

What you should know about The University of East Anglia: *Before You Go*

Introduction

I studied abroad at the University of East Anglia (UEA) in the spring of 2005. The experience left me unhappy for a variety of reasons, and I wish I'd known when signing up what I know now. That means all the "little things" the Study Abroad office and Clark University English department didn't say or deemphasized, but that I could have understood had I paid more attention. England and Europe were great, and if I could go back in time I would tell myself to visit both, but to do so separately from my academic experience. In short, what I say in this document applies solely to UEA and not to the country in which it is located. With that disclaimer, I will say that UEA has real problems that are not just a matter of bad luck or a bad attitude on my part. In life, one has to determine when it's raining, and when someone is pissing in your face. UEA's deficiencies are systematic and widespread. I catalog some, but not all, of them here. My home institution is Clark University, and, although UEA didn't accomplish much that could be considered positive in my life, it did make me appreciate Clark.

The Facilities

The student newspaper is named "Concrete" with good reason—UEA is a monument to hideous '60s architecture, and I've only seen the ugliness of its general layout matched by Albany, New York. In contrast to other UK cities I visited, including London, Liverpool, Norwich proper,



The concrete jungle: you'll see a lot of this area.

Glasgow and Edinburgh, UEA looked as though Soviet-era bureaucrats figured prominently in the design committee of the school. Its plodding, gray buildings reflected the general attitude around campus: students are moving through the assembly line and should not think about their environment or disrupt UEA officials, who have more important things to worry about than their students.

Although the cliché claims that beauty is only skin deep, the amount of pride and effort put into the

appearance of thing can sometimes be ascertained by looking at the details of the finished product. Apple Computer is an obvious example of this.

Clark has a clean campus and obviously takes care in maintaining its buildings and grounds. This shows the general importance the school and its students place on their environment. In contrast, UEA's buildings look like prison. I live on



Graffiti on a boarded up window on Waveney Terrace.

floor 2 of J Block; it is common to meet new people who live in, say, D block, which further reinforced the general prison-like motif.

The Room

The room itself is fine, except for the large header that takes up valuable space near the window and the low-quality, high-pain chair / desk combination we receive by default. Although not as many British students have computers as Americans do—in part, I’m told, because of the high VAT and cost of machines—the vast majority do. But the student desks don’t have a rollout shelf for a keyboard, and the gap between the chair and desk means that writers have to angle their forearms to a nearly vertical angle and arch their wrists to type. Since the work I do involves writing, I spend a fair amount of time in this uncomfortable, ergonomically unsound position. At the same time, the black plastic chair has no back support, so I have to either hunch over toward the front, slumping my shoulders, or lean back, rolling my shoulders. Either way is recipe for back and neck aches. Although this may not be

apparent to UEA administrators, it rapidly becomes a problem for someone who does a lot of writing, programming or anything else that requires a computer—like most modern intellectual pursuits.

The bed is a wood cot with a thin, two-inch mattress over it. For the first five days I was here, I slept on it and woke up aching. I tried to solve this problem with an egg-crate mattress similar to ones readily available in America. After visiting and calling five mattress stores, I couldn’t find the equivalent of an egg-crate mattress—which retails for about \$7 in the United



Notice the large gap (red) between the chair and keyboard, as well as the hard plastic chair itself.



The mattress is approximately two inches thick; notice the wooden planks of the frame.



Something foul grows in the shower.

States. The nearest substitute I could find was a £35 (about \$68) futon cover. That at least helped.

The beds are also shorter and narrower than the ones in American college dorms (most British students, however, appear to be somewhat shorter and wider than American ones). Having someone spend the night is impractical. I’m about 6’1”, and my feet dangled off the edge of the bed.

The bed may seem like a trivial problem, but I, like most people, usually spend eight hours a night in bed. When not traveling, I’m in bed or at my computer half the day. That’s too much time to use products that hurt.

The room also doesn’t include a phone, which became a problem for reasons described in “Other Stories.”

Academic Excellence?

I have just six hours of class per week, for 12 weeks total. That compares to 12 hours per week of class at Clark and more total weeks. I’ve never taken an easier course load in college. I’m an English major. Each class assigned less writing than my freshman “Introduction to Literature and Composition” class.

Three UEA classes are approximately as difficult as one and a half Clark classes; I had more assigned reading from Lou Bastien’s “Major British Writers I” than all three UEA classes combined. Perhaps more

importantly, I don't know what kinds of things interest the professors, but I *do* know that students aren't it. Expect indifference from both professors and administrators. For example, I'm taking a Creative Writing: Fiction class in which the tutor doesn't want to meet to discuss writing and actively discourages students from showing work to her. The two times I've tried to show up to her published office hours, she wasn't there. When I took "Writing the Novel I" at Clark, Bill Tapply required that we turn in 10,000 polished words of a novel. In the UEA class, we're required to turn in just 5,000 words, and only in the form of short stories.

The Creative Writing tutor isn't the only person absent from office hours. I've twice tried to go to the primary Romanticism Lecturer's published office hours—only to find him absent.

Overall, the sense I get from the faculty here is that they are merely collecting paychecks and that they see students as a burden. I've never had that feeling from any Clark faculty after taking 20 classes in numerous departments over two and a half years.

The Students Themselves

The interior of most dorms is in disrepair, and the exterior maintains the gray prison motif. The students don't help make things better—it's not unusual to see broken glass all over the ground from people throwing bottles out of windows.

For the first month of school, the logo for my dorm was a large penis etched into the acrylic plastic door that led to the dorm. Although I told the accommodation office about this dubious icon, it remained until someone finally scraped it off a few weeks into February. Now there's an opaque spot where the penis used to be, and its faint outline can still be seen.

The kitchen is usually dirty, because too many students are trying to utilize too little space. Thirteen people live in my corridor, or "flat" (one room is empty), and each person brings a motley collection of pots, pans, cutlery, utensils, implements, plates and bowls to the kitchen. Since there is no meal plan, everyone cooks for themselves, and the kitchen suffers from the tragedy of the commons. Although I've been told our kitchen is relatively clean, most mornings



A box and other debris, thrown by students, atop a bike shed.

feature scattered debris and dirty dishes littering the sink and countertops. Sometimes there are other mystery problems. For example, on the morning of February 21, 2005, several others and I went in to make breakfast and noticed a foul stench, not unlike urine, emanating from the sink. Running water didn't fix it. Someone else in the hall tried dumping bleach and water into the drain. A couple days later the smell finally departed.

Two people on our floor smoked and left cigarette butts in the toilet and the shower, despite repeated requests not to. These two were international students from China; like the rest of the relatively large



Graffiti in my dorm.

contingent from that country, they spoke no more than a quick greeting anyone else. I tried four times to engage them in some way, but after saying "hi" they turned their backs. The other Chinese students I've met, or tried to meet, behaved similarly. Many British students go home for the weekend.



The emergency phone: ready for anything.

Although this isn't really a problem, it creates weaker bonds between people who live together and gives the halls a ghostly feel on the weekends—particularly because two people on my floor were almost never around. In addition, the dearth of students on the weekends makes the campus feel dead and shows that students don't want to be at school as much as they want to be at home—as opposed to Clark, where most students stay on campus during the weekends, which creates a livelier, more exciting atmosphere.

Other Stories

Some of the frustrations of living at UEA don't fit easily into other categories. Individually, they mean little, but together they illustrate the larger picture of poor management and dilapidation.

One night I went down to the "laundrette" that serves the entire campus so I could wash the pants I needed for traveling the next day; I paid the £1.80, put my clothes in and walked back to my room. Half an hour later I went back down and found my clothes still dry. Confused by this, I put them in another machine, paid the money, and watched the washer spin without producing any water. I looked around at the other washing machines, but all of them were spinning too fast for me to see if they had water.

Eventually I saw one stop, and discovered that it too was dry. I wasted an hour of my Friday night struggling with this, and spent £3.60—or about \$7—

learning that the washing machines were broken. Since all UEA's machines are centralized, I walked a long distance back and forth to get to them, and if they all go down it's impossible to do laundry. No one had put a sign on the machines, despite the other loads going;

eventually I walked back down with a piece of paper that said "NO WATER—ALL WASHERS BROKEN." Why didn't anyone else think to do this? I left with a sack of dirty clothes and nothing to wear but jeans to wear.

Miscellaneous other problems include the Internet connection randomly and frequently failing; trying to find a bus schedule online (none are posted for Norwich city busses); the double mailboxes (UEA actually assigns a mailbox through one's department as well as one through the regular post room); the resolving of the £700 housing bill that should have gone to Clark, but instead they put it in my "school" mailbox, where it got manhandled by others and then placed in the S - Sc slot, where I found it today because I was looking for something else from a professor that had been misplaced—I had to speak first with the woman in accounting and then her boss to convince them Clark should be paying for housing; the bill for the temporary housing card, also with a late fee, because I was supposed to turn it in, although no one said anything about that; the health system.

One night a group I could see from my window started throwing glass bottles from their kitchen on the second floor. I shouted at them and asked what they were doing, and they stated the obvious. I told them to stop, so they threw another. I went to look for the Resident Tutor (RT), and, although it was a struggle to find where two lived, neither was home. So I gave up

that quest and went back to my room to call campus security. The rooms don't have phones, and I didn't have the number, and UEA doesn't distribute a campus directory, so after a few minutes of working through Google and the UEA website, I found the security number. Using my cell phone—and every call costs in the pay-as-you-go system—I dialed them. Someone answered and sounded quite surprised to hear my complaint, but she said she'd send someone to Waveney. Half an hour later, no one had shown. The group that was throwing bottles out their window left in the meantime, but at least four bottles' worth of shattered glass had spread all over the ground on the same walkway over which I had to walk later that night and the next morning.

Candid Money Talk

Since you are unlikely to have a frank discussion about money from the Study Abroad department, I will conduct one here. Although some may consider such information crass or vulgar or wrong, I think it may be informative to evaluate what UEA costs versus what Clark costs. According to the UEA website, the most a British student has to pay for tuition is £1150 per semester for the 2004-05 school



Sometimes you get what you pay for. Notice the gum stuck to the steps—it's also stuck to the floors of the halls (see below).

year. When I arrived, a single room in Waveney Terrace cost £48.30 per week, and my contract covered 22 weeks. That comes to £1062.60. Remember that rooms here don't include a phone and only have one power socket. Clark cut a check to me for £1080 for meal money. All told, that makes £3292.60. Let's say I've overlooked some extra cost Clark pays, and I'll round up to £4000. At the current exchange rate, that translates to less than \$8000 USD. I pay approximately \$12000 USD per semester for Clark, and receive a \$4000 scholarship in addition to that. I don't think one always gets what one pays for, but regardless of one's money philosophy, the fact remains that Clark kept an extra \$4000 or \$8000, depending on how much one wants to count.

UEA also imposes a variety of extra charges for amenities Clark, and most American schools, provide with tuition. Using the gym at UEA costs £1.20 for "off-peak" hours, or £2.40 for "peak" hours. The gym also requires a £6 "induction," which shows one how to "use the facilities." I've been going to weight rooms since I was 14; I know how to use cardio machines and weights. Despite my experience, the gym management refused to let me in without the induction and refused to justify its existence. The same fee-structure (sans induction) applies to the pool, and the basketball gym can only be rented. At Clark, everything is included. Printing at public labs costs £.03 per page, compared to nothing at Clark. A full load of laundry costs £1.80 to wash and £1.00 to dry. The washers have less space than Clark's, so it's not unusual for a load that would fill one washer at Clark to fill one and a half at UEA. A full load at Clark costs \$2, while a load here costs at least \$5. Contrary to what's advertised, UEA isn't actually in Norwich—the "City Centre" is located about three miles away. Going shopping or anywhere else requires a 20—45 minute bus ride that costs £2.50 round-trip. Unlike Clark, where there is a supermarket a 15-minute walk away, UEA requires a bus to go anywhere off-campus or do anything.

The experience of studying abroad is more important than the difference in what one pays at home and what one pays abroad. keep in mind that, regardless of what you're told, UEA is more like an American

community college than a four-year University: the professors are generally uninterested, few students live on campus and you'll have relatively few hours in class / working on assignments. This is advantageous because it allows more time for travel, but some people may dislike the relaxed schedule.

The Health System

The health system in England is actually split into two, interwoven tracks: one is the National Health System (NHS) and the other is the "private" system. Most of the British students here I've met have "private," American-style insurance through their parents because relying on the NHS is a gamble. Still, as I learned the hard way, one sometimes does have to do it.

If you need help with something like a sports injury or anything chronic, make an appointment with the NHS service on campus and, while there, ask for a referral to a private provider of healthcare. American health insurance should cover this. If you do not ask—and the first time I went in, I didn't—you will be slotted in the glacially-paced NHS system. Meanwhile, if you're in England for less than six months, you're not even eligible for free secondary healthcare anyway. That should act as a further incentive for you to ask for a private referral.

If you need to see a doctor here for the first time, make *sure that the doctor is at the University Health Centre full-time*. Otherwise, if you have to see that doctor again, you'll have to schedule yourself against other appointments and the days the doctor is absent. In addition, you must be your own advocate here; if you aren't, you will receive inadequate care. At the first sign of trouble or delay, you should contact the Dean of Students Office and ask the International Student Adviser. This person can help you navigate the labyrinth to some degree.

The systems on which the NHS and private hospitals rely are based on mailing documents back and forth. This is obviously inefficient and ridiculous in the 21st Century, so you should try to speed the process by asking that both ends of the system use faxes and telephone calls to speed the process along.

If you need any secondary care or unusual assistance, be insistent and consistent. Assume you will not use



The detritus of UEA living and evidence of UEA's social norms.

the National Health Service for anything except primary care, because otherwise you will not receive any in the timeframe you are here. Had I read this section before coming here, I probably would have laughed—how hard could it be? The only answer is: needlessly hard. It's like a Marx Bros. movie.

The Study Abroad Office

I will only say that people who are nominally looking out for you don't necessarily have your best interests at heart, or even understand what is in your best interest, or care to help you unless you complain enough to get any help at all.

Not the Only One

Although you'll doubtlessly be told about the extraordinary experiences had by other students abroad, more than half of the Americans I met at UEA were ambivalent or unhappy about coming here. This applied particularly to those who came from expensive, private schools like Clark. In my room, I posted a large map of the United States and one of Europe. The former I posted chiefly for the British and European students, many of whom understood little of American geography (just as most Americans know

little of European geography before we arrive). Still, the United States map actually attracted more attention from most of the American students than the Europe map. As one frustration biology major from Dickinson (a private school in Pennsylvania) said, “America, I love you,” and mock-embraced the map. She had been here the full year. Had I signed up for the full year, I would have been back at Clark by second semester. One friend from high school I know went to Oxford and loved the academic challenge and fascinating social atmosphere. He described one-on-one “classes” with his tutors and a tremendous amount of interaction with his peers, most of which didn’t involve drinking and grinding. I’m not opposed to drinking and grinding, enjoy both, and have engaged extensively in both. I plan to do so again. But there is more to life and friendship than drinking, grinding, and the activities that drinking and grinding commonly lead to. Would it be so hard to discuss what makes writing good, or why LISP works, or how to live?

Conclusion

I hope this document is useful to you in evaluating your decision about whether or not you want to study abroad at the University of East Anglia. I can’t speak to the quality of the other choices Clark offers for Study Abroad, but I do advise those thinking about studying abroad to consider their choice more carefully than I did mine. This may seem like an overly long and pedantic document, but the plethora of issues small and large add up to my verdict, which is that UEA is a poor value and a waste of time. The features that make Clark attractive—small class sizes, a responsive administration and a focus on students—are absent at UEA.

UEA is far from any major city and inconveniently located to anywhere save London; the majority of students live off-campus; the average class size is significantly larger than Clark; and UEA courts international students chiefly because those students pay more tuition than the natives. Sadly, I was sold a vision of European excellence that does not exist anymore than a mirage in the desert. My family and I paid more than \$12,000 for what was essentially a community college experience, and vastly inferior to

Clark or the University of Washington, which are the two primary comparisons I can make.



What you’re unlikely to learn about before you arrive: the gum that covers every surface.



Bizarrely, there are no dining halls, which means that everything you eat will come from a package or be prepared in kitchens like this one.

