

WESTERN SCIENCE SPEAKS PODCAST SEASON 3, EPISODE 5

EPISODE TITLE

A new learning landscape

PODCAST SUMMARY

In honor of [International Week](#) at Western University, the Western Science Speaks podcast is proud to present a special podcast, celebrating the students willing to go the extra mile for a unique and foreign academic experience.

Beginning with an interview with a student who spent 6 months in Stockholm, Sweden and concluding with a student who spent 10 months in Singapore, this podcast unveils the tips and insight needed for any student considering studying in a new learning landscape.

INTERVIEW

You're listening to the Western science speaks podcast. Presented by Henry Standage.

Henry Standage 0:13

In celebration of International Week, we're excited to bring you a special edition of the Western Science Speaks podcast. Today we're going to be talking with two different recent Western graduates who spent their fourth year studying abroad in very different places. In the first half of the show, we'll be talking with a student who spent six months in Stockholm, Sweden. Before transitioning to an interview, with a student who spent 10 months in Singapore. In this podcast we will be looking for the overlapping cultural themes, as well as the contrasting aspects, that makes studying abroad such an incredibly exciting opportunity. I think what really comes through from both of these interviews is that while living in foreign countries will bring obvious differences, most countries have more in common to home than you might initially think. And as one of the interviewees put it to me, it's a brick a day of culture shock, not all the bricks at once. And that's mainly thanks to the institutions that are in place in these foreign countries. And I think that's a really eloquent way to put it. Anyway, here's the first interview.

Henry Standage 1:22

Where did you study abroad?

Amanda Stuart 1:23

My exchange was at Stockton University in Sweden?

Henry Standage 1:26

It was this for academically driven reasons, because I understand that they have some pretty awesome schools over there, or was this just something you'd kind of personally always wanted to do?

Amanda Stuart 1:35

Um, it was a bit of both. I guess for myself as a Canadian student, I sort of recognised that as the world is more increasingly globalised, the benefits of connecting internationally really are paramount. So, I knew that studying abroad would expand my horizons in an interconnected world of thoughts, theories and progression. I also knew that being abroad would sort of give me an opportunity to connect and learn about the diversity in the global community and extend my appreciation over those distinctions.

Henry Standage 2:09

And were you looking at a couple other places? Or were you kind of always locked in on Sweden?

Amanda Stuart 2:14

I knew that I wanted to go somewhere in Scandinavia. So, I looked at universities in Sweden and in Denmark. Those were sort of my primary areas.

Henry Standage 2:24

Now, I heard that in Sweden, they do one course a month. Which I thought sounded great. What were your thoughts about that?

Amanda Stuart 2:33

It was different. It was a bit of a shock for sure. I'm used to sort of more multitasking and taking on larger tasks. But it was nice to focus in on just one subject and sort of have your brain centred on that for a period of time. So I enjoyed it, and I got really close with my classmates. The class sizes were only like 12 people, very small. So it was like a little family and kind of going month by month in every course.

Henry Standage 2:57

Were there any other aspects that were completely different in Sweden academically than here.

Amanda Stuart 3:04

Academically I'd say that they have more of a personal connection with their professors and their peers. And I think that just speaks to the size of the classes. They're very small and everyone's really connected in that sense. I think, mostly I noticed more of a difference in the way people just connected in general, it's more of an individual mindset. And people are a bit more shy or timid. So, it kind of takes a while to get into to break into the shell of most Swedes. But once you're there, it's like family,

Henry Standage 3:37

So, it'd be hard to get them on a podcast. Accommodation wise, how did that get set up?

Amanda Stuart 3:43

I'm really fortunate that Western has an agreement with Stockholm University. So, I was able just to show up at Stockholm University and it was guaranteed accommodation. It was really nice. We had single rooms and a separate bathroom, but a shared kitchen space. So, you were able to connect with your floor mates and have that cohesiveness but still your own separate space. So, it was like the best of both worlds.

Henry Standage 4:10

How were you able to balance your academics because obviously, you've gone there to learn different things, but you also want to travel, you're kind of like right in the middle of Europe. So how are you able to balance leisure time with studying?

Amanda Stuart 4:23

I was really fortunate, the friends that I made, we sort of motivated one another to get the assignments done and out of the way and then just capitalise on our free time to be, you know, on a night bus to Oslo or a train to Copenhagen or something like that. So really just sort of taking advantage of our free time. And it was lucky because it doesn't take very long to travel places and it's cheap. So, it made it pretty easy.

Henry Standage 4:48

How often were you going to places?

Amanda Stuart 4:50

In my first semester, I want to say I stayed put a bit more just because I was still sort of trying to find my way in Stockholm and navigating that. Everything was new and exciting there. So, I didn't feel like I wanted to be gone as much. And then come my second semester, it was like every other weekend was like a new place to go, which is really cool.

Henry Standage 5:11

What was your favourite place that you went?

Amanda Stuart 5:13

That's tough. I mean, I love Stockholm. So that would probably be my number one, but I guess I'm studying there. In terms of travelling, Copenhagen was really cool. It was kind of this picture-esque little town. But Berlin was really, really interesting. I'd recommend it.

Henry Standage 5:30

What would you say to someone who was thinking about studying abroad, but wasn't sure that maybe Scandinavia would be different enough or wasn't sure that they would enjoy themselves? Are there any tips you would give them?

Amanda Stuart 5:44

I guess if there's somebody thinking about studying abroad, I would say, first and foremost, they should definitely do it. It's really worth it. It's an amazing experience. It's really enlightening. And then just to go into it with an open mind, if you're considering Scandinavia, I highly recommend it. For me, it was a huge contrast to Canadian culture. So, it did give you sort of that difference. But it didn't feel difficult to integrate there, simply because there wasn't a huge language barrier. Everyone there spoke English really well and was very open and willing to communicate with you in English. But even if you tried out Swedish and it was really, really bad and your sentences made no sense, they were really, really nice and they slowed down and they were trying to encourage you, so it was a great time.

Henry Standage 6:28

Scandinavia, one of the most intellectual regions in the world represents an ideal location for those who want a change of scenery, but maybe don't want their entire world to be flipped upside down. Now let's go to my interview with a student who spent almost a year residing in Singapore. Southeast Asia is one of the most cerebral places on earth. And on paper, there surely aren't much more alien places to go for somebody raised in North America. Here's the interview.

Henry Standage 6:57

Where did you go abroad?

Jamie Alicia Quinn 6:59

I went to The National University of Singapore.

Henry Standage 7:03

So how does that come about?

Jamie Alicia Quinn 7:04

I knew that I wanted to go to Asia on exchange because I guess like going to Australia, New Zealand is cool, but I wanted to go for a full year. And that's not really an option for Australia, New Zealand in the Southern hemisphere and Europe is different, but it wasn't different enough. And I have my Irish passport. So, it's pretty easy for me to move to Europe to work. So, I know it's a lot more difficult to have a good excuse to move abroad in Asia. So, I took advantage of it with exchange.

Henry Standage 7:37

I assume you went through a pretty big culture shock.

Jamie Alicia Quinn 7:40

Yeah. The nice thing about Singapore though, it's pretty common to hear this, but it's a good mix of Western and Asian culture. Instead of a brick wall, you kind of get a brick a day. That's the best way of describing the culture shock. So, it's not like you're just plopped down in something so completely new. But it's new enough that there are certain things every day that you're kind of like, oh, oh, okay.

Henry Standage 8:13

So, did the university you went to have a reputation for taking international students?

Jamie Alicia Quinn 8:19

I would say so. Yeah. NUS is the number one school in Asia according to the Times Higher Education and has been for the last three years. So, they're pretty, pretty good with taking international students both for exchange and just as regular students, as Western does with international students. Yeah, it's one of the best schools I think you can go to so they're pretty good with that.

Henry Standage 8:43

That seems like the best way to avoid disaster, to go to a school that's kind of used to handling people coming from abroad.

Jamie Alicia Quinn 8:50

They had a really, really great welcome programme because I was there for the full year, when I arrived at the end of July, I had about two weeks to settle in and they ran a whole bunch of programmes for the exchange students for about seven or eight days leading up to the start of classes. And that was a really good way of getting people settled, getting them used to the transit system, meeting new exchange students both in your programme and in your residence. And yeah, it was fantastic and any issues I had, all the professors were great with answering questions. They know it's not easy to move abroad. So yeah, it was really good.

Henry Standage 9:32

Was this academically driven? Was this you kind of wanted personal growth? What was the main reason?

Jamie Alicia Quinn 9:40

My main reason for going abroad in general was for academic and just like, personal experience, I guess. There's no better way in my opinion to live abroad somewhere without having to pay crazy fees than going on exchange. And like I said, when I was narrowing down my choices. NUS is the number one school in Asia. So that was a huge factor for me in terms of education. And I wanted something that was pretty good for travelling, of course, especially because I was there for the year. And Singapore is kind of the central hub of Southeast Asia. And that made it really easy to go away on weekend trips and stuff like that when you aren't too busy with school. But that being said, because NUS is such a good school, one of the biggest differences I found was in terms of, I guess, the mentality towards academics, because it's not like people that Western aren't academically oriented. They are. But in Singapore, it's honestly ridiculous. I was only taking four courses and I knew students who were taking seven, and they're doing like three or four extracurriculars, they call them CCA's. And, some people had a job. Some people were volunteering, and they were still sleeping and had a social life.

Henry Standage 11:02

What about the education system is different?

Jamie Alicia Quinn 11:05

One thing that I had a hard time with was the weighting of assessments. Because at Western, and again, these are just with the courses that I've taken. A lot of times it's a lot of coursework throughout the semester, right with assessments, and usually your final exams are like 30, 40, maybe 50%. But when I was in Singapore, my lowest weighting for a final exam was 60%. I had one 60%. And I think, like four 70% exams and then the other 30 or 40% came from a midterm.

Henry Standage 11:43

So, the first one you took, I assume you must have been super nervous and on edge. By the end of the trip, do you think you became accustomed to high stakes exams?

Jamie Alicia Quinn 11:54

Yeah, I would say so. It was easier going into an exam and less nerve wracking. For sure.

Henry Standage 12:00

Were you able to travel to different countries?

Jamie Alicia Quinn 12:03

Yeah, I was pretty fortunate with that. With our fall recess week, and then the reading week before exams, they do two weeklong breaks in the semester. So, one is the middle of the semester. And then one is between the end of classes and the beginning of exams with those ones. And then we had some long, long weekend holidays like Chinese New Year and stuff like that. And then our Christmas break was a month long. So I had family come visit me and we did some travelling with that. And then I came home for a little bit, which was not nice for the weather. But yeah, it was good. I was pretty fortunate with that. I went to Indonesia twice, once to Sumatra and once to Lombok, I went to Bangkok for Chinese New Year weekend I went to Vietnam, Cambodia...Japan.

Henry Standage 13:03

So how was accommodation? So, where did you stay? Was it with other English-speaking people?

Jamie Alicia Quinn 13:09

So, the way that NUS worked was there's three types of accommodations. So similar to Western where you have traditional hybrid and sweet style, they have, I think its residences, residential colleges, and halls. And so, I stayed in a hall, which I guess you could compare it to the traditional style at Western. And so, for me, I was in Med-Syd my first year and then I sophed in Med-Syd. So I really liked the traditional style and I thought, well, it's good to meet people and blah, blah, blah, and apparently the residences, which are more sweet style, those ones are really heavy with international students and the halls, which is where I stayed which are more traditional style ones. They tend to have less exchange students. So, it was a smaller exchange community and more local students. And that was something that I searched for. And I got that, and it was good, and my neighbour was Singaporean, and I got to know her really well and we still keep in touch.

Henry Standage 14:17

Did you pick up anything in Singapore? Any sort of activities or did you pick up the language a little bit?

Unknown Speaker 14:24

Singapore actually has four national languages, one of which is English. So, I would say 99% of the population with the exception of some of the elders. Basically, the way that they're taught is they learn English and then most of them are either Indian-Singaporean, Malaysian-Singaporean, or Chinese-Singaporean, so they either learn Tamil molay or Mandarin. In addition to English, so there was really no language barrier, which was great. And I got into rock climbing in my third year at Western. And so rock climbing is actually pretty big in Singapore as well. There's a whole bunch of different gyms. So, two the exchange students in my hall, were also rock climbers, and they had brought their gear along. So that was something that we were doing quite often during the weeks as well.

Henry Standage 15:26

If you were talking to someone who's thinking about going to study abroad, and they're saying, well, I want to go away, but I don't want to go to somewhere completely different like Asia. What would you say to convince them to go there instead of somewhere like England, where it's going to be a pretty smooth transition?

Jamie Alicia Quinn 15:43

I would say, do it. Like I was saying earlier, I think it's a lot easier, at least, because as a little background of my education because I double majored in medical science and French studies. The med-sci aspect of it, I'm not really into research and I am not really interested in Master's programmes or anything like that. So not having a practical experience like nursing or medicine or stuff like that you have, in my opinion, you're limited in your opportunities to go to Asia, because a lot of times that's science research based, or business based. So, whereas like, you can go pretty much anywhere in Europe and almost everyone will speak English. And Asia is just, it's so different. And it's so important that you put yourself outside of your comfort zone. And like I said, about Singapore. At least what I

found, it's not like you just arrive and 'I'm in a whole completely different culture. I don't speak the language. I don't like the food. Everything's different.' There's just so many different things. It's such an amazing experience and you're not paying international student fees, you pay your tuition to Western, when you go on exchange, all you're paying for is your accommodation which for me was actually cheaper than it was here. And it's cheaper to stay in accommodation in Singapore as opposed to staying in the city because it's such an expensive country. It's the ideal situation for you to go out and experience something different. Put yourself outside of your comfort zone and learn so much about you, about different cultures, not just Singaporean culture, but we had students from Hong Kong, we had students from Japan, we had students from China, we had students from all over Europe. So, you're really just in this big melting pot of culture. There are no words for me to describe how much I loved my exchange. And I would recommend that to any single person even if you have a little smidgen of 'oh, I don't know, maybe', look into it and apply. It's so humbling at the same time, but you also get to be like, oh, well, I'm Canadian and this is the school I go to and this is how much I love my culture - let me share this with you. But also, I know nothing about these cultures. So, I'll bring all this knowledge into my life. And I guess you could say, I'm definitely not the same person now as I was when I left. Any better or worse, I couldn't really tell you, but it was definitely life changing.

Henry Standage 18:47

That's the end of the second and final interview. I hope you found this podcast informative. Not every person I talked to made the podcast, but the one universal note I took away from every exchange student I had the privilege of talking to, was that regardless of where they went, every one of them called it one of the most rewarding experiences of their lives academically and personally. Western International Week goes from November 12 to 16th. You can find out about all the events by going to the Western International website. I'm Henry Standage, signing out. Thanks for listening.