

## **Global Exchange: Final Report**

University of British Columbia (UBC), Vancouver Campus

Fall 2023

Degree program in Freiburg: Computer Science (Master)

Classes taken during the exchange in: Canadian Studies, Computer Science, French, Statistics

### **TLDR**

Thanks to its size, reputation, cultural diversity, location, opportunities and people I find UBC to be the perfect blend of everything for an exchange. Here, exchange students get the chance to substantially improve both academically and as a person. Surrounded by inspiring nature, students regularly witness breathtaking sunsets, majestic ocean waves, tall snowy mountain peaks, and stunning cyan lakes. However, every rose has its thorn. And the most prominent one for UBC is Vancouver, the city it lies within. Unfortunately, Vancouver is rather expensive with regard to costs of living, encompassing high housing and grocery prices. Not to mention the people that were consequently left without a roof over their heads wandering the streets of East-Downtown Vancouver, an area to avoid while there.



*Rose garden on UBC campus*

### **General Introduction to UBC**

I will start with a general introduction to UBC then switch to a more personal note in the upcoming sections.

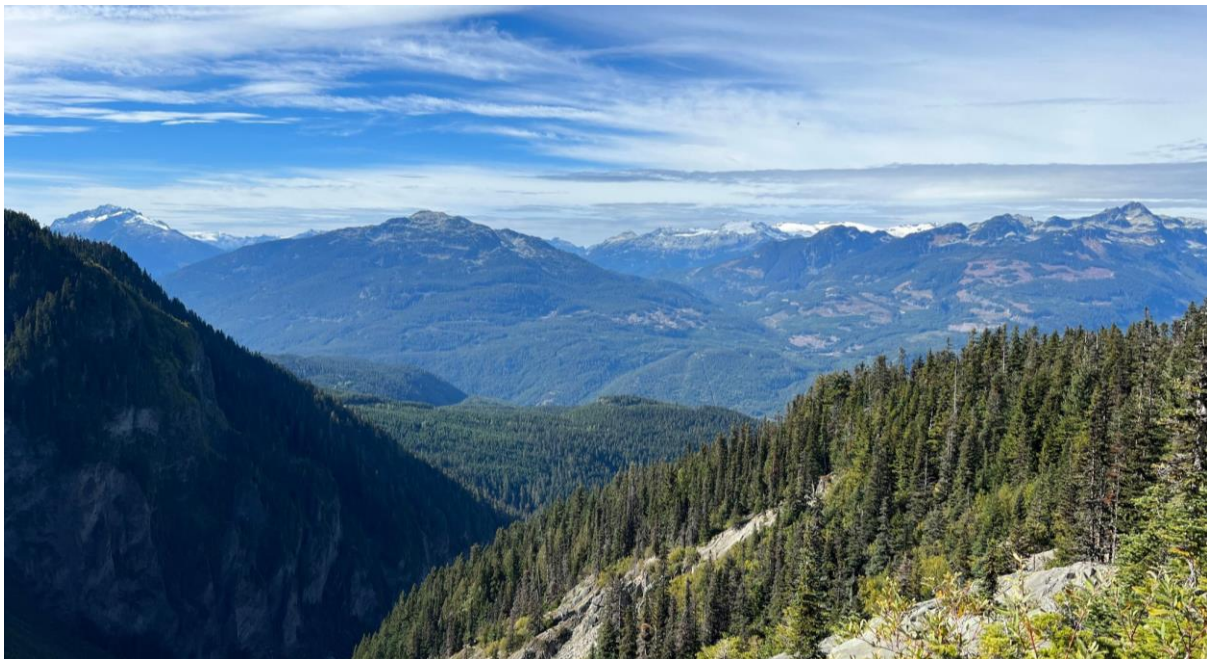
Trust me, you have made the right choice by putting UBC on your preference list, specifically its campus in Vancouver.

One pivotal reason is its academic excellence. UBC is a renowned public research institution in Canada, inside the beautiful province of British Columbia. It has been operating since 1915 and over the years has made substantial contributions to fields such as environmental

sciences, forestry, medicine, physics, chemistry etc. It is consistently ranked among the top 3 universities in Canada.

Another reason is its location. The campus emanates a very relaxing atmosphere, which lies on the Point Grey Peninsula, a land that used to belong to indigenous people. This campus is like none-other, incomparable to what exists in Europe. Its vast size can be intimidating at first. Walking from one end to the other will take about 40 minutes, however classes are located in close proximity to the fountain (Martha Piper Plaza), so most students tend to walk about 8 minutes to get to their classes. Nonetheless, in an extreme scenario one can expect to walk up to 20 minutes to get from one lecture to the other.

Nevertheless, since people come from all over the world to see the campus for its beauty, students rushing from one building to the other will not mind walking.



*View from a lookout at Sea-to-Sky Gondola*

## **Classes at UBC**

Now let's switch to a more personal note and dive into more detail on how classes are structured.

Expect classes to be very different from what you are used to in Freiburg. They condense more material into a shorter period of time, making the semesters a lot more fast-paced and exam periods significantly shorter. Before going into the specifics, let me clarify something I remember being confused about.

At UBC the year is split up into two semesters, as for any university. They refer to the first one as the winter session, and the second one as the summer session. Taking classes in the summer session is optional, and most students opt to work during that period since they try to complete their recommended 30 credits per year during the winter session instead. Deemed as more relevant, I will focus on the winter session. A winter session is broken up into 2 terms. Term 1 starts in early September and goes on until Christmas. Term 2 starts in early January and finishes at the end of April. Most exchange students spend a single term here. So far, I've spent my first term here at UBC.

So let's get back to the interesting part — classes. As I've earlier alluded to, the terms seem very rushed compared to what we are used to. Each class typically has two ninety minute long or three one hour long lectures per week. Most classes require you to complete assignments either every-week or bi-weekly. They are usually not mandatory, but they make up a certain percentage of your grade, typically about 30%. Midterms are also common, and usually two are written — one in October, and the other in November. Often, you don't need to pass them, but again, they make up about 30% of your grade. Projects or long essays are also not uncommon, and they tend to make up about 20% of your grade and you will have about a month to finish them. Final exams are the last steppingstone, and most classes require you to pass them in order to pass the course, in addition to having accumulated at least 50% on midterms, assignments, projects and small extra tasks that you get during the term. Exams make up the rest of the percentage of your grade. So for example, if you only have assignments and midterms worth 25%, and 35%, respectively, then your exam will make up 40% of your grade.

An interesting habit of each professor was that all of them started the term by saying that everybody is welcome in their class, and in theirs nobody will be discriminated against.

Professors are truly welcoming and eager to help you if you're stuck.

Following are some extra details on the classes that I took. On a side note, I got into 4 out of 5 classes that I registered for. But GoGlobal, the responsible people for exchange students at UBC, are eager to assist you if you struggle with getting registered for classes, or as a matter of fact, anything related to your exchange.

### *1. CDST 250A - Introduction to Canada*

Recommended to anyone on exchange.

Great class for getting to know the dark history of Canada. It presents a critical view on the past policies of Canada. Discusses topics like residential schools all the way to very contemporary concerns like the housing and opioid crisis. Several classes focused on Asian discrimination within Canada, such as the Japanese internment camps and Chinese head tax. So it truly embraces a wide range of controversial topics. Moreover, we even had a class on poetry for which we had to write a poem in our own language and translate it to English then present it. My poem was awarded the best overall, which was quite gratifying. I found the weekly workshops the most fun, where we split up into smaller groups and discussed the topic of the week.

### *2. CPSC 436N - Topics in Computer Science - NLP*

Suitable for CS students with some familiarity with machine learning.

Great class for people interested in Natural Language Processing (NLP) wishing to learn about its intricacies while discovering both modern and legacy algorithms in the field. Prof. Shwartz is really kind and always ready to help her students. She organized two paper readings for the last two classes, where we thoroughly discussed two recent publications in the field and dissected them to highlight their strengths and weaknesses. This makes it more compelling for people interested in research, like Master's students. Some of the assignments were pretty tough, but definitely doable since we worked on them in groups.

### *3. FREN 201 - Elementary French*

Suitable for anyone around A1 level, who have already learned French before and are interested in becoming more proficient in it.



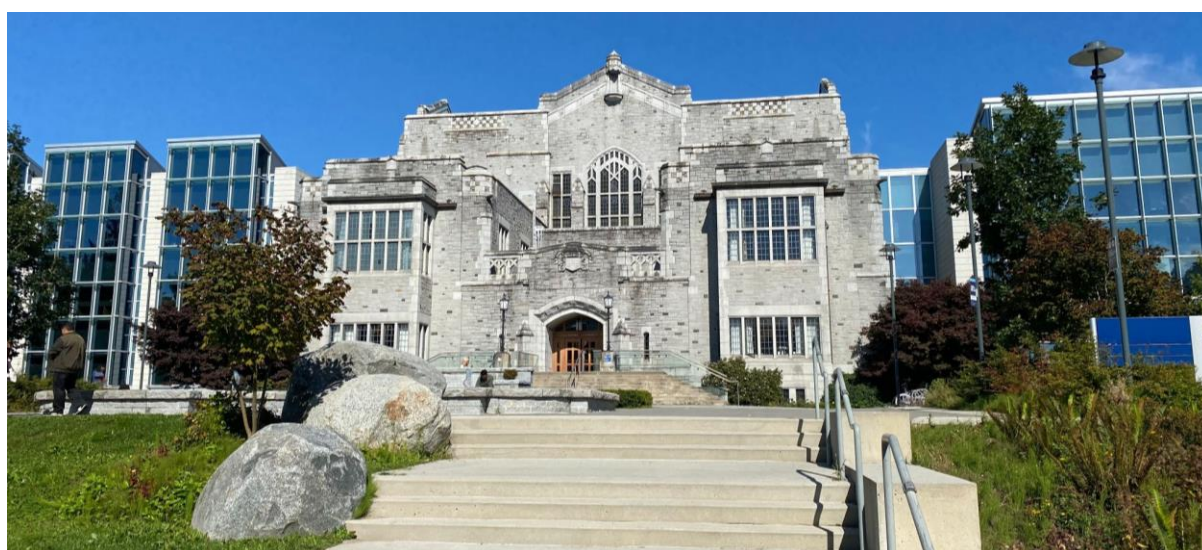
I really enjoyed this class because of the teacher, and the way it was structured. Our class was led by Prof. Vallarino, who made sure we had fun during class while still learning a lot.

#### *4. STAT 201 - Statistical Inference for Data Science*

Suitable for people with minimal programming knowledge preferably in R or potentially python, and knowledge about really basic statistical concepts. But to be honest, you will do fine without any of these if you put in a bit of extra work.

The workload for this class is pretty high, because you have to complete two assignments for every week, and later on in the term a project as well, but don't let that scare you off, it really isn't a hard class at all. The concepts are really well conveyed by the professor, and the assignments help give these a stronger foundation so you will truly comprehend them.

Overall, I believe 4 classes (3 credits each) is the right amount of workload for exchange students, however a lot of them only take 3, which is the minimum requirement by the university. The maximum you are allowed to take is 5.



*Most frequented library by students, The Irving K. Barber Learning Centre (IKB)*

### **Finances and Useful Tips**

Vancouver is expensive. Private housing prices compare well to Munich. People searching for private housing look for accommodation in Kitsilano. On the other hand, on-campus housing ranges from 300€ to 1200€ (euros!). Most apartments are around 700€, which is significantly more than what the typical European universities offer housing for. Groceries are more expensive than in Germany. Expect to pay about 500€ per month. And if you go out, expect to pay around 15€ for a basic meal. Nonetheless, it really depends on you. I like spending money on high quality foods and cooking for myself, so I paid even more for groceries. On the other hand, I rarely ate out. I got my groceries from Save-On on campus. If you want to save some money, people recommend going to No-Frills, which is also not too far.

Public transport is not as bad as you might think. For North-American standards it is really good actually. You get to use buses and the Canadian Line (metro) for 125€ per Term, which is a mandatory fee you have to pay to the university each term. Should you opt for the bus, make sure to thank the bus driver when you get off! It's very common in Vancouver.

Optionally, especially recommended for longer trips, you can use a car sharing service called EVO. Signing up is pretty complicated to be honest, as you need all documents in English, or have official translations of them. They require you to have 2 years of driving experience and no penalty points, which should be proved by a driving record that you have to source from your government. It took me two weeks to get myself approved and registered in their program. However, once you can use their service, it works pretty well, and costs about 0.35€ per minute, which switches to a more favorable hourly rate after an hour and an even more favorable rate after 6 hours, where it stays capped at 86€ for the rest of the day. So it's great for 1-2 day trips with 5 people in the car. For longer day trips, and for trips to the US I would recommend looking into Turo, also known as Airbnb for cars. We used it to drive to Seattle. There are also many rental companies, the one I recommend is Budget. We used it to get around on Vancouver Island while staying in Tofino. Your other option for getting around in the city would be biking. The infrastructure is pretty decent, much better than most other North-American cities for sure. There are a few rental options, but I'm not really familiar with them, and they certainly aren't as prominent as Frelo is in Freiburg. Your best bet is buying one from Facebook Marketplace, which is the platform people use for selling their used items. It is the equivalent to Kleinanzeigen in Vancouver. Basic used ones go for around 150€. However, the bike kitchen, which is a store that refurbishes bikes, also sells ones in great condition for a bit more. Around 250€. They run out quickly in the beginning of September, so you have to be prompt if you want to get one that you like. Regarding miscellaneous things like electronics, clothing, I didn't quite notice a significant difference in price. Albeit, I believe such items sell for somewhat cheaper here than in Germany. It is probably due to the sales tax difference.

Apropo, talking about sales tax. Don't ever forget that whatever price you see online, or on a tag in any store, or even restaurants, will be without value added tax (VAT = sales tax). In British Columbia expect to pay around 10% of tax on top of the price you see in the stores. This is the same in the US, however there taxes vary a lot. They range from 0% to around 15%, and can even differ between cities within the same state.

The university has great sports facilities and outdoor activities. As a matter of fact, sports plays a huge role in the life of many students, and in the reputation of the university in North America. Many clubs exist that you can join for free or some small fee. For instance, I joined the ski&board club for 18€, who organized lots of events for their members over the winter. Some clubs come with extra perks, in this club's case, the members could rent out free ski or snowboard gear for up to 4 days. On campus gym memberships cost about 32€ for the whole term, which is really cheap. You get to go to both Birdcoop and ARC with the same membership. However, expect these gyms to be really packed, especially at the beginning of the term. So try to go early, before 11 am, else you will be standing in line.

Don't forget that you will also have to get to your desired destination somehow. Namely, Vancouver in your case, well hopefully. Flying is really the only option here. Or technically you could fly to somewhere like California and then drive up the coast as I've heard some people have done that. Nonetheless either of these flights would cost you around 700€. Although, it really depends on your timing. If you're lucky you can get tickets for 500, but expect to make compromises. I flew straight to Vancouver from Zurich and mine cost about 700€ for basic economy fare with Air Canada. I would recommend booking a seat in advance to help chances of getting on the plane. I've heard of people (especially students traveling without a company) not getting seated on their plane because most airlines overbook international flights. The flight took 10 and a half hours. A pretty tiring one, not to mention the jet lag that follows it.

I believe that covers finances.



*View on a small part of the city from Kitsilano beach*

## **Traveling and Housing**

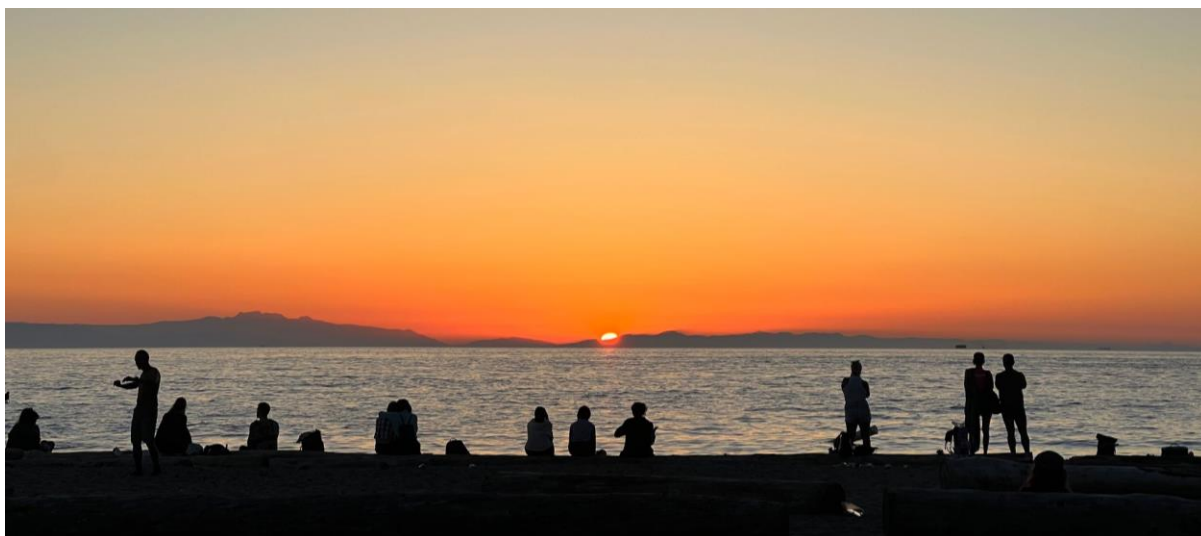
I will continue this segue on traveling. I arrived two days before the start of the term, since the dorms open their doors to their residents only a few days before the semester starts. However, in retrospect, it would have been a better decision if I had arrived earlier. Small cliques start forming very early on among exchange students, and it is crucial to be part of every early event. Additionally, you get to explore more worry-free if you arrive earlier. Nonetheless you will have to think about temporary housing opportunities if you got on-campus housing. Some people spent a few nights in hostels in Downtown before moving into the dorms. Try to avoid anything on Hastings street, or East-Downtown in general. Unfortunately, these are poor areas swarming with homeless people mostly on drugs. It can be really scary walking through there even during the day. Don't be worried though, Vancouver is actually a very safe city.

Your best choice is on-campus housing, however, it is more of a privilege, even among exchange students. As only about 60% of us get housing on campus. I was one of the lucky ones who did get allocated one. I lived in the North Tower of Walter Gage. The building has 3 towers, each with 16 floors, and looks like some old brutalist russian building complex from 60 years ago. But I can wholeheartedly recommend living here. First of all, it is one of the cheapest options — 650€ for a shared apartment with 6 rooms, 1 combined bathroom with two showers and a single toilet, and a relatively small combined living room and kitchen. Each student had their own private room. This is the most common housing option in Walter Gage. Your overall satisfaction will strongly depend on the roommates that you have, which is generally true for every shared flat, but here in Walter Gage it is especially true, due to its layout and compact spaces. I couldn't be more happy with my roommates (roommate = flatmate). Albeit, it is the luck of the draw.

All regular exchange students were either placed in Walter Gage or Fairview Crescent. Fairview, in contrast to Gage, is like a tiny village with small houses. Location wise Gage is as good as it gets, but Fairview is more calm. From Gage you might get stunning views out of your apartment if you get one of the higher floors given that your window faces the right direction. On the other hand, Fairview has a big forest and park right next to it where you can



go for walks or jogs. It is a matter of preference, which one you pick. However, you have to send the university a preference list with all the housing options that they have on campus. Put either one in front of the other if you prefer one over the other. Keep in mind that it could happen that in next semesters they will house exchange students in different dorms, though.



*View on Vancouver Island from Wreck beach*

## **Traveling around Vancouver**

I recommend everyone to go on hikes and shorter trips to explore the magnificent surroundings of Vancouver. In the finances section, I've already given some advice on the different options for getting around in North America. Kindly refer to that section if you are interested in solving the transportation aspect of traveling.

Some of the best and most popular hikes you can do are Joffrey Lakes, Garibaldi Lake, Panorama Ridge, Cypress Mountain, Grouse Grind, Sea-to-Sky Gondola. If you can only pick a single one for some reason, do Joffrey lakes, and if you are up for a challenge, try Panorama Ridge. Beware though, it is really long, but totally worth it! Best way to get to the head of the trails is with an EVO rented out for the whole day. Preferably shared with 4 other people. However, don't forget that you can rent out multiple EVOs and just go in many groups. Some popular hikes like Joffrey and Garibaldi require reserving a pass for either a car or every individual depending on the popularity of the hike. Joffrey is the worst in this regard, and it is really hard to reserve passes for the weekend. However, week-days are pass-free, along with less-busy seasons, so whole months starting from November.

Vancouver Island is also a must visit in my opinion, but it is too big to see it all. I can recommend checking out Tofino and Ucluelet, especially if you are intrigued by surfing, or Victoria, the capital of British Columbia. The island has lots of amazing hiking trails as well. You might see whales on the ferry!

Whistler is another popular destination for many students, especially ones interested in winter sports like skiing and snowboarding. As a matter of fact it is world-famous, the 2010 winter olympics was organized there, and it's only a 2 hour bus ride away from the center of the city. Ski-passes cost a lot of money however. A single day goes for 170€, and the unlimited seasonal pass costs 450€. However, in early december you can find deals, and grab passes for half the price. For people staying longer than 2 terms have the option to get

an Edge Pass, which is meant for residents of British Columbia. I believe passes cost half the price with those.

I've heard lots of great things about Banff as well, however it's somewhat far from Vancouver. Namely, about 8 hours by car. An astonishing location for going on hikes and witnessing untouched wildlife and nature. Bring a bear spray though!

Last but not least, check out Stanley Park, where you can bike around, Whytecliff Islet, if you want to see sea lions, Capilano Suspension Bridge and Lighthouse Park.



*Vancouver Island, Ucluelet*

### **Casual Week-Day Activities**

Term 1 begins with Imagine Day. A day where you get to interact with a small group of people and explore the campus with them along with all the other exchange and first-year students split into groups. On this day, you get the chance to talk to all the clubs that exist at UBC. Clubs are what they sound like, a group of students interested in the same activity. You can join all sorts of clubs, and they are not only sports related. It is a great way to regularly spend time with people with similar fields of interest as you have. Take this opportunity to research what clubs there are and join a couple that you like the most. I enjoyed spending time on campus the most. As I've already touched upon, it is a great place to be at. Casual walks never feel boring there, it is swarming with students during the weekdays, so you always get to talk to some people. Half of them will be wearing UBC hoodies, make sure to get yours as well from the Bookstore to blend in! The campus boasts a few beaches, one of which is a must visit for sunsets, called Wreck beach. It is a bit of a mixed-bag, though. On one hand you get one of the most stunning sunsets there, on the other hand quite a few weird people show up, as it is, I believe, the only optional-naked beach in Vancouver. But definitely don't let that discourage you from visiting, as it is actually really safe. I've been there countless times, and a lot of students go to check out the sunset, or swim when it's still relatively warm outside, like in September. It has to be one of my favorite places on campus.

The campus also boasts numerous libraries, the most popular one of them is IKB. It has a small hidden area with a beautiful Harry-Potter themed interior. Just search on google for



Ridington Room. I preferred studying at Koerner, which is a modern library right across the other side of the road where IKB is. I really liked staying in the Earth Sciences building as well.

Of course you shouldn't just be on campus in your free-time on weekdays. You should check out Kitsilano. It is a charming neighborhood close to the campus, where you will find most restaurants, and some great beaches!

Last but not least, check out Downtown Vancouver as well! It is very pretty if you go to the right spots. Central, and western parts are great to be around, as well as south on the shores of False Creek. If you walk around, you may notice how nice and open most people here are, which was a pleasant surprise to me. Be positive, and open to interact with others.



*Vancouver Island, Tofino*

## **Conclusion**

Overall, I would say that this adventure has turned out to be a life-changing experience for me. I learned a lot on the way, not only academically, but also about myself and Canadian culture. I really encourage anyone considering going on exchange to grab the opportunity, and apply as soon as they can. It is a privilege to be on exchange. Make the most out of it! Don't forget to provide back to the ones around you, and who have helped you on your journey. Or just a stranger on the street. Best of luck!