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## **Erfahrungsbericht / Experience Report**

### **Für Austauschprogramme / for Exchange Programmes**

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**University of British Columbia, Ca-  
nada**

**Social and Economic Data Science,  
5th semester**

**Winter Term 2023**

Gast- Universität und Land /  
Host University and Country

Semester und Studiengang /  
Semester and Study Programme

Daten des Auslandsaufenthalts /  
Dates of your exchange period

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**Bitte gehen Sie auf folgende Punkte ein: / Please comment on the following points:**

- Vorbereitung und Ankunft / Preparation and arrival
- Unterkunft, Krankenversicherung und Kosten / Accommodation, health insurance and costs
- Kurswahl und Studium an der Gasthochschule/ Course selection and study at the host university
- Alltag, Freizeit und Reisen / Everyday life, leisure activities and travel

**Persönlicher Bericht / Personal report:**

Before the exchange began, I had to take care of the usual organizational matters. This will be the most boring and also the most negative part of this report. Before I get that out of the way, I would already like to say that I am very glad that I decided to go on this exchange, that I had a great time and that I gained incredibly valuable experience. I am also grateful that I was given this opportunity.

Course selection turned out to be a bit challenging in my case. My plan was to prioritize taking the two statistics courses on graduate level that I needed to finish my master's. However, choices were limited and there is a special procedure to register for graduate courses. One needs to ask the course instructor for a signature, which is based on their judgement on whether a student has fulfilled the courses requirements. Then, this permission needs to be forwarded to a graduate advisor and afterwards to the Global Office. Most course instructors did not respond at all until very close to the semester beginning. This meant that I didn't know whether my plan worked or not until I was already in Vancouver. I did not get permission to take most courses as I did not fulfill the courses requirements, which were relevant statistics courses taken in the past. I only got into 2 graduate level courses offered by the Department of Statistics, but one was not at graduate level at all and was more of an introduction to the programming language R and the other one was too advanced and required more knowledge in probability theory than I had. I also didn't have the chance to catch up on this as the course only lasted 2 months and required handing in assignments every week. Also, already in the first session, we had to do mathematical proofs by hand on paper, while the instructor walked around and checked on us. While I am sure the instructor only wanted to offer help by taking a look at what we did, I felt very uncomfortable because I had no idea how to even approach the task. However, SEDS is a very interdisciplinary program and taken by people with very different focus areas. There are definitely SEDS students that would have had better chances following this course, as my focus is on software engineering. I decided to drop this course. Before counting on taking graduate level courses at the Department of statistics, I recommend carefully reading the course requirements and expecting instructors to take them very seriously and that you will indeed need the specified knowledge. In the end, I took the introduction to R course, which was a slightly mislabelled as "Data Exploration" and split into two courses that respectively spanned two halves of the semester, "Creative Writing for the New Media" a course that I found interesting but I was not able to get credits for in my master's and the social science course "Data and Society".

Other preparations included making sure I was insured. UBC simplifies this by automatically insuring you when you are an exchange student. However, I additionally bought travel insurance. Search for accommodation in Vancouver was not necessary, because I applied for student housing and got notified that I was accepted sufficiently early. UBC also lets you know the E-Mail addresses of you flatmates, so that we were able to set up a WhatsApp group and got to know each other a bit before moving it. Regarding luggage, I took a 100L duffel bag that I could also use as a backpack and an additional 30L backpack. This was enough room to live abroad for 4 months with and also turned out to be convenient to continue travelling with for some time after the exchange.

The exchange started, as to be expected with an exchange overseas, with the flight from Frankfurt to Vancouver. The other exchange student from Konstanz and me booked it some months in advance, so that we could fly on the same plane. We wanted to arrive 3 days before the semester officially started to get the chance to acclimatize. Our original plan was to sleep some nights in a hostel, but, as we were both lucky enough to score rooms in the same student home (Fairview Crescent) on campus, we also applied for early check in there. Early check in is a bit more expensive per night than a hostel, but we found it to be easier from a logistical perspective and also more comfortable.

Both of us were able to check into the student homes earlier, so that we took a taxi straight from the airport to UBC. I recommend having the address of the student home front desk at hand, as we were not immediately able to tell the taxi driver where exactly we needed to go, which caused slight irritation and delay. On arrival, I was the only person that lived in my 4 person flat share. The others arrived on the day the semester began. After picking up our keys and leaving our stuff in our rooms, we went for dinner, even though the time of day was a bit slurry at that point, in one of the many restaurants on campus. Our first impression of the surroundings of the student home were very positive, as it looked like a friendly suburb where surprisingly, even though it was on campus, many families lived. The student home was also near a beautiful big forest area.

On our second day in Vancouver, we took a 40 minutes bus, public transportation is included in the university fees, from campus to Vancouver Downtown, explored the city, went grocery shopping and bought kitchen equipment and bed linen. Buying kitchen equipment was necessary, especially in my case, because all of the inhabitants of my flat were exchange students that only stayed for one term and therefore the flat was completely unequipped. I benefited from bringing camping tableware and a swiss army knife, which our flat used intensively as a kitchen knife. It was said that there were some so called donation zones where you could pick up things from past exchange students, but it was not clear where. We ended up buying stuff in a second hand store in Vancouver Downtown and in Walmart, which was a bit further away. In Walmart, we were a bit shocked by the grocery prices. There are stores on campus where you can get most of the basic kitchen

equipment and bed linen, but they are even more expensive than Walmart or second hand. In Walmart, we also bought a relatively cheap but absolutely expensive mobile data plan that did not include much data. However, in my case I think they registered the wrong E-Mail address, which caused my mobile data to stop working after the first month. I could have probably easily fixed this, but I decided against it, because there is eduroam on campus and in downtown I had wifi access in cafés or bars I visited, so that I could go to these places when I needed. Regarding internet access, another thing needed for a flat in Fairview Crescent, is a wifi router. There is free internet access, but only via LAN, so that we shared the costs for a common router. In Fairview Crescent, which is a bit on the edge of main campus, eduroam is not reliable. While I also had trouble with eduroam sometimes in some buildings, it is available near university buildings. We bought a new router in a store on campus, but we could have probably also bought one second hand. The latter primarily happens on Craigslist and Facebook marketplace. Prices on there are very low sometimes have a good quality. For example, our flat bought a TV for 30 CAD per person. Unfortunately I didn't have Facebook. Another social media account that comes in handy at UBC is Instagram, because most of the student group events are only advertised on there and you miss out when you don't have Instagram. On Facebook marketplace, my flatmate also bought a used bicycle that was in better condition but less expensive than a used bike I bought in a bike store. Apps like this were also used to sell the items we had to buy to equip the flat towards the end of the exchange.

An important day at the beginning of the semester is the so called "Imagine Day", which is a day where exchange students get assigned to groups and attend introduction events and campus tours. Because I registered for the buddy program, I was assigned to a group led by the global ambassador of my buddy group. The buddy program included extra events organized by the ambassador and the chance to ask them questions. The first thing I noticed in my group was that the majority of students seemed to be undergraduates and were around 4 years younger than me. What I also noticed is that people were easy-going with spending their money and did not seem to reflect much on the environmental consequences of their travels. Some people organized weekend trips by plane to the arctic region.

The introduction events and the campus tour was very informative. During one of the events we were introduced to the UBC Learning Exchange program, in which university staff and students use their skills to give something back to the community in Vancouver Downtown. I decided to volunteer there and was even assigned to a Data Science project, where I contributed to a service that allows homeless people to easier access assistance infrastructure. However, I didn't stay in contact with any of the people I met during imagine day and even though the global ambassador asked whether people were interested in them organizing additional events, no one, apart from some people reacting with a thumbs up to their message in the WhatsApp group, reacted. I met most of my friends through my Israeli flatmate, who was also in his mid twenties and very well connected with other people from Israel and through activities advertised in the main non-official WhatsApp group of Winter Term exchange students.

UBC campus is located a bit away from Vancouver Downtown and surrounded by the pacific. If the weather is good you can see the mountains in the north. Being surrounded by the pacific, the campus also has beaches. Wreck beach is the beach where most people go. We were very lucky with the weather and could swim in the pacific for a long time. One memory of mine is playing ball on this beach with the Brazilian Student Group, which is a bit counter-intuitive for Canada. During the beginning of our exchange, we heard from many people that the weather will soon consist mainly of rain, but this was only rarely the case so that hikes and other outdoor activities were possible in pleasant conditions. On UBC campus, also if its raining, many activities are possible. There are museums, theatres, a free indoor swimming pool, a very crowded but inexpensive climbing gym and a student run cinema that shows movies twice a week. Another thing one notices on campus is the first nation, in the case of the campus Musqueam, language and art. UBC and Vancouver administration makes sure that the fact that the land they are located on is stolen is brought to attention. Prior to most events, a so called land acknowledgment is recited.

I never had trouble finding a spot to sit and work from, even though sometimes it was in a crowded busy hall, which I can personally find pleasant. In these halls, I worked remotely for jobs in Germany a lot. This was not optimal because of the time difference, as I could not really attend most team meetings. Staying in contact with family and friends in Germany takes planning, as you always need to consider the time difference. Most calls with people from Germany happen in the morning.

I already described my trouble with the university courses, but two of the three courses I visited were of high teaching quality. Especially the course "Data and Society", which I warmly recommend to SEDS students, was very interesting and engaging. The locations of courses sometimes required a bicycle to make it to the next course on time.

Cycling on campus was pleasant as there are enough bike paths and not that much traffic. In all of Vancouver, there are enough bike paths to get around safely and you see many cyclists. However, I recommend getting familiar with the bike path system, because it can be stressful to suddenly end up on a crowded highway. Vancouver Downtown has a very aesthetical skyline that benefits from its location at the pacific and the mountains in the background. However, one aspect to get used to was the homelessness and drug use situation. There are areas in Vancouver, especially East Hastings Street,

were you see dozens of people lying unconsciously on the street or taking drugs in public. In addition to these problems, there is a mental health crisis and you sometimes see people behaving erratically on the streets. Of course the main priority here are the people suffering, but when I would describe my experience with it, I would say that even though I always felt uncomfortable when encountering this, it is sad how fast one gets used to it and simply ignores it. Personally, I also never felt threatened or in danger.

On my second day, right after I bought my bike, I cycled to Grouse mountain, which is a mountain in North Vancouver with a system of hiking trails. On my way there, I cycled through Stanley Park, which is a large park with a dense forest directly next to Downtown. I also cycled on Lionsgate Bridge. This bridge connects Vancouver Downtown to North Vancouver and is also the path one takes to get to Highway 99, a very scenic highway leading to Horseshoe Bay, where you can take a ferry to Vancouver Island, and to Squamish, a town full of outdoor people, Garibaldi Lake, one of the most beautiful places I have ever seen and Whistler, the famous ski area.

On that highway I had some bad luck with cars. Once, our car broke down in a dangerous position to stop in, right after a curve. When renting a car, I recommend checking beforehand if the car is equipped with warning vests, as this is not mandatory in British Columbia. Otherwise you have no choice but to use gestures to warn other cars. In typical Canadian manner, a friendly truck driver towed our car to a safer position. The similarly friendly police officer arriving to secure the site and did not even ask us for driving licenses or other documents, even though it was obvious we were foreigners. This situation got more adventurous when no towing truck showed up and we had no other choice but to leave the car behind and hike 30 minutes to Horseshoe Bay, where we could take an Uber to campus. The other car incident happened when we bumped into another car when changing lanes right after Lionsgate Bridge. But nothing serious happened and, again, in typical Canadian manner, the other driver said such things happen and after exchanging personal details and with a ductaped mirror, we continued our journey after 30 minutes. Because its insurance was good enough to cover all the damages of these incidents and because of its relatively low prices, I recommend the app "Turo" to rent cars in Vancouver.

I was passenger in cars rented through Turo both times I travelled to Vancouver Island. Vancouver Island is a big island located a ~40 minute ferry ride away from Vancouver. On this island, there is Victoria, the capital of British Columbia, with its beautiful China Town and historical buildings. However, what truly sets Vancouver Island apart is its pristine nature. The opportunities for hiking, climbing, kayaking, skiing, and surfing are abundant, making it a destination I'm eager to return to. Despite visiting late in the year, we still managed to enjoy several hikes, with some members of our group even went surfing. Vancouver Island has incredibly beautiful beaches and wild shorelines. Especially memorable moments were being on beaches during the sunset.

Unfortunately, my time in Vancouver came to an abrupt end shortly after Christmas. While the semester ended before the holiday, I was able to extend my stay in student housing, similar to the Early Move-in option. However, I learned the importance of thoroughly reviewing the rental contract you sign. In my case, not doing so led to an unexpected encounter during a Christmas left over lunch with friends, as someone arrived questioning why I hadn't returned the keys yet. I had assumed I could return them before the office closed, resulting in a stressful to organize an accelerated move-out.

After moving out of student housing, I took a bus that crossed the border and stayed some days in Seattle, which is located a bit down the west coast close to Vancouver. I took another bus to Portland, where I spent New Years, and then took a very long train through the night to San Francisco. From there, I took a plane to New York, where I stayed a few days as well and then left to Frankfurt. Reflecting on this journey, I highly recommend this itinerary not only for its experiences but also from an environmental standpoint. I feel like I made sufficient use of the fact that I was in North America, but added only one plane landing to my journey homewards.

In conclusion, I must highlight again that my exchange experience was truly one of the most unforgettable times of my life, and I wholeheartedly recommend it to anyone. I already find myself experiencing a sense of nostalgia and would like to visit Vancouver again some time.

Jonas Stettner