

Global Exchange: Final Report

Partner university: University of British Columbia (UBC), Vancouver Campus

Semester/s attended: Fall 2023 and Spring 2024

Degree program in Freiburg: Computer Science (Master)

Classes taken during the exchange in: Data Science, French, Statistics



Motivation

Some of the main motivations for going on exchange is getting to know a new culture, learning to become independent, building new relationships, and improving academically. However, I believe that when all these driving factors are added up, they sum up to something even more important. You get one step closer to learning what you truly value in life.

Introduction

I'm lucky to have attended a full academic year at UBC, so I will share with you all the valuable experiences I made over these 8 months in the hopes of helping you make the right decision.

For your information, I already submitted a report about my Fall 2023 term, which you should refer to for further details on some of the topics I will touch on here.

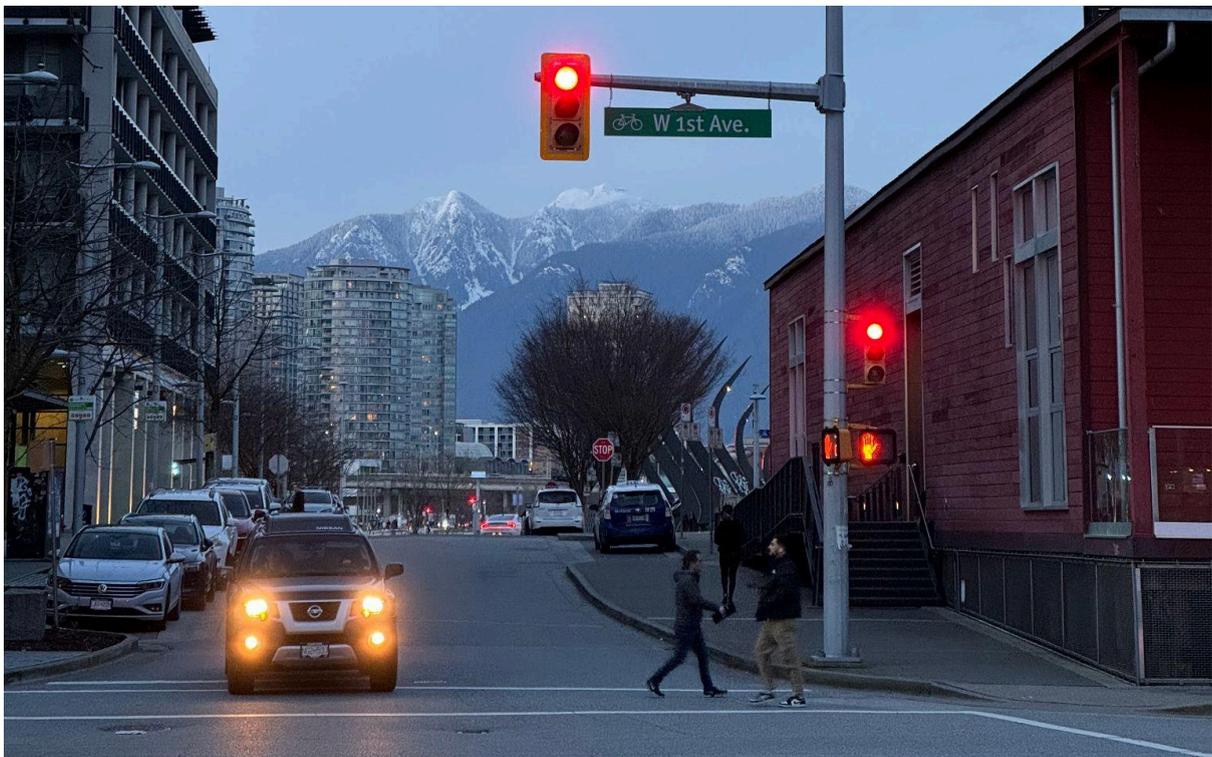
<https://www.international.uni-freiburg.de/de/out/studium/austausch/global-exchange/erfahrungsberichte/nordamerika/kanada/ubc-2023-computer-science/view>

Note: Link might change in the future)

Here are a few topics that I delve into in that report, but cover in much less detail here:

- Structure of the semester, classes, and grading
- Transportation options
- Student residences
- Groceries
- Some aspects of finances
- Some aspects of clubs

So without further ado, let's begin by talking about UBC and Canada.



Should I pick UBC?

Simply put, yes!

UBC persistently ranks among the top three best universities in Canada, and top 50 around the world. This alone makes it an appealing choice for many. However, there is way more to it than just that.

UBC has a great culture with lots of diversity in terms of teaching and students. What I mean by that, is that there is a wide selection of courses available in a variety of disciplines, with a good deal of them having their own style of teaching. This is due to the fact that students and professors come from all over the world.

This intriguing property also applies to the city it lies within, Vancouver. – Well, at least the main campus of UBC, as it has another campus in Okanagan, which I did not have the opportunity to visit. So everything I say only applies to the campus in Vancouver. Surely, the one in Okanagan is amazing as well though! Afterall, it belongs to the same university. – Multiculturalism is at the core of Vancouver and Canada. This is exciting as an exchange student, because it somewhat lets you experience several cultures at the same time.

Furthermore, with an enormous campus, UBC offers a true North American university experience. In some ways walking around campus feels like being in a different city. This is great, since it provides a safe environment for students to study in and encourages them to collaborate and get to know each other.

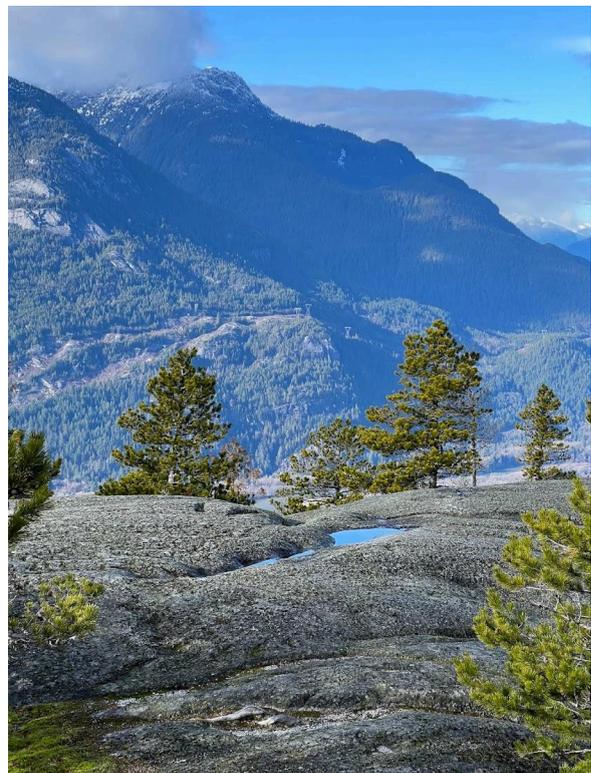
So far some might get the impression that this could be a description of any highly prestigious North American university. However, I left the best part for last. UBC outshines them in one particular area, which is its close proximity to absolutely stunning nature. As a matter of fact it deserves its own section, so I will continue there.

What makes UBC unique?

UBC differentiates itself from other renowned North American universities with its magnificent location. There is no other place like British Columbia (BC). BC is one of the 10 provinces of Canada, where UBC happens to be situated. Nature there is unlike anything. The closest comparison I can make is Norway or Switzerland.

What initially struck me the most is the sheer size of the trees. The west coast is known to have the tallest trees on earth, with the largest ones located in California. This makes going for a walk in the forest a special experience in itself. And thankfully, neither are the woods far nor are they scarce.

Alongside the trees, I was stunned by the vastness of the pacific ocean and the small islands scattered across the sea. Living so close to the shore in the calm environment of the campus was a unique experience to say the least.



Beyond the trees and the ocean, a breathtaking view caught my attention. A mountain chain with snowy summits situated at the northern part of the city. Some of my friends who lived in the same residence as I did, enjoyed a gorgeous view of the city with the mountains in the background. Although, they aren't just mesmerizing to look at, they offer a wealth of freetime activities; such as skiing, hiking, rock climbing, and mountain biking to name a few. Speaking of this, let's talk about how you can spend your spare time in Vancouver.

What can I do in Vancouver?

I honestly think that there's no shortage of exciting things to do here in your free time. This is partly aided by the fact that students organize clubs at UBC, which you can join usually in return for a small fee. You can find a whole suite of niche clubs, like pottery, go (the board game), ski and board, or surf club for instance. I believe there are over 350 clubs to pick from.

I encourage you to sign up for a couple if you are truly interested in them, as it helps you make friends with others who share the same interests with you.

Moreover, you can always find events around campus that you could inquire about joining. I ended up mentoring two 24-hour hackathons, which was an amazing opportunity to grow myself while helping others with solving their problems. I even judged one of them, which was a remarkable experience.

If I had to pick a single activity I enjoyed the most, it would have to be going on hikes over the weekends with my friends. We have done most of the popular trails around Vancouver, and it's astonishing to me that there are still so many trails left we haven't even touched. I will leave a few of my recommendations here: Joffre Lakes, Chief Peaks in Squamish, Panorama Ridge with Garibaldi Lake, Tunnel Bluffs from Lions Bay, Grouse Mountain, 5040 Peak. This is by no means an exhaustive list, and I encourage you to try simple and shorter ones as well, as they can be just as much fun with the right people around you. If you want to explore the available trails for yourself, I can frankly recommend using the AllTrails app/website. It helped us pick the right trails in the conditions we had to work with.

But you might say, surely Vancouver has something it lacks in. Well, if I had to pick something, I would say it's the nightlife. It's not very exciting, but I personally wasn't bothered by it at all. It seemed to me as if most locals gravitated towards waking up early to do something outside, rather than staying up late to have a few drinks at a bar.

Overall, in contrast to the fast-paced nature of many North American cities, I found that Vancouver offered a sense of leisure.



How hard is it to find housing?

Unfortunately, finding housing on or even close to campus is rather challenging, as there are over 70 000 students enrolled at the university.

However, hopefully you won't have to explore the market yourself as your odds are good, well relatively speaking, for getting a housing offer on campus from UBC. What I've heard is that roughly 60% of exchange students get an allocation.

But fear not if you are not among the lucky ones, as you have solid choices to pick from, like West Point Grey, Kitsilano, Dunbar, and Yaletown. At least, these areas would be my recommendations in the order I listed them. The only drawback is that you will have to deal with the whole process of finding a place by yourself. To streamline things, what I can recommend is getting in contact with other exchange students who are in the same boat and finding a place with some of them. You should be able to get their socials well before the exchange starts through UBC's study portal where you will get to introduce yourself to others. You can find listings on the ubc housing groups on Facebook.

Regarding housing costs, well let's discuss that in the next section.



How much should I expect to spend each month?

This is tough to answer, as it heavily depends on your spending habits. Still, I will try to break it down to you based on my personal experience and having talked to others about it. Keep in mind that I will give rough estimates here.

- A roundtrip to Vancouver from Frankfurt costs about 1000 euros
- On average students pay around 700 euros per month for a room in a shared flat
- Getting around the city with public transportation will set you back about 120 euros per term
- Let's say grabbing quick food from campus, and groceries costs you 550 euros each month
- Basic public health insurance is about 50 euros per month
- Memberships at a club and the gym costs you around 10 euros per month
- Your phone contract at a cheaper provider like Koodo costs 25 euros per month
- Don't forget about the books, kitchenware, bed linen, any gear you may need for skiing, hiking etc., events you want to participate in, trips you want to do with friends, renting a car, and the list goes on...

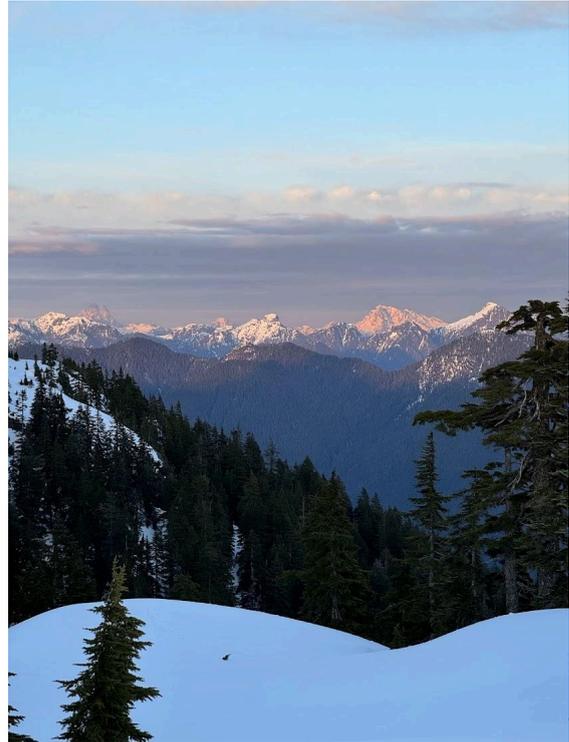
If you sum up the costs above and distribute them over the 8 months, you get an estimated expenditure of around 1500 euros per month, with all the bullet points included except for the very last one that heavily depends on you. So you can easily go way above this. You see, it's not going to be cheap.

I recommend you start tracking your spendings as soon as you enter Vancouver. Doing so, you will learn about your spending habits, and help the ones who follow in your footsteps get a good picture of what's ahead.

How do I finance my stay?

Let's face it, doing an exchange in North America will likely set you back more than Erasmus will. Moreover, as opposed to Erasmus, a scholarship isn't included in your exchange program. Nevertheless, you have the option of applying separately for one. I can wholeheartedly recommend applying to Baden-Württemberg Stipendium, which can cover your housing costs in Vancouver for the whole period of your stay. Some other options are DAAD, but I do not have experience with that. You could optionally consider getting a student loan.

One advice I can give is to start budgeting well before the exchange starts, and make sure you have a relatively stable balance on your bank account, as the immigration office will ask you to provide bank statements from the past 4 months when applying for a study permit.



What is a study permit?

A study permit is an immigration document that lets you study in Canada. If you are staying longer than 6 months, you will need to apply for one. In case you stay for a single term you don't need one. However, you can still optionally apply for one. You would want to do this if you intend to work while studying in Canada.

The application procedure can feel daunting, but there is a great step-by-step guide on UBC's website to help you receive it as fast as possible. For additional information, you should also refer to the *Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada* website.

Picking classes

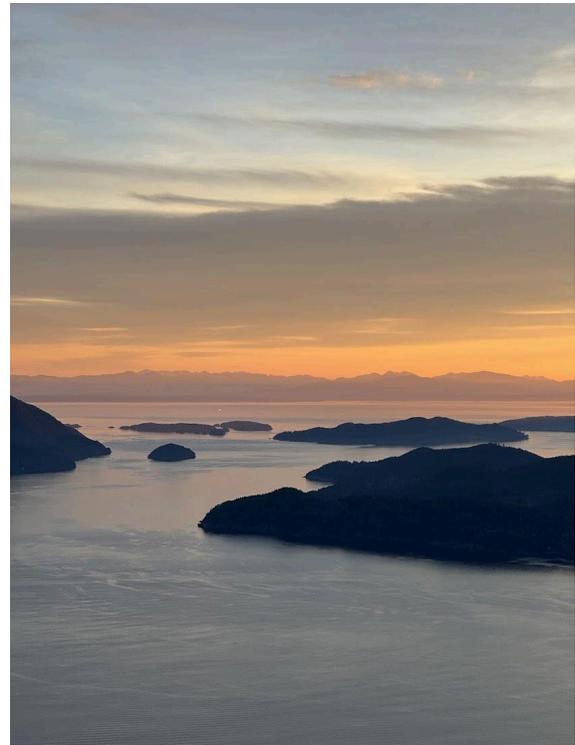
Now that all the administrative stuff is dealt with, let's talk about classes. As I already alluded to earlier, there is a wide selection of courses you can pick from. In general, you should consult your department's advisor at Freiburg to figure out what classes the examinations office will accept, and how much credit points you will earn for each.

In my second term, I took three classes, as I had a big project in Freiburg that I was working on, which required the same workload as two classes. A normal workload is 5 courses per term for regular students. Many exchange students who I met took 4. Here is the list of what I took:

1. DSCI 310 - Reproducible and trustworthy workflows for data science
I really enjoyed this class, as it was excellently structured. It is a very pragmatic one, where we learned how to create data science projects that are reproducible, trustworthy, and auditable. The class introduced us to the usage and integration of tools that are popular in both research and industry. We had 2 classes each week along with an optional lab. There was a final project, which could be done either in R or Python, that was done in teams of 4. I found the project fun, but I have to admit that I invested more time into completing it than I had anticipated.



2. STAT 306 - Finding Relationships in Data
This class was taught in the reverse classroom model, the reason for which was motivated by the professor in our first class, who proved the effectiveness of this model by means of a research study. The professor was very lively. Albeit the class was interesting, but not necessarily fun. I learnt a lot and found it particularly useful to get an overview on how relationships in data can be modeled with simpler methods. We had 2 classes each week, with a mandatory lab, and a final group project, which could be done in Python or R.



3. FREN 202 - Elementary French
Another fun class, which was taught 3 times a week. Classes were remarkably interactive and required students to talk with each other. Thanks to the great professor and tutors, my French significantly improved over the course of these sessions. When compared to FREN 201, I found 202 easier in terms of the workload.

Overall, I genuinely enjoyed all the classes I have taken at UBC, as they brought fresh perspectives and broadened my understanding of machine learning, statistics, data science, languages, and the history of Canada.

Conclusion

To conclude, I would like to emphasize that taking part in an exchange is a privilege and should be treated accordingly. Therefore, I realize how fortunate I am for having participated in such a program. I made some lifelong friends who I learnt a lot from, and have done extraordinary things I will never forget. This exchange has undeniably shaped me as a person, and I have no doubt it can have a similar impact on you! So my question to you is: are you ready to begin a new chapter in your life?

