I spent the first semester of the academic year 2014-2015 studying abroad at the University of Lausanne, located in the city of the same name in the French-speaking part of Switzerland, a small, landlocked country in central Europe. Situated in the canton (with a meaning similar to that of the word ‘province’) of Vaud, the city lies on the shores of Lake Geneva (French: Lac Léman) and faces the French town of Évian-les-Bains, with the Jura mountains to its north-west. Lausanne is located 38.5 miles northeast of Geneva, about a forty minute train ride. The fourth largest city in Switzerland, with a population of 139,390 (as of December 2012), Lausanne is also recognized as the official Olympic Capital by the International Olympic Committee (IOC), and hosts not only the IOC Headquarters but also the headquarters of the ‘Court of Arbitration for Sport’. A museum dedicated to the history and culture of the Olympics is also located in the city. Like Hong Kong, Lausanne also has a metro system, although considerably smaller with only 28 stations, and is known as the smallest city in the world to have a rapid transport system.

The University of Lausanne (UNIL, in French: Université de Lausanne) was founded in 1537 as a school of theology, before being made a university in 1890. Today, the university accommodates approximately 13,500 students and 2,200 researchers, as well as 1,500 international with around 120 nationalities. The university has been following the Bologna process and its requirements since 2005, and together with the École polytechnique fédérale de Lausanne (EPFL, in English: Federal Polytechnic School of Lausanne) the university forms a vast campus at the shores of Lake Geneva. Whilst at the university I took classes in the School of French as a Foreign Language (EFLE) and in the Department of German (Section d’allemand), both under the umbrella term of the Faculty of Arts (Lettres). The workload was quite heavy in my opinion, not so much for each class on its own, but when you put them together as a
whole study load for the semester. This is because to obtain the necessary amount of credits, as advised by HKU and UNIL both, I was obligated to undertake 10 classes. To study French as a Foreign Language at UNIL as an exchange student, you have a few different options, as I will do my best to explain. You can either choose to follow the same courses as the regular full time students doing the French as a Foreign Language diploma qualification, who take a range of classes (including core language classes), take simply language classes at the Centre des langues (language centre) which offers classes at all levels following the CEFR levels (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) from A1 to C2, or you can follow what the university calls ‘cours satellites’ which are 2 hour classes that take place once a week and focus on different topic areas, for example theatrical and written improvisation in French (L’improvisation théâtrale et à l’écriture). Most exchange students take a mixture of these three ‘routes’ as we might call them. For example, in my case, I took a core language class meant for the diploma students at the level B2, a class on French and Francophone (French-speaking) culture, also aimed for students doing the diploma qualification, and then several ‘cours satellites’ to make up the necessary amount of credits (not counting the one German class I also took). My most preferred classes were ‘Le français par les registres’ (French by registers), ‘L’improvisation théâtrale et à l’écriture’ (Theatrical and Written Improvisation) and ‘L’actualité politique et économique, Suisse-France’ (Current political and economic events in Switzerland and France). The first I found the most useful in learning vocabulary to use in day-to-day situations, living in a francophone environment and it enabled me to better understand the people around me, the other local students in particular. The second is mostly for my own enjoyment, I found this class one of the most challenging, as it is essentially improvising, acting and writing scripts in French. I mention this class as a possible recommendation because it was one where I felt I
could see the most improvement in myself at the end, not only in my speaking skills and vocabulary, but also my confidence. The last I chose to mention because I thought the teaching method very interesting. In the first few weeks the teacher himself would introduce to us a different current situation in a francophone country, which we would then analyze and discuss. I was lucky to have classmates who were highly opinionated and of a variety of academic and cultural backgrounds which always lead to thought-provoking and interesting discussions. After the first few weeks, we expected to take it in turns, either alone or in pairs, to research a current topic and present it to the class, including a summary of the situation, either a video or text relating to the subject, lists of technical vocabulary needed for the topic and activities to incorporate all these aspects into one for our classmates to do in class. Essentially, we were each in our turn expected to run the class. I found this quite different to the teaching methods I have experienced elsewhere, and I have to say I thoroughly enjoyed it. An Australian friend and I presented in the second half of the semester, and chose ‘La loi Taubira’ as our subject, which is the issue of the legality of gay marriage in France. One class that I severely disliked from the start of the semester was actually my core language class, the proper name of which was ‘Discours analyses et pratiques’, which roughly translates as ‘Analytical and Practical Discussions’. I found the class to be very boring, the material covered did not interest me and I would find it very difficult to be motivated (and sometimes, I am afraid to say, awake) in this particular class. The teacher was fond of us reading and going over texts of important literary figures in francophone culture, and having the class take turns in presenting one such text at the beginning of each class. The presentation of expected to last for 45 minutes, including in-class discussion, but often went on for much longer as the teacher, in my opinion, failed to keep track of time and stay on the subject. The text I was obliged to present talked about the people living in the mountains in the early 18th century, and
their daily lives in facing each other, God, and other natural elements. I thought the text very sombre and did not like it at all, and said so when it came to the presentation. Another point I’d like to make about this class is that I felt the organization to be very poor, especially in terms of how to validate the class for credits, concerning the exchange students in particular. We were many in that class, for the class was one of the few that were obligatory, yet the teacher seemed to have no idea what we had to do to get the credits for the class. At the beginning of the semester she outlined a few assignments and tests to us, which had all but entirely changed by the mid-term exams. We were constantly having to ask whether this test or that test counted, and which exam we were supposed to attend, for we had been told that our assignments were different to those who were following the class full-time. From what I heard from others in different level classes, ours was the only one to not be well organized, so I am inclined to think that it was perhaps only this teacher and not the faculty in general who was not well planned. On the whole I think that classes at UNIL differ greatly to that at HKU, because the classes at UNIL make you think more, and you have to constantly use what you already know to improve yourself and to learn more. Accommodation in Switzerland, like in Hong Kong, is notoriously expensive and difficult to find. Luckily for students, such a thing exists called the ‘Fondations Maison pour Etudiants Lausanne’ (FMEL) which helps students to find housing during their stay in Switzerland, much like Cedars at HKU. Through the FMEL I was offered, and accepted, a room in ‘Maison Rainbow’. Located quite far from the city and from the university too, it wasn’t the best situated – transport to and from the residence wasn’t frequent, and because of the distance, expensive. However, despite that, and perhaps because of those issues, Rainbow House had, in my opinion, the best atmosphere and community out of all the different houses, even though most of the others were located closer to the city or the university. Because of our far-out location,
we were ‘forced’ into getting to know each other and making friends with one another. Within a day of my arrival, if we keep in mind that unlike many others in the residence, I had arrived alone with no-one else from HKU even on exchange in the whole of Switzerland, I had already been invited to 2 welcome dinners, and a welcome party someone was hosting in the opposite building. People were friendly and welcoming, and taking the initiative I organized a dinner in my kitchen which ended up cramming in 20 people along with 5 pizzas. Each person had a single room and their own bathroom and toilet, but we shared kitchens and common rooms, ensuring that we had chances to meet other people and have the space to hang out and enjoy each other’s company. Indeed the people sharing the same kitchen as me became some of my best friends in the building, and as they were mostly native French-speaking, greatly helped me with my classes and also my homework! The residences were all very international, but perhaps Rainbow the most. It was the newest built, barely finished before we all moved in, and with the least amount of local students, although there were quite a few. There were people from all over, from the Americas, Asia, and Africa and of course many from the entire of Europe. This pleased me greatly; as it was something I had expected and not quite met with when I first moved into halls in HKU.

Something that I really must mention before ending this essay is the ESN and their work. ESN stands for the Erasmus Student Network (Erasmus being the organization that facilitates exchange programs between member European countries) and is made of different volunteer committees in each member country also committees in each member city in that country, all their work on a voluntary basis. Our committee in Lausanne did their job very well I think, with organizing weekly ‘Pubnights’, basically socials in different bars and/or clubs in the city to enable all the exchange
students to meet each other, and also the local students, and also different trips and
events during the semester. They organized many, but my favourites were ‘Bal de
Rentrée’ at the beginning of the semester, which was basically a night of
‘club-crawling’, because I was able to meet so many people who I then stayed in
contact with for the rest of my time in Switzerland, and the second being the
ski-weekend organized by them in Zinal, in the Valais Alps. I really enjoyed this
weekend because, as notoriously difficult as ski-weekends are to organize, they
planned everything so we had to only turn up at the right place at the right time.
Another thing about this trip was the high amount of local students who took part,
there were more locals than exchange students which was unusual, and they were all
very kind and took lots of time to teach us how to improve our skiing, snowboarding,
and everything else we could possibly want to know about the sports. The Swiss
people may have a reputation for being difficult to talk to, without a prior connection,
but I would like to dispute that and say that I have had very different experiences
concerning the local people. For example, during that ski weekend, a friend of mine
who had never skied before was struggling at the top of the slope, having just fallen
off the chairlift, and me being already halfway down said slope, was unable (because
of lack of skill) to climb back up to help her. Within 5 minutes of me struggling to
climb up to her and her attempting to stand back up, a whole fleet almost of the local
students arrived as if from nowhere to help her. They were very accommodating and
offered to help us both down the mountain, even though I’m sure they would have
much preferred to carry on to the more advanced slopes than go back down the
beginner pistes with two struggling exchange students. Another time, right at the
beginning of the semester, I was alone looking for the finance office on campus, and
after asking a group of local students for directions, in very broken French I might add,
it appeared that said office was in fact on the other side of campus, meaning a good 10
minute walk. I thanked the group and proceeded to walk in the direction they had told me, when they insisted on accompanying me and helping me with all the paperwork. I had never met any of the group before, but they explained to me exactly what I had to do in terms of announcing my arrival etc at the local governmental offices, how to get a student card and many other things I would need in the coming few weeks. From what I experienced in my semester there, if you make the effort to be friendly and open with them, the locals are more than happy to be friends and to help you wherever you need.

Switzerland may be expensive, and far away from Hong Kong, but the landscapes, chocolate, and the people make it more than worth going, and I highly recommend it as a destination for anyone looking to go on exchange in the near few years.