

Name: Robin Yee

Home institution: McMaster University

International CO-OP destination (city, country): Dublin (Ireland) and Paderborn (Germany)

Travel dates: Summers of 2009 (10 weeks) and 2010 (12 weeks)

Work term (1st, 2nd, 3rd, etc.): 2nd and 3rd

Program: Bachelor of Engineering and Society, Engineering Physics

1. Why were you interested in an international work term?

I wanted to travel—see new places, meet new people, explore the world! I love my university city but I felt like I hadn't been challenging myself as much as I wanted. An undergraduate friend of mine told me about an award she had received to research in London for a summer, and opened my eyes to the possibility of being paid to work abroad.

2. How did you fund the travel costs and other expenses for the term?

I would not have been able to afford the work terms abroad if it weren't for generous programs run by some foreign countries to bring undergraduate students overseas for research experiences. I needed significant assistance and was fortunate to discover programs that paid appropriate stipends, and, in some cases, transportation and part of my accommodation.

3. Can you tell me what steps you took to secure your CO-OP position? Was it a difficult process? What advice do you have for other students?

To secure my position, I did extensive research on the Internet. The more you familiarize yourself with the criteria that foreign employers or program coordinators are looking for in the students they bring over, the better chance you stand of portraying yourself well in your application—something that's crucial because they may not have a chance to interview you face-to-face. I also applied through IAESTE but, since it was during the 2009 recession, this did not help me find my position. I sought and was offered a research experience in France by the professor of a friend I made while working in Ireland, but had to decline as the stipend was not sufficient for me to break even.

4. When conducting your job search did you find that many of the jobs available were in specific sectors (such as corporate, non-profit, government, etc.)? Where, or how, would you suggest other students focus their search?

I was surprised how many opportunities were available for (scientific and engineering) research experiences in Europe (and some other countries). The U.S. shows a strong bias for citizens, permanent residents, and resident students—to the point that I felt it was not worth the effort to search. I would suggest students take advantage of government-funded programs that promote research

experiences; I thought I was just going to travel but completely changed my mind and now love research! Corporate positions, I suspect, are possible, but are made much easier by connecting through an organization like IAESTE or AIESEC, since regular postings may expect that you already possess the appropriate work permits.

- 5. Tell me about the cost of living in (city or country). How did your expenses compare with the salary you were earning? Were you able to save any money? Where did you find savings or discounts to reduce your expenses?**

The cost of living in Ireland was high. Because it is an island nation, it is harder to get goods transported there and there is less of a competitive market to drive prices down. The cost of living in Germany was extremely cheap, and I would say lower than in North America. Housing costs are proportional to the size of the city, and this is something that can (and should) be checked online before committing. Students can get very good discounts in Europe (esp. for museums, attractions, galleries, etc.), but they should be aware that transportation is still expensive. Europe is dense, well-connected, and easy to travel through, but it will still take up a considerable part of your travel funds. Hostels, however, are inexpensive and often very nice (do research ahead of time!). My work term in Ireland provided very good compensation for the higher cost of living, and my plane ticket and accommodation. As a result, I would have managed to save a few hundred dollars (CAD) if I hadn't travelled so much. In Germany, I lost a few hundred dollars (CAD) overall because of the lower stipend, and also because of a few costly mistakes on my part due to the language barrier. I also had to cover my own airfare there.

- 6. How did you find accommodations and how much rent should students expect to pay in (city or country)?**

In Ireland, the program coordinators arranged for our accommodation. In Germany, my supervisor helped me find a flat to rent before I arrived. If these people hadn't helped me, I would have searched the university websites for student accommodation, and also done general searches to get an idea of the price ahead of time. Again, the Internet is your best resource.

- 7. What, if any, cultural barriers did you have to overcome?**

In Ireland, the weather was significantly different than what I was used to and that took some adjustment. Germany was much more of a shock, though; although many young people have English lessons in school, English is not very prevalent outside of large cities and I struggled to communicate with others. In both countries, opening hours for shops do not typically run late, so I had trouble balancing work and chores (i.e. grocery shopping).

8. Did you find it difficult to meet new people? What steps did you take to integrate yourself into your new surroundings and make yourself more comfortable in your new setting?

In Ireland, the program was organized for a group of students, so it was easy to meet new people. In retrospect, I would have liked to meet the others in my residence, but I didn't until a few days before my departure. I should have made the effort when I first moved in. In Germany, one of the trade-offs I should have made would be to pay more to live closer to the university and/or city centre, where it would have been easier to meet people. I also talked with co-workers as much as possible.

To fit in, my first action is always to get a proof of residence, followed by a bank account and library card. Libraries open up a wealth of resources for learning about local history, children's books for practicing a new language, music, travel planning, magazines, news, and general reading to pass the time. Setting up some semblance of a schedule (picking a day to write friends, for example, or having a certain favourite meal regularly) is very helpful for a bit of grounding in very unfamiliar circumstances.

9. Overall, what advice would you give CO-OP students who are seeking international opportunities?

I cannot emphasize enough how much information is available on the Internet if you are willing to spend time hunting. You will surprise yourself, and in the process develop an intuition for the personal traits and goals that foreign recruiters are seeking. Also, take some serious time to consider what you are seeking (location, hours, duration, pay), what you are interested in doing (areas of research interest, education specialization), and what you must consider (whether you can live in a rural area, transportation to work, finances, potential for networking). These will help guide your search and narrow your applications from 'every job in the world' to 'these jobs.'

Learn as much as you can about the location before you go. This is an opportunity to learn about life, and really understand the history, language, culture, and people of a different region—at a level similar to what you learned in your favourite classes, for example, it becomes a part of you and what you know. Once you're there, make sure to record your time there in some way—a blog (personal or shared), photos, letters, and/or journaling are all good ways of documenting lessons and perceptions during a time when your vision of the world will be changing very rapidly.

Always remember to bring a spare gift (or two) that is representative of your country/culture for those people who will help you in ways you can't anticipate but who will make a huge difference while abroad. I don't care how heavy your suitcase is; abroad, you rely on the kindness of others, and you will truly regret the decision to leave these gifts behind.

Expect to feel misunderstood or unable to fully communicate your experiences when you return. This is not the fault of yourself or others; it's just the result of a very personal adventure. Try to find others who have been abroad and who will understand. At all costs, no matter how life-changing it was, be conservative in your references to your time abroad, and only bring it up when it is highly relevant: most people don't have this kind of opportunity, and you run the risk of isolating them and yourself.

10. Is there anything else you'd like to share about your experience?

Working abroad was one of the best opportunities I had during university to learn more about myself; it also improved my work skills and resumé. I am very grateful to those who helped me along the way, during my time abroad, and after my return.