

Final Report

Research Stay at University of British Columbia (UBC)

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Master of International Relations

University of British Columbia

Master Public Policy and Foreign Affairs

Courses:

RES 520/GPP 584 - Climate Change: Science, Technology and Sustainable
Development

GPP 562- Resource Governance, Environment and Human Security

SEEDS Program: Re-use of Surplus Furniture at UBC

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When I applied for the research stay at the University of British Columbia, I was already passionate about environmental issues. The masters in International Relations at the universities Humboldt University, Free University and University Potsdam, gave me the opportunity to dive into different topics but it also enabled me to focus on issues related to environmental protection, which I knew was going to be my personal focus of the degree that is so relevant and yet so broad. With the research stay at UBC I was hoping to explore the wider field of environmental studies to figure out where my initial interest about the environment derives from and which area I want to focus on for my master's thesis. I knew I was going to settle in quickly, get the opportunity to meet new people from around the world and have the chance to live a completely new chapter of my life, something that every exchange student experiences and not only International Relations students can relate to. But I didn't know that

I was going to be fascinated by the beauty of the country in a way that I could have easily stayed another semester. I was told in advance that the campus at UBC is particularly beautiful because it is located at the western tip of the Point Grey Peninsula, and therefore right by the ocean and surrounded by forest- but I did not expect to be able to study environmental studies basically in nature. UBC is an inspiring place to do the research stay with the University Alliance for Sustainability at, because you get reminded every minute of your day why you are working on these issues to preserve what is in front of you, for now and the generations to come.

Classes at the University of British Columbia

I took three classes, of which one of them was a directed studies course at UBC and cannot say which one I enjoyed best, or from which I took away the most. The two classes with the Master's Program of Public Policy and Foreign Affairs were both very small, with a maximum of 10-15 students. This allowed for questions and discussions and from the first day I was impressed by the diversity of the class. The students were not only from eight different countries and four different continents, they also came from a variety of educational backgrounds- most of them with a couple of years work experience with their national governments, the UN, or small environmental or human rights NGOs. The content of the classes was challenging, but motivating at the same time. I enjoyed the various topics that ranged from climate science, over mitigation and adaptation mechanisms to international resource conflicts and current domestic Canadian climate politics.

The class "Climate Change: Science, Technology and Sustainable Development" enabled me to think critically about climate solutions and political decisions regarding climate change. Topics of the class included domestic climate policies of Canada, but also international approaches in the US, China and the EU. Discussions and debates in class helped me to form my own opinion about the effectiveness of certain policies and let me see the bigger picture. Throughout the semester, the assignments allowed me to work on environmental issues of my interest in further detail. In that way I could focus on my initial interests but also explore new areas of study. Topics which I dealt with in greater detail were the European Emissions Trading Scheme; Adaptation mechanisms in response to sea-level rise; and the contested hydropower dam in British Columbia- Site C and its environmental and social impacts. The last few weeks of class were dedicated to debates, in which the students needed to conduct research on certain topics and provide pro and con arguments on topics of geo-engineering strategies, such as aerosols, ocean fertilization or afforestation. Other debate topics included mitigation strategies involving electronic vehicles subsidies, carbon taxes and national high efficiency standards.

The class “Resource Governance, Environment and Human Security” covered topics, such as conflict minerals and the Resource Curse, fossil fuels in British Columbia, as well as global challenges of over-fishing, deforestation, and water scarcity. Weekly discussions and presentations engaged the class with the different topics, that were yet all connected. The classes were given particular value through guest lecturers who were experts in the field and often stayed after class for questions and comments from students. Guests that were invited ranged from university professors, over directors of initiatives, such as the Africa Forests Research Initiative on Conservation and Development (AFRICAD), and environmental activists, as well as African miners to give the students a perspective outside the textbook. The professor- a former French diplomat- provided valuable feedback on assignments and presentations and was not only a professor who taught us the content of the class, but also a coach for public speaking, debating and articulation.

The SEEDS Program at UBC

The directed studies I participated in was a project as part of the SEEDS Program, which is a program at UBC that connects students with faculty, staff and operations in handling environmental challenges on campus with initiatives including topics such as energy, water, climate and waste, to name a few. As I have long been concerned with waste and interested in zero waste initiatives, I applied for a waste reduction SEEDS Project. I was prepared to contribute something to the university with my research, but I did not expect to be integrated in a way that I felt I could make a positive impact just by doing the project and by being the only one in charge. It required dedication to the project and overcoming barriers of bureaucracy along the way, but after all, I managed to bring together different stakeholders and present to them my recommendations on how to handle surplus furniture in an effective, regulated way, in order to avoid large amounts of reusable furniture from going to the landfill. I was included in the team immediately and at all times taken seriously. I felt that my ideas were considered and discussed on the highest levels in the university and I got to interview over 15 faculty, operation and staff at the University of British Columbia, the University of Victoria, as well as the University of Washington.

Sustainability Initiatives at UBC

Outside of class I also got involved with sustainability initiatives. The university offers a large number of sustainability events, conferences and initiatives throughout the semester, which was a great way for me to find out about UBC’s sustainability work, but also to meet like-minded people and explore other fields of sustainability that I had not been dealing with in greater detail previously. It was at UBC where I found my interest for sustainable food. It began with being invited to visit the UBC Farm,

Orchard Garden and Roots on the Roof (all three are sustainability initiatives at UBC). In the end of the semester, I was invited to give a workshop at the UBC Orchard Garden to education students who wanted to learn about how to integrate sustainability issues in the classroom and their curriculums. My topic was Waste Reduction and the importance of the connection to food and I made great contacts with the workshop participants and Orchard Garden Team members.

Overall, the Research Stay with the University Alliance for Sustainability was one of the most enriching experiences I have had in my studies. I got to explore a completely different way of teaching and learning at university and a deeper insight into global environmental issues. I met people who value the environment as much as I do and broadened my perspective on work opportunities in international relations and environmental studies.