

### International student exchange

I'm currently doing my international exchange program at Waikato University in New Zealand also called Aotearoa in the Māori language. Just like Canada, New Zealand also has natives called Māori people and European who settled here are usually called Kiwi. New Zealand is a beautiful country and has so many to offer in terms of food, history etc. I am currently living in Hamilton; an inland city in the North island of NZ. It's a growing city with a laid-back lifestyle, and has friendly locals and a student-friendly atmosphere. Hamilton may not be as big or busy as Ottawa, but it has its own charm. Compared to Ottawa, Hamilton is a mix of historic and modern architecture, and a more structured urban vibe. The public transport system here is smaller and has fixed operating hours, during the day the bus passes every 15 minutes and late hours it comes every 30 minutes. During the weekend public transport takes a bit longer and also they stop working early around 8pm depending on where you live, but biking, scooters and walking are very common among students if you don't have your own car.

For future students coming to Hamilton, I highly recommend visiting the Hamilton Gardens. It's one of the most unique gardens I've ever seen, with themed sections like the Italian Renaissance Garden, Japanese Garden of Contemplation, and even a Surrealist Garden that feels like something out of a dream. It's a peaceful and inspiring place to explore. If you want to experience more of New Zealand's natural beauty, Rotorua is just a short drive away and is known for its geothermal hot springs and strong Māori cultural presence. You can also take a weekend trip to Hobbiton in Matamata, which is a must-see if you're a fan of The Lord of the Rings or The Hobbit. We were lucky enough to do a trip organized by the university of Waikato and we went as international students in exchange. The set is magical, and it's such a cool way to experience part of New Zealand's film history.

One thing I love about being in Hamilton is how easy it is to connect with other international students, and how everyone you meet is welcoming. The University of Waikato also has great support services for exchange students, and I've met people from diverse backgrounds. The campus itself is beautiful and creates a perfect environment for students. We have a park and a small lake right on campus which became one of my favorite spots to relax and decompress after long hours of assignments. The campus has almost everything a student could ask for; gym facilities with group workout activities, parking for car owners, the wellbeing facility that plans yoga sessions for students on Mondays, a range of accommodations, and different restaurants and coffee spots like Bongo Cafe for sushi lovers, Sue's Café, Food Paradise, and even a student bar called The Don, which hosts activities like open mic nights, karaoke, and other school events. For

international students who enjoy alcoholic drinks, it's important to know that only a passport is accepted as a valid ID.

The university also has a wide range of student clubs, which I really appreciated from sports clubs and cultural groups to the Business Management Club. As a student completing my Bachelor's in Business Management, I was especially excited to join the Women in Business Association. It's a space where you learn from women excelling in the business world and a great opportunity to network.

I also took part in the Buddy Program, a fantastic initiative for international students. We were paired with Waikato students who had already been at the university for two years. They showed us around, helped us adjust to life here, and offered advice on how to prepare schedules, manage assignments, and use school platforms like Moodle (similar to Brightspace). We had five weeks to plan activities together, explore New Zealand, and really build friendship. I'd highly recommend joining this program as it made me feel comfortable and helped me settle in quickly.

Academically, I enrolled in four papers (courses), which is the maximum allowed here, to meet the requirements from the University of Ottawa. The minimum is three papers per trimester. The classes are well-organized, and the academic support is strong, which helped me manage my workload even when things got intense, especially with classes having flexi mode where you can join online or in person. Classes here take usually two hours and some are only an hour. I h

In terms of accommodation, Waikato offers various types of stays with pricing depending on whether you prefer fully catered or self-catered housing. They also provide options for staying with a host family if that's more your style. If you're not satisfied with the university's options, you're also free to find your own accommodation but I would strongly recommend choosing something close to campus to avoid additional transport costs.

The transport system is decent. Buses run every day with fixed hours. During the day, the wait time is about 15 minutes, and at night around 30 minutes. On weekends, buses end earlier, so you may need alternatives like Uber, e-scooters, or Flexibus; which is a local transport service you can book in advance for a cheap price.

If you're planning your exchange, here's a breakdown of important expenses:

- Student visa & immigration documents ( every student needs to apply for their visa in order to stay if you are not a New Zealand citizen)
- Flight: My flight ticket was around CAD \$1800, but it depends on when you book.
- Accommodation: I pay NZD \$220/week, which is a decent rate, but cheaper options are available if you start looking early.

- Transport: Each bus ride costs NZD \$1.20 to campus. You top up your Bee Card (bus card) online with your logins.
- Groceries: Similar to Canada, I spend NZD \$80–\$100 weekly depending on my diet.
- Insurance: Around NZD \$400, as UOttawa's insurance doesn't work here.
- Gym: Student-friendly rates are available for 6 or 12-months memberships.
- Traveling: If you plan to visit the South Island (e.g., Queenstown or Christchurch), you'll need to book a flight or ferry. For exploring nearby areas, I recommend renting a car for convenience and savings if you plan to visit places around your city like Raglan or going to Auckland.

I hope this was helpful to you as a future student planning your exchange program in New Zealand. It has been an incredible and eye-opening experience for me, and I'm sure it will be for you too!