

**Exchange university**

University College London (UCL)

Degree programme

Sustainable Urban Planning and Design

Learned Heaps In London

Before departure

I applied for exchange studies to get a more rounded education. I chose UCL and London because I was looking for a program that would help me bridge the gap between what I had learned in Stockholm and practice back home in the United States. Thus, UCL's Bartlett School's Anglo-American focus was highly useful.

Before beginning the program, I had to apply for a tier 4 student visa, which required me to return to U.S. for about a month to apply and wait for the visa to be processed. UCL's program starts later than my KTH, so I had an extra-long summer holiday.

Upon arrival

I made the mistake of not booking my flights sooner! UCL has a week-long orientation week with special events for each program as well as international/exchange students. This week is not only an opportunity to meet fellow students, but it is also an excellent opportunity to get acquainted various student clubs. The following week, my program hosted another orientation, a school-wide boat tour on the Thames, and a couple of additional social events. The school does a great job of getting students ready for life in London and at UCL. Try to arrive at least two weeks before classes start, so you don't miss a single event.

Financials

I did not receive any additional scholarships from KTH to study at my host university. Thankfully, I had previously received a tuition scholarship that carried over to my exchange university. The cost of living in London was higher than in Sweden, particularly in two important categories: housing and travel. In order to save money, I rented the cheapest room I could find. While the location was great and the living situation was comfortable, this meant I had to forgo living with (or close to) other students and people my age. I also saved money by using student discounts wherever I could.

As an international student from a non-EU country, I had to pay a large fee to obtain my Tier 4 visa as well as a smaller fee to gain access to the NHS (national healthcare services). Also, I was required to return to the U.S. to apply for the Tier 4 visa, meaning I had to pay for an unexpected roundtrip flight, increasing the total application cost.

Accommodation

I found accommodation online. I tried several websites and services and started searching even before arriving in London. While it is possible to find accommodation before arrival, it's much easier to do so in person. Moreover, because a lot of students search for accommodation at the same time, it's wise to arrive in London several weeks before classes begin in order to get a head start on your search. Ultimately, I found a single room for rent via Gumtree.com. The ad was posted for less than 2 hours before I replied. I viewed the room two hours later and signed an agreement right after. I moved quickly, but it was such a relief to find a room, especially at the advertised price and location. I was less than two minutes walk to a metro station that stopped at my university, so the trip was 25 minutes door-to-door on a good day. Housing costs are very high in London—just be prepared.

University and studies

UCL is quite large and has numerous colleges and departments within the university. I studied in the Bartlett School, which houses the urban planning departments, as well as other fields related to the built environment. As a graduate student in the Bartlett, the university can actually feel quite small because many of the professors' and administrative offices are concentrated in a single building. This building also houses a library specific to our field and contains study spaces that are only available to our department. I spent most of my time at UCL in this building. All of the courses are taught in English, so no additional language courses were required.

Courses

The courses offered at UCL within the Bartlett are varied, and the selection can be tailored to one's interests. I found that the urban design courses (e.g., "Place Making" and "Layout, Density, and Typology") were a useful mix of theory and practical design. There was always something due each week to keep you on task as well as weekly tutorials with teaching assistants. I found these weekly meetings the best time to ask questions both about course content and explore out-of-the-box urban design approaches. Much of the work in these courses is completed in groups. You learn to work with others who have different skills and backgrounds and to pull more than your own weight when the group dynamic requires it.

Several other courses such as Pillars of Planning and Urban Regeneration took more traditional approaches to teaching, including weekly lectures and required readings. It seems impossible to read all of the required readings. However, it is necessary to read the foundational texts (which are often highlighted in the lectures) and at least skim the others. These classes have limited time for discussion. It's imperative that you attend a professor's office hours if you don't understand a concept or need assistance with your essays/exams.

City and country

I had visited the UK and London once before my exchange. I also speak the language and am moderately familiar with the culture. Moreover, it's not too different from the culture in which I was raised, so it was easy to integrate and feel comfortable living in London.

Leisure and social activities

UCL is intense, so there is not a lot of spare time, especially if you commit to trying to get as much required reading done as you can. However, I did manage to take weekly music lessons and see several concerts. While the university did offer some events throughout the term, more activities were crafted by students and shared via a WhatsApp group chat. This was the best way to keep in contact, share events, and ask questions about courses/homework/studying.

Other recommendations and observations

Be prepared to spend a lot on housing. If you can, arrive in London at least 2-4 weeks before classes start to find a place to live and start looking online before you arrive. There are always lots of free and/or cheap events going on around the city. UCL is just one of a handful of universities in London, so be sure to look for lectures, events, and even money-making opportunities (like volunteering for research projects) at other universities nearby.