

Experience Report:

semester abroad at the York University - Fall Term 2022

Preparation (planning, organisation and application at the host institution)

I started planning this in October 2021, not long after I joined Oldenburg University as a student. I always wanted to go for an exchange semester, especially outside of Europe so I started looking long in advance for opportunities and this is when I found out that the university had a partnership with York University. With a friend, also interested in studying abroad, we started the process together and it made it better as a lot of documents were needed. We were supporting each other throughout the process. I then waited for an answer. At York University, there is a double application process that I had to make sure I am completing. After knowing from the University of Oldenburg that I was selected, in January, I got an email from the host institution a couple of weeks later where I had to go through another application process. Make sure that you are checking every now and then for an answer. In my situation, I never received the confirmation from York University and luckily, I checked their website a little bit before the acceptance deadline.

Travel and arrival

I travelled early September from my home country via United Airlines in order to arrive a week before classes. I wanted to have enough to get over the jetlag as well as to have some time to settle in the new city and discover a little bit the surroundings.

Accommodation

Student dorms at York can be really expensive. As an undergrad student, you are expected to pay for a Meal Plan. As a grad student, you are expected to get a flat by yourself which is quite some money. In addition, exchange students are not necessarily the first to have access to these dorms. Seeing how the rate has increased in Toronto (+ 16% this past year), how hard it is to find a place in a WG and just how expensive it is, I thought it'd be better to live with a family and be emerged in the Canadian culture. I found my host family through homestay. My first experience was hard and took a toll on my mental health due to very very bad conditions of living. I had to email one of the coordinators of the program I was following at York in order to get out of this messy situation. They will always do their best to help students and make sure that your semester is going well. Within a week-end, I had a new place to stay at with a retired professor from the university that was just amazingly lovely. I had a good time with her and we are still in contact nowadays. After a hard time, I had a blast living with her.

I would definitely recommend looking to live with a family as there are definitely some aspects that will differ from the German / European culture or try to find a roommate. I would also recommend looking for a place to stay as soon as possible. Even if you are not sure you are going to go or when you'll arrive. Otherwise you might get less housing opportunities. A lot of students I know where going for the city center for the bars and pubs but in the suburbs, it was also really nice and I was still very close to downtown (20 min by subway). Don't hesitate to broaden your search. Suburbs are amazingly beautiful and it's really like small cosy neighbourhoods and not just a crowd of people you're surrounding with.

Studying at the host university (courses, academic performance / credits, support, credit transfer)

I attempted three courses at York U and I only received great grades (between A and A+). The professors are really helpful. They tell you from the beginning of the semester what are their expectations. I had weekly assignments for two of my classes. It might be a bit time-consuming but you receive constant feedback so it's perfect to improve. Professors are always willing to answer questions and it happened more than once that I emailed a professor on a week-end, only to get an answer 5 minutes after. As a grad student, I had courses within small groups so professors know who you are, what you are capable of and you have close relationships with them which is really agreeable. For the credit transfer, York U will only send your grades to your home university once you made sure to complete the UHIP (the health insurance for exchange students) payment and the undergrad/grad association payment.

Everyday life and leisure time

The life in Toronto is very expensive. Definitely not something like Germany. In addition, tax prices are not mentioned on the prices displayed so you have to remember what taxes you should add to the prices, depending on what you are buying. And tipping is kinda mandatory. Waiters will expect you to tip them at least 15%, even if you just casually go to Tim Horton's to buy something for take-away.

In order to visit a little bit, I always made sure to have most of my homework and assignments done during the week so I can go visit on the week-end. You have several opportunities on the week-end to travel for cheaper. You also have the Tuesday offer from ViaRail (their train service) to get some discounts. I went to Niagara Falls, the CN Tower, Toronto Islands, Scarborough Bluffs, Montréal, Ottawa, ... Don't hesitate to travel a little bit and explore. The landscapes are really amazing and believe me, a picture is not worth capturing memories.

York U is also organizing a lot of events. You have coffee breaks for international students where you can meet so many new people. You have games where you can cheer up for York U sports team. This is also an incredibly nice activity to do as you can see the spirit of the university.

General experience, credit transfer, conclusion (tips for other students, DOs and DONTs)

It was an overall great experience but if you are a bit tight on money, you might want to apply for other universities. Toronto has become one of the most expensive cities in Canada and it's very hard to find accommodation for a great price. So, start looking as soon as you can. And don't hesitate to live in the suburbs, the subway system is kinda strange with lines only going up and down and left and right but you can reach the city very quickly. Do join the events they are organizing. You'll meet new people. Don't be afraid by the fact that your classmates are going to be different for every class. I made great friendship with people that I met only once a week. Don't be afraid by their vegetables and fruits (they don't really have any taste and you will definitely be surprised by it the first time). And don't hesitate to ask for help when you need it. Might it be a professor's help, a classmate's, another international student or directly from the International Office. There's always someone to help!