

Study Abroad 2019-2020

University of Hong Kong

Motivations

HKU is a world class university located in the centre of Hong Kong Island. There are a dozen other universities in Hong Kong, but HKU is the only one located on the island of Hong Kong, the rest are located in the New Territories – a much larger land area which extends onto the South East Asian mainland. I chose this university as the large expat community and English fluency of most locals meant at least initially there would be less issues integrating, while still providing me a new continent, climate and access to local people and new cultures. The academic and career prospects at this university were also unparalleled and though I never considered a year abroad when I began my degree, the benefits and opportunities from the experience were far more than I would ever have predicted. Begin a modern dynamic city in the heart of South East Asia there were great travel opportunities and links, both inside the country and around the continent.



Accommodation

Accommodation is one of the most important factors to consider when deciding where to take a year abroad, especially in an extremely expensive foreign city. The University does have extensive halls with several dorms or floors dedicated to international students, but there is little consistency between experiences and no full guarantees are made to any individual. During the application process you are informed of a date and time upon which you must select three prospective choices of halls you would like to live at. No guarantees are made to anyone applying and housing is distributed on a “first come first serve basis” it is claimed. I say it is claim as despite the fact I applied two days after the deadline I was given halls accommodation while others who applied the minute of release were not given any place. Halls are often segregated by gender and there is competitive admissions culture which may lead to different experiences. There are not nearly enough hall places for the cohort of students, and so admission for halls for local students is heavily dependent on academic performance, but also extra-curricular activities, sports and service to hall administration and services. Many halls essentially require a student to play competitive sport and have other outstanding qualities to gain admittance and readmittance in subsequent years. As I understand it this does not generally extend to international students, although there is no reason why a hall may not require it, or if an application would be strengthened by a student's previous say athletic or academic success. There is also naturally a competitive hierarchy between halls, with for example the newest, nicest accommodation the on-campus Jockey club I, II and III generally taking the most prestigious students, and thus extremely hard for international students to gain admission.

The true benefit of halls is though they are gender segregated and you will likely have to share a very small space if not a room they are ludicrously cheap. My entire costs for two semesters with food included was £2000. This would easily be two months rent privately in a similar area. I was sharing a room with two other people and large bathroom facilities with around thirty, but for that price it was hard for anything else to compete. There are more affordable private rental opportunities and

some privately run student halls, but as price comes down quality does too and proximity from university decreases. Living on the Kowloon side (across the water from the island) is perfectly manageable. The MTR (underground metro) is extremely cheap, fast, convenient and clean – living as deep as Sham Shui Po for example shouldn't be too challenging. Many internationals and expats living in areas such as Jordan or Sham Shui Po so these areas aren't totally alien to outsiders. These areas will likely still be in the £500-£700/mo range atleast, with share facilities and/or rooms and very little square feet. In contrast I knew two Americans living in Sai Ying Pun (one metro stop from campus) with about total 20m², kitchen and two independent (very small) bedrooms full serviced apartment paying around £1200 – each.

Despite my late application I was given a place at University Hall (or UHall), which a highly exceptional and historic part of the campus. One of only seven listed buildings across the university, it is a two-hundred-year-old colonial building acquired in the fifties. They have a strong collegiate culture, with high table dinners and an initiation for all new hall mates – climbing Victoria Peak at 4am and singing the UHall hall song until sunrise. International students are exempt sadly. Living with local students was a great experience and a great way to integrate however, since we all lived in close quarters and had a shared common room. All of my floor was international students however which definitely helped when initially landing and setting up.

Sharing a room with two other random international students was a very new experience at first, but though at sometimes a challenge it definitely added to the overall experience and brought the entire hall of international students much closer together. The food included at the hall certainly matched the £300 cost per term, but there are plenty of cheap places to buy dinner and usually a hotplate and some pans to cook if necessary, though ovens are basically non-existent on the island.

Campus Life and Studies

The University campus is integrated into the western side on the central city, second to last stop on the Island line metro. A combination of repurposed colonial buildings and huge new tower blocks, there are extensive facilities and academic services. I lived in Pok Fu Lam, so commuted easily by buses which arrived nearly every minute but travelling from anywhere on the island or Kowloon is reasonable quick and very affordable. The university is built onto the side of the central mountains of the island, with Mount Victoria being the largest. Around many of the streets of Hong Kong there is pretty steep terrain so learning where the nearest escalators or elevators are is as important as your next class. Studies are fairly intense. Though 50% of the university is international, the vast majority study law, politics or humanities so in any STEM class you may be the only non-local in the room. Full time students are typically very motivated, and classes are usually graded on a bell curve. The library facilities are high quality and available for 24 hours, studying is very much in the culture. The initial module selection process is fairly straight forward, 4 modules selected online. Once per semester you may also take a common core module, which is usually much less demanding than traditional credits, for example two friends took one about the history of conflict and were full assessed at the end on a play they wrote and acted in with local students about conflict. Examinations are conducted at the end of each semester, and midterms halfway through for a moderate proportion of the overall grade, though I took my final exams remotely so I can't comment much more on how they normally take place.

Other Helpful info

There is a reading week for all students, which is an excellent policy. There are midterm exams immediately after but many take the opportunity to travel around south east asia. The green public

light buses are a great swift way to get around, but you must tell the (usually non-english speaking) bus driver which stop you want. Mount Victoria, Dragons back, Monkeys, cliff diving, rent bikes at sha tin and crucially Mr Wongs. There is a short bucket list. If anyone ever makes it back there, enjoy.

VU Amsterdam

Motivations and Application

As a late entry to “the VU”, due to the protest movement in Hong Kong, my application was rushed and a rather stressful. There were limited options by that point but I was very pleased to have the opportunity to study in Amsterdam. The international team at the VU are experience, as the university has a huge intake of international students, however they are not the most empathetic team. Students with more complicated applications (visa etc.) all said they felt very little support. There is a general university culture that students should self-sufficient – help is available but not exactly eagerly extended. Since I was an EU student the process for me was a lot less complicated – its not clear to me if the same will be the case in the future. The process for module selection meanwhile is an absolute nightmare. Each semester is divided into three “periods”. A student chooses a minimum of four 6 ECTS (European Credit System) modules - though I was told five are usually taken. The modules usually run for a single period, though not always, and have exams at the end of each period, sometimes overlapping into the next period so you will have exams while beginning a new course. Every exams has the opportunity for a resit however, which is not capped, which gives a bit more flexibility. When registering for a module you must use the VUnet timetabling system, which is very poorly designed and complicated. The details for each module are listed on a separate webpage, with some information on pre-requisites and whether they are open to all students or just a select cohort. The pages seem to be populated by the lecturer or coordinator and hence the information isn’t standardised. To actually select the module you need to select each relevant component (tutorials, seminars, lectures, workgroups...) for each module to check there is no clash, though it is not always obvious from the online content what you need to select. If you don’t select all necessary exams before the deadline for module selection, you will not be able to sit the exam. This in contrast to say Warwick or virtually any other university where you are automatically enrolled in necessary exams for the modules you select. Through the semester there are options to pick up or drop modules throughout the semester, though I found the process far to complicated initially to bother messing with it later. Also, period 6 is only 4 weeks long so if you do take a course in this time it will be very intensive.

Accommodation

Despite being a late applicate I was given more options than many of the other international students. The VU has a huge student campus -Campus Uilenstede- just 10 minutes bike from the university, with around 3000 students housed on a small green area with large 13-story tower blocks, cheaper good quality food and a student bar. Its an incredible location only 25 mins bike from the VU, with the Bos, a huge forest and lake area 5 mins to the West. The only draw back is that just to the West further is Schiphol airport, which is very convenient for travel, but there is a plane roughly every 4 minutes very close overhead. You get used to it, its not so bad. Each block and kitchen is numbered throughout the campus, the two main options for exchange students are block 102 and the green tower. 102 has a kitchen and bathroom shared between two people, while the green tower has 13 floors of 14 people shared kitchens, and ensuite rooms and best of all a balcony!

Both are extremely high quality and have recently been refurbished, though the kitchens in the tower could be a little less dingy. The green tower does have two working elevators though this is not clear online. The variety of international students within the tower is probably the best part of the experience, within my time I made close friendships with people from every continent, and despite the smaller kitchens in 102 those people easily integrated into the wider community, partially thanks to all the great ESN events and trips. The price of either of these accommodations is extremely low, around £400/month. There are other accommodation campuses around the city, and private options, though I am not clear on the process.

Campus Life and Studies

There is variation among the courses, but more are reasonably easy to pass, however, select business course for example only have a 50% pass rate. The university campus can be hard to navigate and find specific rooms, so leave lots of time on day one. The European student network organises cheap trips and events and it's a great way to meet international students. The museum card is also a great deal as it allows access to all museums over the Netherlands. The Bos has great opportunities for swimming and watersports and there are great beaches at Den Haag and Zandorf.

Tips

Get a bike from the Waterloopin market, the Bike Boys may be promoted to you by the university welcome information, but they are borderline a scam organisation, selling 40 euro bikes for 170 euros to international students who don't know better. Boogle are okay for rentals and Swapfiets are better but buying your own bike for around £70 - £80 euros is the best option.

Travel as much as you can, use the discounts from the ESN card on flixbus and flights. Or by a good bike and you can cycle.

Brouwerij't ij, de kade, beach at den haag, Zaandam, zaanse schans, Rijksmuseum, ouderkerkerplas, Utrecht, haarlem. The bulldog is a tourist trap as is most of the city centre, including the big clubs. Cocos is fine for a student night and I enjoy shelter and deskool for nightlife.