

## Experience report—University of British Columbia

Winter Semester 2021/22 Term 2: January – April 2022

FU Berlin: Master Program North American Studies – Sociology and Culture

UBC: Arts – Sociology, Geography, History, Canadian Studies



*Picture taken on a casual walk on campus in January*

My term in Vancouver is characterized by three aspects: intense studies at UBC, abundant nature for long walks, and great Asian cuisine. Even though I took mostly upper-level undergraduate courses, the workload at UBC far exceeded what I was used to at FU at the graduate level. In the end, I spent lots of time during the term on course work, slightly balanced by food exploration and long walks accompanied by sea, mountains and forests. but the plus side is, all course work is thoroughly planned out during the term with clear deadlines, including final papers, and I was completely free when the term was over. I planned a research stay after the term ended, and I'd

recommend this to anyone who wishes to stay on a bit longer, experience the city without the hectic of a full-loaded term and combine the stay with your own research agenda.

### **Preparation**

I began the application process more than a year before my departure. Apart from the formal process at FU Direct Exchange, there's also the scholarship opportunity at DAAD. The application there ends normally already at the end of September, so plan in lots of time to gather documents, especially those letters of reference! Once accepted, GoGlobal at UBC sent out various emails with detailed instructions on visa, accommodation, course registration, etc. In general, people at GoGlobal were very responsive to my questions, and I've had only good experiences with them.

### **Accommodation**

Because of COVID, there were not enough spots for exchange students to stay on campus residence. I ended up having to search for a place on my own. GoGlobal sent out a helpful info package for housing. With its help, I managed to find a room in Kerrisdale through Facebook. The place is close to the R4 bus stop East Blvd, and only takes about 25 minutes to campus. There are many sublet offers in various UBC Facebook Housing groups, but the search process was, at least in my case, very arduous. If you are not determined to live off campus or don't already have friends to rent a place with together, I personally would recommend taking an on-campus housing option. It saves time and energy on endless searching and sending out messages with low reply rate, and as I moved on campus later on, I find it actually very nice to be so close to campus facilities, the beach, and other students. There's also a vibrant community feeling while living on campus. One downside is the cost: student housing doesn't offer many cheap options, and food & groceries are generally on the pricy side in this neighbourhood.

### **Studies**

I took four courses in four different disciplines: Feminist Geographies (Geography), Asian Migrations to the Americas (History), Sociology of Emotions (Sociology), and Senior Seminar in Canadian Studies (Canadian Studies). I have only good words to say about

these courses, and feel very lucky to have participated in them. Maybe because of the courses I chose, the course format, especially assignments, were very different from what I was used to at FU. We made video documentaries, wrote manifestos, read memoirs and discussed in live session with the authors, watched movies and kept personal emotion journals. All the instructors I have had are approachable, always up for a good and casual conversation, encouraging and able to give very good constructive feedback. I have learnt a lot from them and fellow students, who were always courteous and active participants. The class discussion was also somewhat different from my experiences at FU. Here it could often feel more personal, conversational and unfinished, less formal and hierarchical. Another fellow exchange student from Cologne took courses in the program Gender, Race, Sexuality and Social Justice, and have had a wonderful experience with the faculty and fellow students as well.

Meanwhile, I've also heard about not so good experiences from other fellow students, so maybe I was lucky in my course choice. My personal recommendation would be to branch out to various disciplines when registering or auditing courses, and taking the ones that really interest you, as the large workload and tight schedule would seem even more strenuous if you don't like the course all that much. Even though there are some restrictions and extra steps for exchange student when it comes to course registration, the instructors and program coordinators are always responsive and kind to student's enquiries.

One thing I found helpful is the published syllabi from courses offered in previous terms. This may not apply for all disciplines, but the sociology department, for example, has on its website most syllabi from previous courses ready for download. It helped me to get a better picture of the course content and requirement, as the course description on UBC website is mostly quite bare. Alternatively, you could also email the course instructor for a working version of the syllabus.

### **Day-to-day and leisure activities**

If you are looking for more affordable groceries, keep a lookout for small ethnic grocers on commercial streets. Most food options and grocers concentrate on major

commercial streets, such as the 41<sup>st</sup> Ave in Kerrisdale, or West Blvd or West 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue in Kitsilano, just to name a few that are closer to campus.

Because of my Chinese heritage, I like to go to neighborhoods such as Fraser-Victoria, Kingsway in Vancouver, Crystal Mall in Burnaby, Parker Place, Yaohan Center and Richmond Public Market in Richmond and explore old-style markets and food stalls there. Steveston Fisherman's Wharf is also an interesting place to explore if you like seafood. Many days in the week fishermen sell freshly caught seafood here, with good prices. There's also a museum here with local histories, a park great for picnic and kite flying, and a long trail (West Dyke Trail) offering meditative mountain view all the way to the North end of Richmond.

If you like mountain activities, North Vancouver is the place to explore. Winter activities such as skiing, snowboarding and snowshoeing are popular among the locals. Because of my limited budget, I couldn't explore this side of the Vancouver living this time around, but I always enjoyed seeing people in ski gears carrying their boards on the bus heading North. These mountains are also great places for hiking during summer months. If you like water activities, there are several kayak centres that rent out boats and paddle boards. Popular ones include Deep Cove and Jericho Beach. The city also has many beaches, including the ones on campus. The U-Pass (Semesterticket) gives access to public transport in the whole Metro Vancouver area, including several surrounding islands, cities as east as Coquitlam and as south as White Rock. This makes good opportunities for a day's outing.

Vancouver is nicknamed Raincouver, so you can imagine it rains a lot here. This weather definitely has an impact on mood, especially in winter months. Typical city life is not as buzzing and diverse as in Berlin, and most places close early. Cultural activities do exist, but pale in comparison. I recommend VIFF if you like cinema. Except for certain commercial streets, the city is dark and quiet as soon as night arrives. Prices are high for almost everything, which was quite a shock when I first arrived. People say it's a great city for retirement if you have money, and to a certain extent it makes sense to me. All things considered, it could make it difficult for people to make new friends here, outside of the UBC bubble. However, I was lucky enough to make some good friends here, but

mostly after the term was over. Living on campus might've made it easier to establish friendships during the term, as the course work here usually takes up the majority of time among students.