

Ben Cottrell – Exchange to Leeds - 2002

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The Idea

I was nearly finished my 2B semester when the idea of travelling abroad for school came to me. The first inspiration came when my friend in engineering one day told me that she had registered for an exchange program to Sweden for a semester. My response was “You can do that?” It had never occurred to me before that this program existed. That started the wheel in my head spinning considering the possibility, but I wasn't too serious, it was a busy semester. The next inspiration came from talking to a fourth year student in my program who had done an exchange program to Leeds University in England a year earlier. It sounded like he had a great time; his only regret was “I wish I would have stayed an extra semester”. That got me to go down to the international exchange office to look into the exchange program; I really didn't know what the program was all about. It was already the end of November and I had heard it might be too late.

I soon realised that there were lots of choices as far as different places to go. I was interested in Germany, Sweden, and England. All these Universities seemed to have the types of programs similar to Geological Engineering at Waterloo. That was important to me because although I wanted to get away, I didn't want to fall behind a year. The different Universities within these countries had their pros and cons, but the biggest con for me of course is that I can't speak German or Swedish. England seemed to be the most feasible choice, and Leeds University had the right courses for me. Others in my program had visited this University and had received a majority of the course requirements; I decided to go for it.

The Registration

Several spontaneous trips to the International Exchange Office and some internet surfing gave me some background information on Leeds Uni. I decided also to go for the 2 semesters straight; my full third year of school would be spent in another country. I just thought that if I were going to take such a big step, I mind as well make the most of it. I'm glad I did. The first task was to start the administration stuff to get there. It seemed like quite a lot of running around at the time, but of course I was going to another country to a different University and still getting equivalent course credit.

Probably the most challenging portion of the registration was figuring out what courses I would be taking while at Leeds. The courses had different titles and their engineering program is only three years

compared to our four, so that also added some confusion. It required some digging and quite a few emails but I eventually got things sorted out for the most part by the time 2B was over. It helped a lot that other students in my program did the same exchange program to the same university.

Other than that, the registration was fairly easy. I started my work term in January not knowing for sure whether I was accepted to Leeds, but I eventually found out in February. That also meant that I would have to arrange for a double work term. I stayed working at the same company for both work terms. It created some confusion from the co-op department as well as the registrar's office. A certain amount of bypassing had to be done, but I was never too concerned, it was sorted out eventually.

I also started receiving pieces of mail from England; I was kind of excited about it. England seemed so foreign to me, the mail even came in these weird, boring, brown envelopes that I had never seen before. A fairly important task was selecting a residence to live in. Leeds gave me some options and a couple of pamphlets. I checked out the residence websites to get a better idea but I still didn't have a clue which would be the best one. I think my first choice for a residence was a hall on the campus that came with a meal plan. However, I was put into a flat called Montague Burton. I thought that kind of sucked because thinking of a flat I was thinking of a bunch of apartments for mature students or married couples like the ones Waterloo and Laurier have. I got lucky though, Montague Burton turned out to be the best university accommodation.

For the most part I had my things sorted out by the summer before I left. There were a couple little things such as passport, visa, and health care that I was still dealing with but it worked itself out eventually. Now I realise that maybe I was almost too concerned about things. Even though it was a good idea to get a visa, I generally don't think that I needed one, a letter would probably have sufficed, but I guess the visa was good, just in case. Also, as far as health care, I maintained my UW student health care for insurance purposes, but England was super easy with respect to its health care system. I ended up using their health services a couple of times, and they didn't require a special health card like we would in Ontario.

The Trip

It was such a huge sensation the couple of weeks or so before I left Canada. I was nervous, a little anxious, but for the most part I was really excited, knowing that I was going to be in a different country and a culture that I had never seen before - and for an entire year. For me I was going to use the experience as an independence building thing, as well as getting away from UW and some of the

pressures of heavy course loads and big expectations. I really didn't have many other expectations than that.

One of the biggest things for me was missing my friends and family. But everyone was supportive and my friends even threw me a going away party the night before I left. It was really good of them but an eleven hour trip with a hangover wasn't fun.

I had two suitcases that were going to last me one year. It's kind of interesting packing your things for a nine month trip, talk about being selective. Anyhow, it was no big deal and the plane trip was as good as it gets for a person with a huge headache and nausea. I arrived in Manchester at 4:00 am and immediately had to figure out how to get to Leeds. I took a bus which started running at 6:30, threw my things on board and took a seat on the empty coach. I was extremely tired. By then it was almost 24 hours without any sleep. But as the sun started to rise I could see all the scenery, and it was all so new to me, my eyes were wide checking out everything I saw. It was amazing that this strange place with rows and rows of red brick buildings and compact cars driving on the wrong side of the road was going to be my foster country.

I arrived in Leeds around 9:30 am and jumped into the first taxi cab I saw. I didn't know how far away the residence was and I didn't care. I was dead, and I wasn't about to try looking up bus routes. The taxi driver seemed to be driving in circles; none of the roads were straight, but he knew where my residence was without any problems and we got to the residence quickly. We pulled up to what appeared to be a town house complex surrounding a large court yard with high walls everywhere and a large closed iron gate. The layout resembled a prison, but it looked new and nice once you got into the courtyard. I paid the cab driver 4 pounds which was almost \$10 for a 3 minute cab ride and checked in at the office. The guy who served me was super polite; he looked like Mr Bean and was drinking tea. I thought that was kind of funny, my British stereotypes were already coming true. He looked my name up, gave me my key and pointed me in the direction of my flat. I did a death march to the doorway through the courtyard towards block N, my future home. The residence was really quiet; either people were sleeping or nobody had moved in yet. As I was going in the main door, a guy with an American accent came out and held the door for me. I already had met at least one person and that was reassuring that I wouldn't be lonely the whole year. I walked into my flat, went straight to my room and fell asleep on my bed without any sheets, wearing my jacket, and with another jacket as a blanket. It was freezing.

The First Couple of Weeks

I went through a big transition in the first two weeks in England. I was used to working because I had been on my work terms for the previous 8 months before leaving Canada. All of a sudden I didn't have to work, or get up at 7:00am every morning. I didn't even have school for the first two weeks I was there. My time was filled with exploring.

The campus was huge and I found myself frequently getting lost. I had to look after such things as registering for courses, signing up with the health care office, and getting acquainted with the social scene. As for class registration, it was relatively simple. Unlike Canadian schools where your courses are either selected for you or selected by you well in advance, the UK schools have all the students walking around the gymnasium in job fair format, browsing and talking to different TA's and professors looking after registration for their courses. It took me a few hours to select my courses, and to get a student card. I also learnt for the first time about the existence of British queues (line ups). These things were long and agonising. I was too used to the super convenience of the Canadian systems; the queues on a daily basis in England were almost Needles Hall quality.

I had to register with the university medical centre. All they asked of me was my student card; they didn't at all mind that I was from another country. I was used to the OHIP system whereby if you didn't have a health card at every visit, you weren't going to be treated. On my first visit to the medical centre they even gave me a few different vaccinations, including my first ever polio vaccination.

A class mate of mine from Waterloo was there as well taking the same program as me. I actually met up with him by accident on my first day there. His name was Keith and I had known him since our first year in Geo Engineering. It was great having another person with me over there because we could work together to figure things out while adapting to the new system. On the first day the school cafeteria was having a welcome dinner for the international students. We got there in time for the left overs and were treated with our first ever dinner of UK fish and chips. I kind of enjoyed it except for the topping of mash chic peas smothering the chips, it was my introduction to British cuisine.

The Football Team

Within the first week of being there I was approached by a couple of big guys recruiting for the University football team. It was American football, not the standard British football that we call soccer. I

was surprised to know that this team existed, and they were keen to have as many North Americans playing because at least we knew the rules. I signed with them and went out to the first training session that began just before October. A lot of guys were at the try outs, a number of Americans, lots of British, and even some South Americans and an Aussie.

Football eventually became a big part of my life in Leeds, something that I never would have thought of before. We practised a couple of nights a week and played games typically every Saturday. Everyone on the football team got to know each other quite well and when we weren't playing we usually went out together to the pubs and clubs. It was a good group of guys and our coaches were cool as well. The quality of football wasn't outstanding and it wasn't a big sport at the uni but we made the most of it and had a lot of good times.

Our team did really well in the league as well. We ended up undefeated in the league, with the best record. The only downside with playing football was the duration of the season, it seemed to last forever. Our last game wasn't until sometime in March and by then my body was starting to fall apart with a bad ankle and shoulder. We lost in playoffs, and football was over, but we still kept in touch with each other after that. I was awarded MVP for defence which I thought was pretty good considering I never played football in Canada. Now that I'm back at Waterloo I really miss playing, but I'm still reminded of the good times whenever I reinjure my ankle.

The Modules

The modules (courses) I was taking in the first semester were relatively similar in content to what I would have expected back in Waterloo. I was taking 5 modules, 4 mandatory with an elective. The big differences between Leeds University and Waterloo were the timetable hours and the amount of assigned work. My timetable was fairly easy going; each module had 3 hours a week with a couple of extra tutorials and labs now and again. I thought this was a great change of pace from Waterloo, but the other students from Leeds Uni must have been fairly accustomed to it. My roommates typically didn't make it to class until sometime in the afternoon, these guys were great at sleeping in.

The modules were structured in more of an independent style of learning. There typically weren't the same weekly assignments that Waterloo would have. Instead, these modules possibly had a couple of midterm exams and a final exam that was worth a large portion of the final grade.

Another unique aspect of the course layout was the extended vacation periods given to the students. Basically, school started at the beginning of October and lasted until the beginning of December. Everyone then was given one month of Christmas vacation and then would come back in January for a couple of weeks with exams beginning at the end of January. We were then given another week off. The second semester began in February and then again had another entire month off for Easter vacation in April with exams starting at the end of May. It was quite unusual, and it seemed to me to be kind of unnecessary to be given so much time off between the regular semester and the exams. I suppose the point of view was to use this time to study and review for the upcoming exams, but not too many people that I know of needed that much time. The result was a lot of free time that was used by me and the other international students to travel and explore England. The downside to this was it extended a typical year of school until mid June with not much time to work over the summer vacation.

During the first semester I really didn't put too much effort into the courses. The concepts we were learning were not too intensive and there wasn't much course work to keep me occupied and involved with what we were learning. I went into the Christmas vacation thinking that I had not learned much and there weren't really any marks to assess just how well I was doing. So I basically crammed the entire semester of knowledge into my head a couple of weeks before the exams and the result was pretty good marks. I ended the first semester with a 70% average, which by UK standards was near the top of the class. I was relieved about that. The second semester went basically the same way as the first although there seemed to be more course work in a couple of my classes. I again did a lot of cramming before the exams and finished overall with a 69% average over the entire year. My worst marks were in my electives. I took a politics course and a transportation planning course. These courses required a lot of independent work such as readings and seminars. The technical engineering courses were probably the best courses I took and I learnt quite a lot about geotechnics and some engineering geology practises. The earth science courses were less interesting for me but were reasonably well laid out.

University Life

I would have to say that life at Leeds Uni was pretty easy going. Maybe it is because I was used to life at Waterloo, or maybe it was the 8 months straight of working 50 hour weeks. Whatever it was I felt pretty relaxed the entire time I was there. Classes were not too demanding and all the other students seemed to have the same laid back feel to school. I noticed that even the professors approached their teaching with an easy going attitude. Perhaps there was a mutual understanding between teacher and student whereby I won't work you too hard if you don't bug me too much. I shouldn't say that was the case for everyone, a

couple of the profs were enthusiastic, some even taught their courses out of their own text books that they wrote. For the most part it was on the easy side of different, a great year away from UW.

I think that if I hadn't been involved in football over there I would have been bored. There was definitely enough spare time to pursue an extra curricular activity, take an extra course or two, or work part time in one of the many bars or clubs. I even worked as well as playing football in my second semester and I never felt any pressure. Working was another unique aspect to life in Leeds. I myself had special status to work in the UK because my father is British, but even the other North Americans had permission to work a set number of hours per week. I worked as a waiter/bartender in a nice restaurant downtown. It was my first time doing this kind of work but I had no problem finding a job. It was a decent source of extra spending money; working approximately 18 hours a week I totalled close to 1000 quid which was almost \$2500 CAN at the time.

Also, the spare time I mentioned was quite often spent going out, socialising at the pub, or venturing out to one of the many large clubs located throughout Leeds. Weekday nights were student nights in Leeds. Each club had specials throughout the week and there was always somewhere to go whether it was a Monday or Wednesday. The party life actually slows down on the weekends for the students because the clubs start raising their drink and cover prices, resulting in students putting together their own house parties. During the first semester I was really into going out all the time because it was the first time in a long while that I had the time and opportunity to do so, but by the second semester I was a little bored by that routine, and I started to feel too old. A lot of the guys in residence who were keen on clubbing were 18 and 19 years old, although I must say the young people grow up quickly over there. It also started to become expensive, an average night out would cost around 20 quid (almost \$50).

The cost of living in England was definitely higher than Canada. Residence alone cost around 260 quid per month (\$650) and it wasn't as nice as you would expect. Groceries were reasonably priced if you were smart with your shopping; I was averaging around 25 quid per week (\$60) on groceries. And eating out was almost impossible with my budget, a meal at a half decent restaurant would cost almost as much in British pounds as it would in Canadian dollars. There were lots of fast food style restaurants to choose from; a meal at McDonalds would cost almost \$10, and you could grab a sandwich at a cafeteria for \$4. I already mentioned the expense of going out, but other sources of entertainment, such as going to the local movie theatre, were quite reasonable at \$10 for students. There were also lots of concerts and DJ's at the uni, which cost around \$40 for a ticket.

Getting used to public transportation was also standard for any student in the UK, not just the internationals. The city bus systems were efficient, but I tended not to use them at all unless I was going far. A day rider ticket cost around \$5. Intercity buses were also quite common. A round-trip to London would cost around 30 pounds and I quite typically ventured to and from Liverpool because of an airport that offered a lot of discount airline deals. This would cost 20 pounds roundtrip.

The Travelling

The travelling I did while in the UK was definitely the most memorable and rewarding experience of my time spent overseas. England is an ideal hub for European destinations; a lot of discount airlines made it quite reasonable to fly to cities that I had only ever read about.

When I left for England I didn't expect to do much travelling because I never really thought that I would have enough free time or spending money. But the months off in Christmas and April made it ideal for travelling as long as one had the resources. I would recommend to Waterloo students to make sure you have a source of money or a credit line somewhere because once you get to England you will want to travel, no matter what your attitude about it is before you leave. It's just something that international students end up feeling obligated to do.

My first trip out of England was to Amsterdam over a long weekend in November. It was organised by some fellow Waterloo and McMaster students. We found out that one of the discount airlines was offering free tickets - you just had to pay the taxes, so the roundtrip airfare cost only 23 pounds – unbelievable. However, this flight flew to Belgium and not straight into Amsterdam, which eventually caused some problems; things started to get expensive quickly because the train ride itself cost 60 Euro (\$90). We stayed in hostels in Amsterdam; some were good and some were bad. The city itself was both beautiful and strange. The museums and scenery were outstanding but there were also the drug and red light districts that added to the obscurity. Overall, it was a very memorable trip and great time spent off school, especially when we missed our plane and were forced to buy another ticket (which wasn't free this time).

My next big trip was a month later. Keith (from UW) and I travelled to Salzburg Austria and were chauffeured to a cool little ski resort town in the Alps. There we spent 4 awesome days snowboarding with our Austrian buddy Dominique. From Austria we took a train down to Italy where we rented a car in Trieste and drove pretty much all across Italy, stopping in Milan and Rome. It was very historical and

unique. The whole trip took around 8 days and was another memorable adventure. We made it back to England by Christmas Eve day.

Less than 2 weeks later (still on time off from school) I travelled to Madrid Spain to visit my girlfriend Julia. I'll take this time to warn other UW students to be careful of these European women. They may be very easy to fall in love with. Anyhow, I spent a week in Madrid, visited with her family and friends, and lived *la vida espanol para una semana*. One year later, we are still together and now it's her turn to visit my country.

My other big vacation wasn't until April during the Easter vacation. Julia and I decided to do a big tour of France. We flew into Paris for a few days and then flew to Nice on the Mediterranean. After another few days we drove through France back up to England. It was an amazing vacation, I don't think I could ever have a better 10 days. I really miss it.

The Summer Term

As the summer term approached I began to weigh my options as to what I could do with the 3 months from the end of exams in June to the beginning of school again in Waterloo starting in September. I basically had the option of going back to the Waterloo area and working at a co-op job or trying to get a job in the UK for the summer. An influencing factor was my friend Steve from Waterloo who was moving to Belfast, Northern Ireland for 6 months to work with his airline company. It meant that I would have a guaranteed place to live and for free.

I started to concentrate my job searching efforts on the Belfast area but I didn't have very much luck. I had one inquiry from a consulting firm but they left it for me to contact them when I arrived in Belfast and it didn't work out. I therefore spent the month of June searching for work. I thought that with my experience I would be able to find something in the construction industry but nothing was turning up. As I continued to familiarise myself with the region of Northern Ireland, I began to realise how the political situation and history of the region have made the socio-economic system unique. Things such as job application processes have more red tape. Slower development within the city makes it difficult to find a semi-engineering type of job. If I had known these things in advance, I probably would have started applying for positions earlier in the year, and relied more on referral companies to find work, which is typical in the UK.

Even though the work situation didn't pan out as I had hoped, I still had a good time touring Northern Ireland and Ireland, and learnt a lot about the politics unique to these countries. I spent the last couple of weeks of the summer in Spain which was an awesome way to prepare for this upcoming year of University and saying good bye to Europe.

My Change in Perception

Now I'm back in Waterloo with the normal lifestyle that I had when I started university. Although I am back to my familiar surroundings I notice that I now look at life differently from before I left. I think it's the realisation that there are people all over this world who are just the same as all of us, yet have a different behaviour and mindset due to their surroundings and culture. Living with people in different places that I had only read about gave me the perception that we live in a small world, and although we may be separated geographically, we still have the same goals and desires. It's resulted in me thinking globally instead of locally, which has broadened my goals and aspirations in life.