperware chockablock with treats. She even made sure I had vegan leftovers for my vegan flatmate! She came to my house for tea, and brought biscuits, she offered to lend me money when my card had to be cancelled! She originally came to Durham as an international student from America, so she knows how weird it can seem.
- There's a lot of confusing aspects to University College, things like formal dinners and gowns (not like a pretty dress, think Harry Potter robes), but overall the collegiate system is a great way to make friends and learn about the city. I'd recommend going for the beginning of the academic year (October), and making use of all the Fresher's Week events.

#### Accommodation:

- Finding a flat in a new city where you don't know anyone, before you arrive, can be overwhelming. But don't rule it out. I'd recommend using the Facebook page Durham Find A Housemate. Even if you're only there for one term, you've got a good chance of finding somewhere.
- You can expect to pay between £50-£150 a week for rent. A lot of flats closer to campus are *very* expensive, because a lot of Durham students are quite well off.
- If you are looking to save money on rent, check out flats in Gilesgate. It's up a hill, about 20 minutes walk from town (and the music department), 30-40 from main campus (the science site and main library are further away, humanities are probably 25 minutes). However, the rent is much cheaper, there are fewer students, and it's closer to the second shopping centre, which has a couple big supermarkets, departments stores, Poundland, etc.. Plus, if you don't fancy walking up a hill every day, the blue buses offer £1 student day passes around the city.

- I stayed in a 4 bedroom flat in Gilesgate, where rent was £60pw, non-inclusive. That's around \$90-120, and while the house might not be what you'd expect for that price in Dunedin, it was warm and comfortable. And you're going to want warmth in Durham.

#### Banking:

- I never opened a UK bank account, choosing instead to use my Kiwibank Visa Debit card as I normally would. This is due to a few reasons. Firstly, I was only going to be in England for three months, and travelling Europe for one. Secondly, I would be receiving, and living off, *weekly* Studylink payments. Thirdly, I had heard that international transactions could be complicated and expensive. I really wanted to avoid regularly paying hefty international fees.
- I did consider getting a cash passport, which is a card you load up with different currency online for use in multiple countries. The only reason I didn't get one of these is that the Dunedin store ran out the week before I left, and by the time I was leaving Auckland I had decided on using my normal card instead.
- Originally, I planned to work off once a week cash withdrawals. However, I realised late in the game that withdrawing cash involved some brutal international ATM fees. While using my Kiwibank card incurred a conversion fee, I still paid that when getting cash.
- I did have to pay my monthly rent in cash, because neither mine nor my landlord's bank would accept international transactions. It worked out.
- While using my normal card was easy and convenient, I did have my account hacked when I was in England. I have no idea when/how this happened, or if it was connected to my using the card overseas or anything like that, but because it was a Kiwibank card, the new one had to be sent from New Zealand. I had excellent customer service from my bank, and because it was a Visa card I was able to get an emergency cash withdrawal from Visa, but I had two very stressful weeks without access to my money. So no matter what banking solution you go with, I would *strongly* recommend having two options. You don't have to use both obviously, but it will stop you from getting into a similar situation while you're away from home and those who can help you.
- I would also strongly recommend thinking this over and finding the best solution for you. Because there are a lot of options, and they depend on your individual circumstances.

#### Exploring

- Durham itself is absolutely gorgeous, and has so many interesting things to visit, the Cathedral and Castle being the top two. It's a lovely old, old, old town, and for me that air of history never got boring. It's beautiful in Autumn with leaves all over the cobbled stone bridges and narrow roads, and honestly I stopped to take photos on my way to class almost every day. I felt like I was in a Jane Austen novel.
- Durham is in the north of England, a ten minute train journey from Newcastle. From there, you can travel to Scotland in a couple of hours, or down to London in about the same. There's not a lot of exciting tourist attractions in the surrounding area (unless you count Newcastle), but there is a lot of lovely scenery.

Overall, Durham is a very cool place. I learnt so much that's not offered at Otago, and had so many new adventures. The student population is very different to Dunedin, so it is a very

different experience (no couch fires, no street parties, and binge drinking in formal gowns), but thankfully the climate and language are about the same!

Enjoy the experience, embrace the differences, and take the opportunity to explore Europe while you're in the area. Most importantly, have fun!