

York University, Toronto

Fall 2023 and Winter 2024

Degree program in Freiburg: Polyvalent Two-Majors Bachelor (English, Geography)

Classes taken during the exchange in: Linguistics, English, History, Anthropology, Geography, Environmental Science

Global Exchange Interim Report: York University, Toronto, Canada

First Days

I arrived in Toronto three weeks prior to the start of the fall term, which allowed me to get to know the city and enjoy the last summer days. I was very happy with my decision to arrive early, although one or two weeks in advance would be well enough too.

When I arrived in Canada, tired after the long journey, overwhelmed by size of city and airport and challenged by the fact that I didn't have a phone plan yet, I was already welcomed by the open-mindedness and willingness to help of Canadian people. I will not forget how a woman on the bus actively approached me as I obviously looked confused about when and where to get off, and how, dozens of stops later, the supportive bus driver reminded me to get off. Then the woman that approached me on the bus even accompanied me to the subway station, where she asked the worker in the ticket booth to let me, not possessing the local "PRESTO" transit card yet, in for free. Of course, in the calm and understanding Canadian way, he let me in. Although other Canadians tend to accuse "Torontonians" of being stressed out and arrogant, the friendliness of people here instantly made me feel welcome in my new home away from home.

Housing

I was lucky enough to get a room in residence on Campus weeks before I left Germany. This not only reduced my organizational stress, but also enabled me to stay close to the everyday campus life and the other exchange students, of which most also stayed on campus. Residence, contrary to the "SWFR Wohnheim" is quite expensive, and I know people that found something cheaper even downtown. Further, students are not guaranteed their own kitchen or washroom. Since - unlike most of my friends here - I got a "suite-style" residence, I had my own kitchen and thus was not forced to buy the meal plan to eat on campus. Although residence has its flaws, I do not regret my decision to choose this option. Living downtown is cool, and the subway ride after a night out is definitely shorter, but it lacks the proximity to other students and campus life. Commuting downtown takes about 50 minutes from campus,

which at times can be annoying, but one gets used to these distances in a city of 3 million inhabitants quite quickly. If you decide to live downtown, I recommend the “Tartu College Student Residence” at Spadina, as it is comparatively affordable and located nicely.

Orientation Events and Semester Start

The International Office “York International” organized two orientation events for exchange and international students – the first for students like me that arrived before the semester start and the second for the ones that didn’t have the opportunity to arrive early. The event featured formal information sessions but also activities like a campus tour and a shopping trip, which not only helped to get to know the other exchange students, but also our new surroundings. The beginning of the semester in Toronto was both stressful and exciting – in the positive sense. I personally experienced the pressure to get to know as many people on as many events as possible, which at times created (positive) stress.

The first weeks of the semester itself began rather slowly, as it is typical here for students to add or drop courses during that time. This brings me to another recommendation: Try to enroll into more courses than you would actually like to take, as this gives you the opportunity to drop the ones you like the least. At first, I found it quite complicated to enroll into courses because I had to contact most of the instructors individually, since I was registered as a “no degree” student. While making the enrollment a little bit more complicated, this gave me the freedom to choose any course in whichever subject I was interested. Eventually, I got into all the courses I wanted (or needed for my studies) – so even if the enrollment process is not very easy or intuitive: don’t stress yourself too much, as most instructors and the International Office are pretty understanding.

Study Life

“Don’t stress yourself too much” is a good way to introduce the everyday study life at York. The Canadian study system is significantly different to the one we are used to in Germany. Instead of having one big exam/essay at the end of the term, assignments are split up much more throughout the term. In effect, I had a little bit more work to do during the semester, but the exam period was less stressful than usual. Most of the courses I attended so far were small seminars and much more school-like in nature: Attendance is often obligatory and weekly readings are quite common. Still, most of the exchange students, just like me, didn’t have too

much trouble getting used to the system and the level of difficulty, which most perceived very manageable. Regarding the choice of my courses, I was happy with one course and less so with another one – this semester, however, I am very optimistic about all the courses I attended so far. Studying in Canada, a nation defined by its indigenous history, I can only recommend taking at least one course related to “First Nation” culture (I’m currently taking Indigenous Drama).

Challenges

One aspect I struggled with at times is that of organizational issues at the university: YorkU is a huge institution with a big campus, and at times it feels like it cannot meet its organizational and administrative demands. Receiving your UHIP (health insurance) card or getting maintenance for a broken lamp may take longer than what I am used to in Freiburg, but I guess that is part of a study-abroad experience as well as all the positive aspects that come with it 😊.

The aspect I found most challenging can best be described as a culture shock. Back in Freiburg, I was used to being around many people who are highly sensitive in terms of environmental awareness and social inequality. Here, I came to realize that these values are far from universal, but rather limited to certain social bubbles, such as to the ones I am surrounded by in Freiburg. While many people living in Canada are quite progressive in terms of human rights, I experienced that, especially at university, this is not the case to the same degree regarding social and ecological sustainability. For instance, I remarked less critical discussions in some of the courses I attended, or a less developed understanding of consumption and waste pollution.

I am aware that my perspective on these issues is subjective and influenced by my personal backgrounds. Thus, I reject to judge different attitudes or propagate mine as “the right ones”. As I am convinced that it is important to be able to see issues from different perspectives, such insights are helpful and a significant part of what makes studying abroad so valuable. Still, or maybe even because of this, I found it important to share this challenging experience.

Toronto & Trips

Having dealt with the study experience I now want to give some insights into the “fun” part about studying abroad – this is not to say that studying can’t be fun either ;).

Toronto is a very multicultural city – and that’s probably the aspect I like most about it. People with diverse backgrounds, food from all over the world and various events celebrating cultural traditions are what define the city. In Toronto, I hardly ever feel like a “foreigner” since most of the people here have backgrounds from elsewhere. Moreover, I am still overwhelmed, sometimes positively and sometimes negatively, by the North American character of the city, defined by a skyscraper packed financial district and uncountable blocks which are best travelled around – unfortunately - by car. Having said that, Toronto’s public transport system is comparatively good for North American standards, and most importantly, YorkU is directly connected with downtown Toronto via the subway line. Although being North America’s third biggest city, Toronto feels way less crowded than the likes of New York and Los Angeles, which doesn’t mean that there isn’t a lot to do though!

We spent a lot of time at sport events like baseball, basketball, and, of course, at everybody’s darling hockey (don’t you dare calling it “ice hockey” – where would you play hockey if not on ice?). On campus, there are a lot of possibilities to practice these and many other sports yourself. In terms of facilities such as gym, swimming pool or “soccer” (not football!) pitches, Canadian universities have a lot to offer. Strolling through the diverse neighborhoods like Kensington market or Koreatown is another activity that we enjoyed doing, just like going to parks or the islands on the Lake Ontario, which offer both a great view of the skyline and a welcome change to the urban life.

As I am writing this report (end of January), colder temperatures define the life in the city. Canadian winters are much longer and colder than Europe’s, with temperatures as low as - 30°C (although this is rather an exception in Toronto and this winter’s temperatures didn’t get lower than -16°C). Ice skating, snowshoeing (mainly outside the city), and tobogganing (a type of sledging down the park hills) are common activities besides, unsurprisingly, staying inside significantly more than in the summer months. Due the strong seasonality, I am very happy with my decision to stay for both the fall and the winter term, enabling me to see the city and the country from different perspectives.

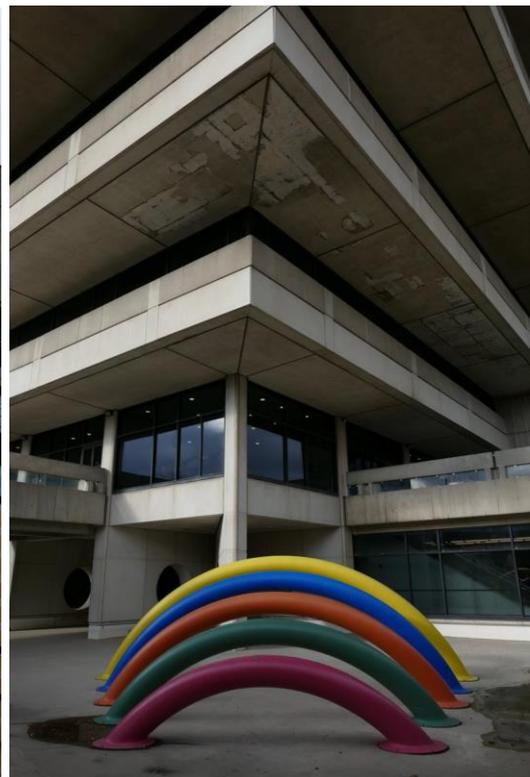
The country is a fitting keyword to talk about the trips I made from Toronto. Its location at the Great Lakes enables many trips – even without having to use the plane. A must do is Algonquin Provincial Park, which is reachable by car from Toronto. Together with the other Baden-Württemberg students participating in the OBW program, I had the possibility to join a trip organized by the “Friends of Algonquin Park”. This trip took place at the beginning of my

exchange. It not only helped me to get to know the other BW students in Ontario, but also a part of East-Canadian nature, and most importantly, lovely Canadian people in person of Mark and Janet Webber, who organized the camping trip. We liked the park so much that we went back there for the beautiful “fall colors”, and we will do so again for the winter season.

In the free reading week, we did a road trip to the maritime provinces Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, stopping in Quebec City. These provinces are rather atypical destinations for Torontonians as most prioritize the West (and especially “Banff” and “Jasper” National Park are definitely worth a visit and I will come back to that in my final report) but it was undoubtedly worth the journey, especially as the road trip helped us to get to know the endlessness of the country. Less explanation is probably needed for New York City, which we visited by bus. In close proximity, too, are the Niagara Falls, which are cheap to reach by train or bus.

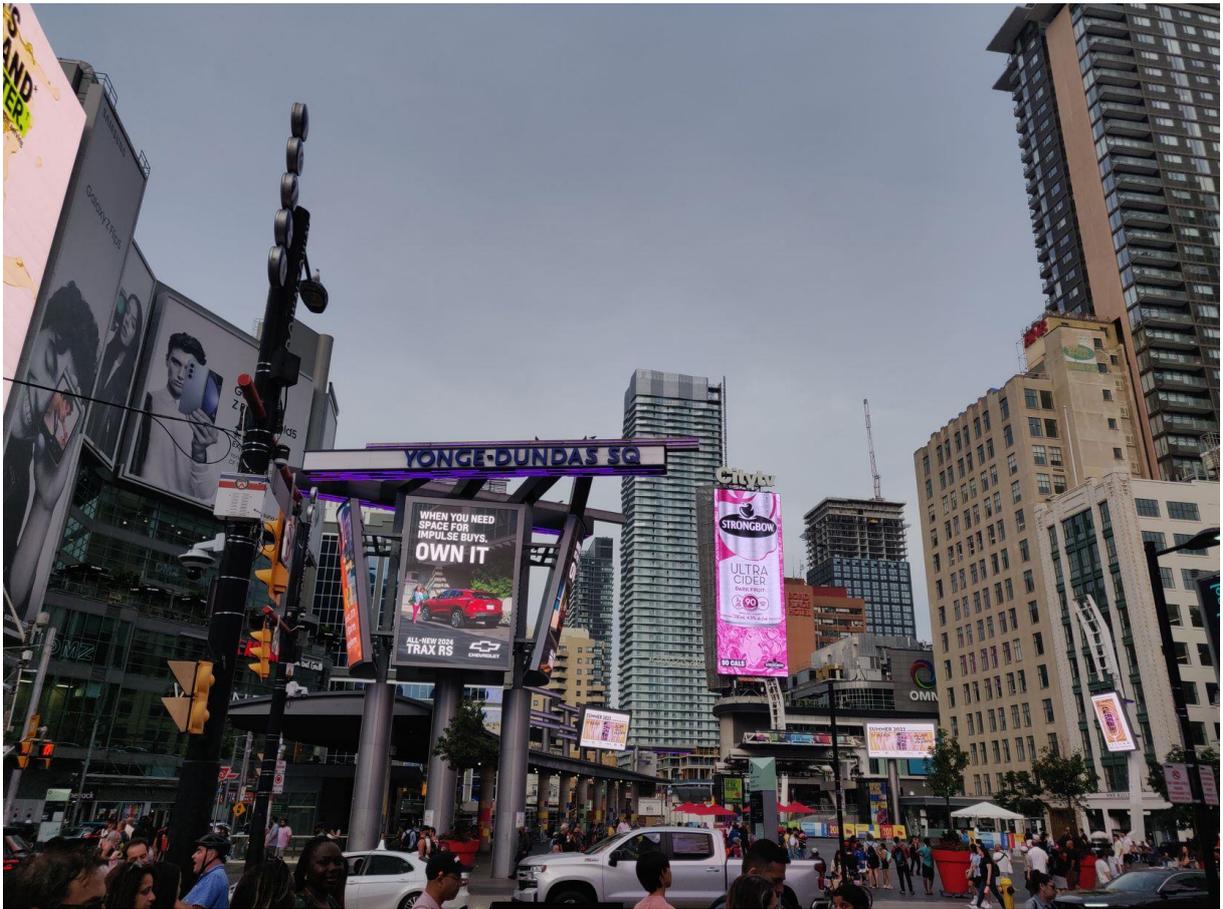
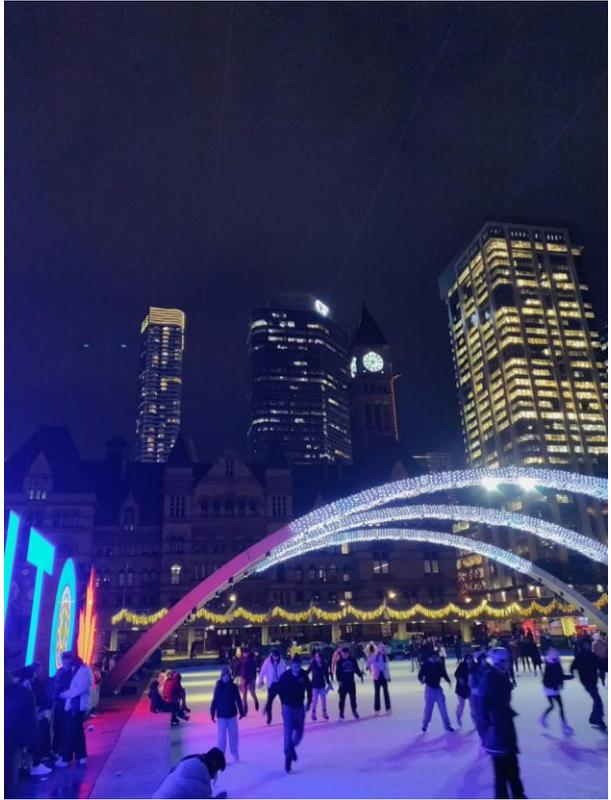
I look back on the first term in Toronto with a lot of joy, as I was lucky to meet many lovely people, to get to know the culture and beautiful places, while also experiencing a new study system. I look forward to the remainder of the time I will spend in Canada a lot, and – although I only just passed the half-way mark – I can already say that I am very happy to have chosen to study in Toronto.

York University



Toronto





Algonquin Park



Nova Scotia and New Brunswick

