McMaster University in Canada

McMaster University in Canada has an environment very conducive for studying. There are about five libraries and they have rooms designated for quiet study and for group study. This is one aspect I really like because this means that people who study and discuss in groups do not disturb people who prefer studying in silence.

Many of the people were friendly and helpful, especially people from the OISA (Office of International Student Advisor – equivalent to IRO in NTU). The instructors were also very approachable and helpful.

The style and system of teaching is very different from that in NTU. A lot of things are not taught very directly. Instead, we were taught the general concepts and for the assignments, we had to do a lot of self-reading and some thinking. But of course, the instructors were very approachable and welcomed questions.

The grading system places less emphasis on exams by including the marks of assignments, lab sessions, and projects for calculation of the final grade. This way, consistent learning throughout the semester is more or less enforced instead of students studying only before exams in the case of exams contributing to almost 100% of the final grade.

Another difference is, because the total number of students taking a subject is not that many (most of the subjects only have about 20 to 40 students) the instructors can afford to spare time for the students and arrange for the lab sessions to correspond to aspects taught in class. For example, the lab sessions would be based on things taught the previous week. The university also employs masters students to be Teaching Assistants (TA) to help lighten the workload of the instructors (professors), although I found that not all the TAs were up to the mark.

It’s quite an experience although in some aspects I did not manage to learn as much as I had expected to. The heavy workload certainly is a pity because it left me with little time to experience in depth the cultural differences. I really would have liked to mix around more by participating in ECAs or by volunteering at the OISA (Office of International Student Advisor). This would have left more time to mix with students and experience more deeply the different culture and environment.

However, I did benefit from the chance to be more independent and I also formed great friendships.

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