
Insights into the “International Study” course at UPenn

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Within the PhD program at the Nazarbayev University Graduate School of Education, doctoral students in their second year take the eight-week international study course at one of the partner universities of the school. The two partner universities are the University of Pennsylvania and the University of Cambridge, both of which are leaders in teaching and educational research. The primary aim of the international study program is to work closely on doctoral research projects with partner university advisors. This fall, my groupmate Miruyert Abdrakhmanova and I went to UPenn to complete the international study course, while other doctoral students from our cohort visited the University of Cambridge. In this short article, I will share my experiences from the program at UPenn, which included compulsory, planned-optional, and unplanned components.

To begin with, the most important and compulsory component of the program was the weekly meetings, during which we presented our doctoral project ideas to partner university advisors, and who, in turn, guided us through their feedback. The meetings were attended by our partner university advisor, Matthew Hartley, as well as Professors Alan Ruby and Peter Eckel. In contrast to previous cohorts, there were only two of us from NU, so we were given more time to work with advisors during the meetings. With every meeting attended and every piece of feedback received, my research proposal began to take shape and become more refined, which relieved some of the anxiety and worries that I had developed during my first year on the PhD program. The advice that I would give to my ‘younger self’ and PhD students in future cohorts is to not to worry if you have not written your research proposal yet because you can change your entire research question after several discussions with professors.

Although the program did not require us to take any courses, we were given an opportunity to attend classes that had extra seats and may be useful for us. From the time we arrived at UPenn to the middle of the semester, there were not many choices left. However, thanks to our advisor, Matthew Hartley, we were able to attend some of the “Advanced Methods of Qualitative Inquiry” classes, which was one of the most popular courses in the School of Education and certainly the most relevant one for us. Equally relevant and interesting was the “Globalization and the University” course that Professor Alan Ruby kindly allowed us to attend. Working closely in one course with doctoral students from various parts of the world, each with different experiences, broadened our understanding of ‘doctorateship’ and contributed to our growth as scholars.

Undoubtedly, most of our time at UPenn was dedicated to individual work on the research proposal, using the resources available on campus. One of the resources that we went there to use was the university library, which is unbelievably rich. If it happens that the library has no access to a book or article that you need, which is unlikely, a school librarian will quickly help you to get it either by requesting it from another university or purchasing it from the publisher. Not only are the library resources immense, but also the availability and variety of study spaces became a source of motivation to work. Certainly, a peaceful corner near the shelves full of books in the old library, a bench near the famous “Love” sign, or a study space in a cozy hall of GSE created an inspiring atmosphere in which to study. We also became aware of the ‘human’ resources at the university - experts in the fields of our research who work at UPenn. With the help of our advisors, we reached out to the scholars we wanted to meet and discuss our proposals with. In my case, I discussed my doctoral project with Professor Nancy Hornberger, whose work I have read and used in most of my papers.

Trying to get as much as possible from our stay at this cosmopolitan university, between the meetings, classes, and independent study on our proposals, we also managed to attend various seminars, educational talks, and conferences organized at the university during our stay. Interaction with other PhD students, as well as visits to presentations and proposal hearings of doctoral students, shed light on the experiences of doctoral students and the skills that are expected from them. Thanks to all these activities, we could breathe-in the atmosphere and culture of UPenn, meet other students, and make connections with current and future scholars from all over the world.

To sum up, the semester at UPenn was productive in many ways. It provided us with invaluable support from Professors Matthew Hartley, Alan Ruby, and Peter Eckel in framing our research proposals. It also connected us with the outstanding scholars and ambitious students of an Ivy League university. Finally, it expanded our understanding of scholarship. I believe the experience we had during the study abroad program will be of great value during the rest of our PhD journey at Nazarbayev University.