

Grants for Teaching Sabbaticals

Final report

Report from STINT Grant for Teaching Sabbatical

University of British Columbia 2020-01-01 – 2020-05-31

Fredrik Ahlgren

Senior Lecturer

Linnaeus University

Kalmar, Sweden

Abstract

This report describes the preparation, planning and activities for a teaching sabbatical at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, BC, Canada. The teaching did go well, even though some obstacles with work permit and discussions about salary. During the sabbatical the COVID-19 pandemic hit the whole world which made the sabbatical more of a remote teaching experience abroad. Overall the sabbatical went as planned and was a good experience, which have led to a continued relationship with the host institution.

Preparation and planning

The first point of contact with the Naval Architecture and Marine Engineering (NAME) department at University of British Columbia was during a visit at the British Columbia Institute of Technology year 2019. The visit at BCIT was a part of an internationalisation programme with the objective to investigate possibilities for future student exchange between Linnaeus University and BCIT. During this visit I took the opportunity to introduce myself for the programme director at the NAME department at UBC. I was later invited back for a teaching sabbatical during 2020.

The planning of the course started in end of fall 2019, and the initial discussion was that I was going to teach from my research subject of energy efficiency in shipping. Focusing on the operational energy efficiency. The NAME department did have a need for teachers with a competence of Marine Engineering, especially with an operational experience from sailing.

Unfortunately, there was a slight misunderstanding between me and the host institution. The deal was that I was going to be fully paid as a visiting professor, and a part of the faculty. A Teaching Sabbatical in the north American system is generally paid only for the coursework that you do, and that applies for about 30-50 % of your salary, and the rest is from your home University. In my understanding when I applied for the STINT grant, I did not account for loss of salary, only for additional living expenses. I had already applied for a 100 % leave during the period keeping 40 % at Linnaeus University during the period of my stay. Vancouver is an expensive city and finding a decent place for a family to stay was harder than we initially anticipated. We managed to find a good place to live renting from a family who was working and living temporarily in Australia. The housing situation in Vancouver was very expensive, but generally the areas were calm, and the elementary schools were all nearby. They have a system where the kids always are assigned to the closest school, so it's very much dependent on your living which school the kids are going to.

Tasks and responsibilities

The NAME department was in need of marine engineering competence. I was responsible for planning one course in Marine Engineering, and also the student summer projects.

Activities during the stay abroad

My main task was to teach a special topics course, called NAME 550N Systems Engineer, Special topics. The NAME program started up a new special topics course which was very flexible in terms of syllabus, and I was able to write the syllabus, so it aligned with my previous research and current industry challenges. I did send a draft syllabus to the programme director a month before my arrival at UBC. When I arrived at the institution the course had not yet been announced for the students, so I got an opportunity to present and pitch my course for two master programmes, the Master of Engineering (M.Eng) and Marine Engineering Leadership (MEL) programmes, a total of 35 students. My course was optional, and if they chose this it would be on top of their other courses (that is an additional workload). We had an initial cap of 16 students, but we ended up extending the course to 21 students due to a higher demand than expected. The students were really intrigued and willing to take that extra workload, even though they were not required to.

One of the main challenges today in the maritime industry is the decarbonization and alternative fuels, which I focused on. I also included a mix of data analysis tools and machine learning, based upon previous research. Besides from this I also hosted a handful of lab exercises at the Marine campus at British Columbia Institute of Technology (BCIT). In these exercises we used a ship engine simulator to get the

students familiar with the operations of a large machinery space. About half of the students didn't have any previous experience from working on board.

Overall the course went really well, and even the COVID-19 situation made me plan a couple of lectures and guest lectures to an online format it worked out well. As a part of the course I also looked into wireless sensors and the area of internet of things (IoT), to give an introduction in to this area all students got access to an IoT-device which we did a basic sensor setup and publishing this to a dashboard on the internet. This was a challenge organizing online as they needed access to physical devices, but after organizing a noncontact pickup from the lab we managed to complete even this on a Zoom-meeting. The feedback from the students were over my expectations.

During my stay I was also included in discussions with their research group and also participated in writing a research application in collaboration with their research group.

I was invited to one conference and acted as one representative for their department. It was a future ship workshop¹ by the marine systems initiative² (MSI). MSI is a research collaboration between UBC and industry, focusing on the marine sector. During the conference I had the opportunity to meet a lot of interesting people from the local industry in British Columbia. That is representatives from both the local shipyards as well as representatives from port authorities and shipowners.

Research collaborations

During the spring one research paper was written in collaboration with University Collage of London (UCL) where I was one of the authors. The plan is to continue the research collaborations.

There were not many staff meetings at the department. As the department for Naval Architecture and Marine Engineering is a small department, only consisting of eight individuals (where many of them are part time), most of the staff meetings for the Mechanical Engineering faculty were attended by the programme manager, and the information was handed down informally. I think I was not also invited due to my temporary status as a sabbatical instructor. I was only attending one single staff meeting, and that was over Zoom during the Covid-19 lockdown.

¹ <https://msi.ubc.ca/events/2020-industry-workshop>

² <https://msi.ubc.ca/>

Unfolding of the COVID-19 situation

The handling of the COVID-19 needs a special reflection. The pandemic unfolded in the middle of the semester, and quickly the university closed down and everyone went remote. Overall this worked out very well and UBC provided excellent support over Zoom for what was needed, and there was not a problem to buy equipment for your home office if that was needed. In my course I had already finalised the physical labs, and it was not much of a problem to continue the teaching online.

From the family perspective it affected the school for my children. The schools in Vancouver were fully closed between mid-March until June, and we had to home teach our children at the same time as we did work full time, which was far from ideal. Anyway, we are glad the pandemic didn't hit even earlier, which meant that the children did have some time to adapt and learn the language as well as meet new friends.

Important lessons

I have learned a lot during these months at UBC. The first and most important is to be humble, that gets you a long way. I was very impressed and a bit astonished when arriving to UBC, as it's a top University, and also students that not only are highly motivated but also have invested a lot of money for their education. I learned that it is not a big difference of the students, they still have the same kind of questions and challenges. The biggest difference I would say is that it is much more formal and a stricter hierarchy here. In Sweden we are on a first name basis, and I don't think any student has any second thoughts of talking to any of the staff. It seems to be a cultural difference here. Even though I was very clear that the students could use my first name, I hardly ever was called anything else than *Professor* or *Doctor*. I would say that the Swedish culture works very well in an international classroom, I think the learning situation is better if it's more informal. A teacher should rather lead the students to their learning than tell them what to learn.

I gained a lot of confidence in using the English language during my stay. I know that my English is far from perfect, and I have gotten very well aware of that people identify me as a Swede just by hearing me open my mouth. Still, the language was never a problem, as the main task of being understood was easily achieved. Also, after some while I really didn't even think about this – and got used to just using the language. As a result, I did most of my teaching in English even at a summer distance course for Swedish students.

I must say that working with highly motivated students, which all have invested a lot of money and time in their education, is highly motivating and makes you want to push yourself even further on. I have never prepared my lectures this thorough as I did this

semester. It also paid off. I have never gotten this amount of positive feedback from a student cohort either.

Comparison between the host and the home institutions

The big differences between the institutions are cultural. The Swedish way of working, with “fika” and joining together for a common lunch doesn’t exist in the same way in the North American workplace. But in general, the differences are quite small, the teaching is much done the same way. The planning of courses and amount of labs and lectures were similar.

Curriculum and courses offered

They are really flexible in terms of setting up a course from scratch. I got the opportunity to develop my course syllabus freely in discussion with the programme director. This means they can quickly change their professional programs, so it aligns with what is happening right now.

Use of technology/IT in education

I didn’t see much of a difference in use of technology/IT in the different institutions. The students seemed to handle this equally well as Swedish students, and from a teacher perspective it was not really a big difference. If something I would say that UBC has put a lot more emphasis on cyber security than Linnaeus University. There were obligatory introduction briefings on cyber security, and just the fact that they use two-factor authentication shows they are taking this more seriously. They used the learning platform Canvas instead of Moodle which we use at LNU. It’s in my opinion a much better platform, but the use of these platforms doesn’t differ in any significant way.

There is a significant difference between the general view of the examination and grading between the Canadian system and the Swedish system. In Sweden we are grading upon fulfilling the objectives of the syllabus, and in my understanding the grading is more a relative scale here. I was surprised to find that most students thought they failed my course, when I graded the students in my course, and according to my course objectives and standards gave the majority of the students a 'C'. The grading at UBC also differs between undergraduate, graduate and post-graduate level. And there is a big emphasis on 'above or below' class average for all students. This information is also presented in clear writing on the student grade portal.

The status of pedagogical merits compared to research merits

There seems to be a way for making a pedagogical career. I am not sure from my limited experience if this differs from the Swedish system in a large extent. They do have a teaching professor degree, but it seems to be very uncommon. The absolute majority seems to have a PhD degree as the base when working within the University system, and only a few individuals that have gone the pedagogical track. They do however value the course evaluations more seriously than we do at Linnaeus University. All evaluations are done anonymously by the students, same as we do in Sweden, but they are automatically used for the basis of your pedagogical merit portfolio. I am not sure exactly how this works, as I never got to see this fold out as I was only spending one semester at UBC.

To what extent educational programmes conform to labour market needs

The Master of Engineering and Engineering leadership programmes are very closely linked to the local ship building industry in Vancouver. There is a high involvement directly from the industry in teachers and most of the students get an internship during the summer. As I see it the programmes success is mainly because of this, as most students are aiming to stay in Canada after the education.

Recommendations

If you are travelling with your family, consider matching the academic year (Aug). Especially in Vancouver it proved to be a challenge to find a suitable place to live in mid academic term, as most condos and houses are swapped during the month of August. Likewise, the children will start their school year when all other children are coming back from their summer leave.

As the grants for teaching sabbatical means that the individual person needs to take all the contacts self, it's important that all specific arrangements are done in advance regarding salary. Please make sure that you agree on the specific terms of sabbatical stay in terms from both universities. From my experience an agreement that you are going to be fully paid, does not automatically mean a 100 % salary, in my particular case that meant being fully paid for the amount of course work done, and they assumed I was financed the rest from my home university. I think it is a good system that both Universities take a part of the pay.

Action plan

- I will continue to work together with UBC. I will continue teaching this fall (2020) at distance, and most likely even during the next year 2021.
- I will continue getting better on remote education. This academic year has been an eye opener for me in terms of using digital tools.

The home institution should further address the need for both evolving the distance education. Teaching in English should take a much bigger role in the institution, and the step after that should be to advertise courses internationally. The institution (Kalmar Maritime Academy) is now mostly aimed for Swedish students, and the programme also comprises of many small courses, not aligned with the traditional academic format (7.5 credit). These factors make it hard for international relations with other universities, as well as attracting students from abroad.

Continued relationship with the host institution

I will keep teaching at the department for the rest of the fall 2020 at distance. I am also involved in supervising several student projects. Discussions are ongoing on a taking a more permanent role as an adjunct faculty member.

I would like to end the report by showing my great appreciation for getting the opportunity to teach at UBC. I am much more confident in my own teaching role and have extended my academic network substantially. The experience living and working abroad is also a fantastic opportunity for the kids to learn a new language and experience another culture.