



EXCHANGE REPORT
Alma
Year and semester for exchange
Fall semester 2024

Exchange university
University College London, The Bartlett School of Planning

Degree programme
Sustainable Urban Planning and Design

A once-in-a-lifetime experience

Before departure

I applied for exchange studies at the Bartlett School of Planning because it has been at the forefront of the field for over a century. UCL is the best university in the world in the subjects of Architecture and Built Environment and I believed this intercultural learning experience would inspire me in unique ways. I knew that it would give me access to world-class research which sheds light on the latest discoveries in my field. Furthermore, as the university is located in the heart of London, I knew it would make it possible for me to personally experience the urbanism that one of the biggest cities in Europe has to offer. I did not have to do any specific preparations before departure except buy medical insurance. Luckily, my exchange was only from September to December which implied that I did not need a Student Visa to stay in the UK.

Upon arrival

I arrived in London two weeks before the semester started. This gave me plenty of time to settle in, get to know the area where my accommodation was located, and familiarise myself with London as a whole. I was also able to attend the official welcome week which was arranged by the Student Union. It included many social events that new students could sign up for to meet other people and ask questions about UCL. There was one specific day when new students were introduced to all of the societies at the university. Societies are organisations or “student clubs” where people with the same interests meet up and practice a certain activity, sport, etc.

Financials

I received an Erasmus grant and also chose to extend my CSN student loan during my time in London. However, considering that the exchange rate for the British pound sterling to Swedish Kronor was not to my advantage, the Erasmus grant and CSN loan did not cover all of my costs in the UK. Accommodation and public transport are highly expensive in London. However, I would say that groceries are less expensive than in Sweden.

Accommodation

I applied to UCL student accommodation and was very lucky because I was offered a room 5 minutes walking distance from Bloomsbury Campus. When you apply for UCL accommodation you state your preferences about size, price range, and location (for example if you want your own studio, a single ensuite, or a shared room with another student). Based on your preferences, the accommodation team will allocate a spot to you if there are enough rooms available. I would recommend looking into how many rooms UCL offers in each category and have that in consideration when writing your preferences to increase your chances of getting somewhere to stay. I got a small single room with a shared kitchen and bathroom, which I was very happy with. We also had a welcome week at my house arranged by the UCL accommodation team which offered us many opportunities to get to know other people that stayed there.

University and studies

UCL is a very big university but considering that I was admitted to the Bartlett I spent most of my time in their facilities. I would say that the biggest difference from KTH is that the Bartlett offers a broad range of courses within the subject of planning and architecture, which made it possible for me to gain more in-depth insights into certain aspects of urban planning. I selected 4 courses that each had one two-hour lecture a week. This meant that I did not have many lectures compared to the other students, and I had the luxury of choosing how to structure my time, which was very nice!

Courses

I chose 4 preliminary courses a few weeks before the semester started and this was followed by an “add and drop period” where students could choose to change their first selection. I had to make some changes to my initial study plan because there was an overlap between the two of them. I ended up studying the following four courses:

Comparative Planning Systems and Cultures

Planning for Housing: Process

Urban Regeneration: Urban Problems and Problematics

Planning for Sustainability and Inclusion

I am very happy with all of my courses. The first one included guest lectures where each week, a speaker within the field visited UCL, representing the planning system of a specific country. At the end of the course, I learned about a broad range of planning systems and cultures across the globe, which contributed to knowledge about the Western-centric bias in the discipline. This course did also have 5 seminars during the semester where students discussed 2 readings. The second course was a lecture-based course where students wrote a 3000-word essay at the end. What I liked the most about this course was its focus on the UK housing system, which made me gain more insights into how the housing crisis has been manifested in London and other English cities. The third course was also a lecture-based course where students were supposed to write an online exam at the end of the course. However, this was supposed to take place in April, and considering that my contract with UCL ended before that I got the opportunity to write a 3000-word essay instead. My favorite aspect of this course was the interactive discussions between the students and the professor. We were all encouraged to share our experience about planning practice and apply it to the theoretical frameworks/debates presented in class. The last course consisted of lectures, seminars, and two 15000 words essays. This course gave students the chance to choose what aspects they wanted to delve into, which I found highly interesting.

City and country

One of my favorite aspects of my exchange was the unique opportunity to get to know London as a city. I was positively surprised by how multicultural it is, which made it feel like a very welcoming place from day one. I would argue that London is a place where you can practice your favorite hobbies, no matter what it is. It might be sports, jazz-music events, going to food markets, or exploring the natural parks outside the city center.

Leisure and social activities

In my spare time, I did a lot of activities with my flatmates and friends from school. I also went on a lot of trips during the weekends. For instance, I visited Bath, Cambridge, Oxford, as well as Edinburgh. This gave me more insights into the culture in different parts of the UK, not only London which I would argue is an outlier from the rest of the country.

Sustainability

I traveled to London on a flight from Arlanda airport. I know that a lot of students who came from Germany or other countries in Europe went by train which was a more sustainable option. The university encouraged sustainability by arranging vintage fairs where students could buy used textbooks and other things. I also downloaded an app called "Too Good to Go" which is the world's biggest marketplace for surplus food. You can buy groceries or meals at a discounted price that have not been sold at restaurants/supermarkets during the day. That is something that I would definitely recommend.

Other recommendations and observations

Other than that, I would really encourage you to explore different parts of London while you are there. In my opinion, every neighborhood is like its own city, with its own personality, architecture, and atmosphere. Take the opportunity to experience the unique cultural diversity that one of Europe's biggest cities has to offer.