

International Exchange Programme



Nafeesah Chaudhry

Nafeesah Chaudhry is spending one semester at the University of Maine, USA as part of the International Exchange Programme. Nafeesah met Maine's specific criteria by showing that she is a hard-working and reliable student and we are privileged that she is representing us abroad. On her return, Nafeesah anticipates completing her compulsory modules at Birmingham and plans to undertake voluntary work at local primary schools. She will also assist at University events such as Applicant Visit Days and Open Days as a student ambassador and hopes to share her positive experiences with future students through her blog.

September 2013

I first realised that I wanted to study abroad during my time at college many years ago as I'd hear the phrase 'sandwich degree'. I was always intrigued by this and wanted to find out more. My desire was further awakened at an applicant visit day I attended at the University of Birmingham (UoB) prior to beginning my study there. I was told that my prospective course of Childhood, Culture and Education only allowed students to study abroad at European institutions for one term only. The idea of studying abroad for a term only, without being put back a year actually appealed to me more. Once I started the degree programme at UoB I began to prepare a

personal statement and get my grades as high as possible to enable this opportunity to happen. In February 2013, I attended a meeting held by the new course director which is where we were told that we could in fact study anywhere in the world. Whilst some students found the idea of stepping outside of Europe daunting, I embraced this good news by researching into the universities available to study at. I realised that I wanted to study in the United States of America – for sure! My list of possibilities was shortened due to the limited number of institutions still available for students to study abroad at. Therefore, out of Minnesota and Maine, I chose Maine for its beautiful looking campus and high regard for Education as a degree programme. Following this, all the form filling began, from those required by UoB, to Maine's forms as well as various files of evidence to get my Visa status as a student in Maine. I then found out the good news of being accepted at the University of Maine (UMaine) in early March 2013 and I still remember telling my university girls – that was definitely a celebratory moment. I spent the next few weeks working hard to get my assignments complete to the best of my ability.

Once I had attended my Visa Interview I booked my flight to Bangor. It was so strange booking a flight to go somewhere without any family members. However, everyone was very supportive of my decision to study abroad and my sister helped me to decide what type of room I wanted to live in when I got to Maine. August 2013 was a very busy month for me, from wedding celebrations and shenanigans to working at my part time job; it was very difficult to fit packing into my schedule. One late night in mid-August involved me and my dad trying to get my bedding and winter wear into two boxes. It may not sound like a lot of things, but it was. I had them sent to my buddy, Jenny, who is every bit as nice as I imagined her to be! My final packing took place on 25th August, as I rushed around Tesco trying to find some flip flops without any luck. Once back home, my mum gave me a spare pair that she had! I then began to fill up the suitcase – full of clothes, shoes, make up, toiletries and my all important soft toys.

The day finally came – 27th August, something I'd been waiting and planning months for! I woke up in the very early hours of the morning to drive to Manchester. I was very nervous but I had previously been chatting to a couple of girls from Bradford over the internet who were also going to Maine and met them at the airport after the all important farewell with my dad at departures. It was actually very emotional; my father waved goodbye at the bottom of the escalators as I went up them with a new chapter of my life awaiting me. Although the aeroplane journey was very long and uncomfortable, I was relieved by the time I got to Bangor. Zang, our driver, was already waiting there for us, which made things a whole lot easier. We arrived in good time to the campus and I freshened up once I got to my room. I was then greeted by Jenny who delivered my boxes to me. She also took me to a gas station to get a drink, as I ordered pizza with 'chips' and got a lovely packet of Lays! The first night in the apartment was spent alone and each of my housemates arrived in turn: Hannah, Shannon, Nicole, Sakura and Olivia. I love our apartment, it's so cosy. I have my own room as requested, but we share the bathroom and have a combined living/kitchen area.

I have settled in so well. The first people I met and became friends with were the UK clan. I instantly clicked with each and every one of those guys. It's nice to be able to speak to someone who knows what you're going through! My classes started two weeks ago. The first thing I noticed upon entering my Child Development class was the number of people in it – 200; I couldn't believe my eyes! My Family Interaction class is also the same size but the others are much smaller. The teaching style is similar to what I've experienced in the UK with the professors speaking at us; the amount and type of assignments differ, however. In the US, students have Prelims throughout the semester, which are smaller tests/assignments which must be completed in order for the overall grade for that class to be established.

Since coming to the United States, I have been fortunate enough to visit the Mall, Walmart, Dysarts and Margarita's. The main thing which struck me when arriving here was the size of everything, such as the roads, cars and stores, e.g. Walmart. I was Skyping my aunt a few days ago, and she asked me how big Walmart was and I couldn't even describe it, but I said that it was one and a half times the Tesco we have at home! Dysarts was the first diner I went to; it was such a lovely experience.

Although I have settled well into my new life, I do still miss home as I think I'll always be a 'Brummy' at heart! The advantages of coming here include developing myself intellectually and personally and I have seen a huge difference in what I eat, as I am now a much less fussy eater than I was at home. I believe that this has made me a more grateful person overall. Although I am away from home, I am only a Skype call/Whatsapp message away, which makes things so much easier. Keeping in touch with family and friends is very important to me; however, I've found that since being here, hearing from people back home can be as fulfilling as it can be upsetting! But I've learnt to deal with those things, and I know that I am here for the right reasons and I cannot wait to start learning more about the United States of America!

November 2013

After nearly 12 weeks in the beautiful city of Orono, I can well and truly say that I have found my second home, finally. The lush autumn leaves, friendly Americans and huge campus have all made me feel at home. However, travelling to Portland, Maine last month was just the break I needed. Going with a British friend meant that we both had little knowledge of the area, but we made it a trip to remember. Day one was spent in Old Port, which I fell in love with right away. The cobbled streets through to the underground restaurants and quintessential shops made this harbour town very difficult to leave. I did take photos as a reminder and memory of each and every little quirk this place had to offer. Our motel was so cute, and we got to know the area of downtown Portland very well. The second day was spent at the Maine Mall, which was big, to say the least. We took our time parading the shops and stopping over for a bite to eat here or there. I was very happy to have found many gifts for the family and friends at home. Our third day was spent at Old Orchard Beach, which I found to be very peaceful. Until coming here, I didn't realise how much I loved the sea and rivers. It's so beautiful; I only wish that I'd grown up on the coast. On my return, I had a Native American Studies essay to complete, which I'd got an extension for. I was very pleased with this. I also had some exams in my classes as the preliminary exams kicked in. In one of my classes, the couple of assignments for my Family Interactions class also started in late October, they were very interesting! I'd get a different scenario each week and I had to complete a mini research project on it. I found these very easy to do, and I was pleased with them as I was able to get a higher mark in them which I may not have got in the exams. The exams themselves are taken in the lecture theatre, which I found to be very different to taking an exam in England, where students are required to take the exam in a designated exam hall where invigilators walk around to keep an eye on things.

Since being in Maine, I have had the opportunity to go horseback riding twice, I've thoroughly enjoyed both my lessons. I find a sense of peace when spending time with horses, which I don't actually get very often. Although my time studying abroad has been difficult, mainly because of not having a car, I have made some very good friends who often take me wherever I need to go. Despite this, I have experienced severe home sickness twice; the first time was when we got back from Portland. It was triggered when I finished speaking to my three aunts on the phone; I think I just realised that I missed each of them dearly. The second time was recently, as my messaging system to keep in contact with family members at home stopped working all of a sudden. I then had this urge of wanting to see my sister, and one of my best friends whose birthday was coming up also. I've realised that keeping busy always helps! Going to a basketball game was great, as I was able to live the scenes I watched on

many US teen dramas. But spending time with friends is also very important to me; this can be difficult sometimes as university studying can pile up. I often go to the library with one of my good friends, I feel this works really well for me, as we are able to catch up on things, but also get work done alongside of this. I have now come to the realisation that I will miss these things, very much. One thing which helped with the homesickness was receiving cards and packages from my father. I recently shared my Yorkshire Tea with my American best friend; I loved this as I was able to share my culture with her. I was also able to do something similar at CultureFest - an event is held by the university where different people from all over the world have stalls for people to learn more about their cultures and values. After buying props and using the computer to print off posters for our table, telling people about the UK proved to be very rewarding. My name also appeared in the UMaine newspaper, as I was interviewed by the media editor for the paper. I just hope that I was able to inspire people in the UK to consider studying abroad, because the challenges you face are definitely worth it.

[Privacy](#) | [Legal](#) | [Cookies and cookie policy](#) | [Accessibility](#) | [Site map](#) | [Website feedback](#) | [Charitable information](#)

© University of Birmingham 2015

