Pre-Arrival Frequently Asked Questions

Topics covered:

- Banking
- Cell Phones
- Cycling
- Living in Vancouver
- On-Campus Housing
- Off-Campus Housing
- Student Info
- Transit and Travel

Banking

Will international students be able to qualify for membership at Canadian credit unions?
For many of the credit unions in Vancouver (including VanCity Credit Union, Coast Capital Savings, and Blue Shore Financial), you need to be a resident of British Columbia, but you do not need to be a Permanent Resident of Canada; international students can become a member while they are living and working here. Here is a list of credit unions in BC: creditunionsofbc.com/list

Are credit cards difficult to get even if you have established credit history in the US?
Canadian banks generally do not take credit from foreign countries into account, but it is best to speak to the bank directly about this.

Can credit cards from the US be used in in Canada?
American credit cards, such as MasterCard and Visa, are accepted; however, American Express is not widely accepted by restaurants and shops. Keep in mind that banks charge extra fees (typically a percentage, e.g. 1-4%) for using the credit card in foreign countries.

Great Resource: UBC Student Services has an extensive overview of banking information (banks vs credit unions, opening a bank account, transferring money to and from Canada, fees and charges) on their website: students.ubc.ca/new-to-ubc/prepare-arrive/banking

Cell Phones

Many students had questions on which companies had the best rates, what kind of fees they would be charged, etc. Unfortunately, we cannot answer this question because cell phone providers offer a variety of plans and rates. It is best to research this yourself by visiting individual cell phone provider websites and/or services such as www.cellphones.ca or www.comparecellular.com/plans-and-add-ons to compare plans. As well, you can speak directly to the cell phone providers.

Cycling

Is it illegal in Canada to ride a bike without a helmet? What type of lights are required?
Helmets are mandatory in BC/Vancouver. You will see people riding all the time without a helmet but you can get a ticket. Bike lights so that you are more visible are needed, especially at night or on grey days. Both front and back lights are recommended and you can get them cheaply from stores such as Mountain Equipment Coop (www.mec.ca).

Is bike theft a problem in Vancouver? Do you have to lock your seat and both wheels down?
Bike theft is unfortunately a problem here and a good lock is essential. Bikes left outside overnight are especially vulnerable, but even during the day theft can be an issue. You can get special locks for the seat and tires so they are not quick release and take part of the bike, such as a wheel, with you when you lock up a bike to deter theft further. The higher the value of your bike, the more protection you might want.

Living in Vancouver

Does it rain all the time? Should I bring or buy a raincoat?
It does rain fairly often in Vancouver, so you will definitely want a raincoat, umbrella and waterproof shoes or boots. Embrace the rain: Vancouverites will bike or run year round, regardless of the weather. You can look at rain gear for cycling and other activities at www.mec.ca. The upside of all of this rain is that it keeps Vancouver green and beautiful year round.

What is a reasonable budget for a family of three?
It is hard to estimate a budget, as there are many factors, including which area you plan to live in, age of the child, daycare requirements, the type of cell phone plan you need, entertainment costs, and so on. If you are looking to save costs, you may want to consider living in an East Vancouver neighbourhood; neighbourhoods on the west side can be pricey. As for entertainment, there are a lot of free and cheap things to do in Vancouver, so you will never be bored no matter what your budget is. We suggest consulting our living cost calculator for some indication about budget planning: grad.ubc.ca/prospective-students/tuition-fees-cost-living/cost-living

Are there public schools in the proximity of UBC?
For a map of Vancouver schools, check out the Vancouver School Board: http://www.vsb.bc.ca/schools.

Where are the pharmacies located?
There are at least 5 pharmacies within walking distance of the campus:
Shoppers Drug Mart, on the corner of University Blvd and Wesbrook Mall near the bus loop
University Pharmacy, in University Village near the A&W
Shoppers Drug Mart in Wesbrook Village
Save On Foods in Wesbrook Village
Point Grey Pharmacy, W. 10th Avenue
London Drugs and Rexall also have pharmacies, and have various locations throughout Vancouver.
Rexall offers a Savings Card – 20% off on regularly priced Rexall brand products.

On-Campus Housing

If offered a spot in on-campus housing, when will I be able to move in?
The Student Residence website has a list of Important Dates, including move-in dates: vancouver.housing.ubc.ca/applications/important-dates. Year-round housing will depend on your specific contract.

Is there a limit to the size of shipments we send to the residence?
Please note that the university will not accept any delivery on your behalf prior to your arrival. Please make arrangements accordingly.

Do you recommend getting onto the waitlist for UBC's residences now?
The UBC Housing website (housing.ubc.ca/vancouver) should be able to answer your questions. You can also contact the housing office by phone or email; the following link should help you find the right person to contact: vancouver.housing.ubc.ca/contact-us.

I am on the waitlist for on-campus housing. How likely am I to get a room?
General wait list information can be found on the Student Residence website: vancouver.housing.ubc.ca/applications/how-we-assign-rooms/waitlists-sublets.

Is the deposit that is paid to UBC housing refundable at the end of the contract?
Security deposits are refundable in general if you are eligible. Details can be found in the residence contracts, vancouver.housing.ubc.ca/applications/residence-contracts. Deposits might not get refunded, for example, if you still owe rent or caused damage to the property.

Off-Campus Housing

The people from the homestay I'm speaking with told me there's a safety deposit I must pay in order to make sure I get the room. Should I tell them that I'll pay that when I get to Vancouver?
A safety or damage deposit is very common here. You likely have to pay it to hold the spot, but can ask for a receipt. It should be no more than 1/2 a month's rent and you will get it back when you leave if you have not caused any damage.

I am trying to find an apartment in Vancouver from out of town, however, landlords will not reply to my emails.
Landlords can be very hesitant to rent to people they have not met in person. It may be better to contact other students who offer shared accommodation as they might be more flexible. Check online at sites such as Craigslist: there are often students offering rooms in their apartments. You could also try temporary accommodation (such as a hostel) and then find something more permanent after arriving.

The landlord of an apartment I'm interested in requested a copy of my ID such as driver's license or international passport details. Is that safe?
The landlord can ask to see your Driver's license to verify your identity, but cannot make a photocopy. The BC Tenant Resource & Advisory Centre has details on "Personal Information a Landlord Can Require": tenants.bc.ca/personal-information

Do most apartments go up on Craigslist at the start of the month or do they get posted throughout the month?
Apartments are posted throughout the month as people give their notice but it spikes at the end and middle of the month.

I'm a little worried because I haven't secured housing yet.
Vancouver has a really high turnaround for accommodation because renters only need to give one month's notice before vacating a suite. This means that many rental spaces that are available for September will be posted during August.

Is there a hostel close to campus other than the accommodations on campus?

The closest hostel to UBC is at Jericho Beach (which is a stunning location). It is serviced by a community bus from campus. hihostels.ca/westerncanada/168/hi-vancouver_jericho_beach.hostel.

It was mentioned that the west side is safer—does that mean the east side is not very safe?
There are certain parts of East Van that are less safe, namely the Downtown Eastside. Some of the neighbourhoods directly surrounding the Downtown Eastside do experience some crime due to their proximity to this area, but for the most part East Van is not an unsafe place to live.

Student Info

How do I get a Student ID?
Information on the Student ID info available at ubccard.ubc.ca/about-the-ubccard/faq. You must apply online, after July 15th, services.ubccard.ubc.ca. UBC Cards can be picked up at the UBC Access Desk in the UBC Bookstore, or, if you will be living at a UBC campus residence, you have the option to pick up the card upon your check-in.

I want to buy a new laptop for school; can I get a student discount?
You can only claim discounts once you have a valid student identification card.

Transit and Travel

What does the commute from the east side look like if you have your own vehicle?
From Commercial Drive, biking/busing is about 50 to 60 minutes. Driving is closer to 25 minutes, but you have to consider the parking rates at UBC (parking.ubc.ca/grad-students). There are some main corridors for driving, e.g. 4th Avenue, Broadway, 16th Avenue, and bus routes e.g. 31 or 41, that are reasonably fast.

How are transit fares calculated? Is it different depending on the type, like skytrain, or regular buses?
If you are student with a U-Pass, you are covered for all zones at all times of the day. For those without a U-Pass, transit fares are based on zones, not the type of transit you are using. Vancouver has 1, 2 or 3 zones. For example from UBC to North Vancouver via the Seabus is 2 zones. To Surrey is 3. Concession fares on weekdays after 6:30pm and on weekends where everything is considered 1 zone.

Who is eligible for the U-Pass? Where do I pick up the U-Pass?
The U-Pass is a type of monthly transit pass that is issued at a lower rate to students. You are eligible for the U-Pass as long as you are a registered student. So, if you begin your courses in September, the first month you will be able to use a U-Pass is September. You can pick up your U-Pass from the bookstore using your Student ID. See planning.ubc.ca/vancouver/transportation-planning/u-pass-compass-card. People who are not registered students, including spouses of students, would have to buy regular priced tickets or monthly passes through Translink. See: www.translink.ca/en/Fares-and-Passes/Compass-Card.aspx.