Our semester abroad at the University of Edinburgh was a great learning and life experience, and, although we spent some of the semester traveling across Europe, we spent most of our time there in class or studying. There were new academic challenges studying at UoE and new challenges adapting to life in Edinburgh, but we embraced these challenges and had a fulfilling semester in the end.

Early in the semester, we learned that the important skill of time management was even more essential when studying abroad. Classes were different and had different demands and requirements, the commute to class was long, and sometimes we just wanted to travel up to the Highlands on the weekends instead of catching up on work that we didn’t get done during the week. The class schedule was comparable to CUA, but a full course load at UoE consisted of 4 classes instead of the 5-6 we would have at CUA, and attendance policies were usually a little more lenient. Also, one of each class’s meetings in a week was a tutorial, which was comparable to discussion sections in physics courses we had taken at CUA. For these tutorials, our professors broke up our often 100+ student class into smaller groups, where we had a chance to get feedback and ask questions on course content and homework problems. A big part of scheduling, too, was the commute to class. We lived in the university dorms, as did a number of other study abroad students, and either walking or taking the campus shuttle to the Kings Buildings science/engineering campus entailed a ~30-50 minute commute. This meant that we were on campus for all of the breaks between classes, and we had to learn to make use of the time and library space available to get work done.

Although the university dorms were not very close to our classes, they were quiet and comfortable. Most importantly for us, they were the only housing option to include a meal plan. This plan consisted of breakfast and dinner in the dining hall each day, which turned out to be really convenient, as we did not want to spend a lot of time shopping for groceries and cooking in a new city. In spite of this advantage, the majority of students (regular and study-abroad) did not live in these dorms but in centrally-located apartments of 5-12 students. In fact, most of our friends had chosen this option to be closer to campus, to live with international students, and/or to cook for themselves.

Another change that came with studying abroad was that we received far less feedback on classwork at UoE than we would have at CUA. On average, we received a grade on only 2 pieces of work per class. In most classes, this included one project or paper (worth 20-40%), and one 2-hour final exam (worth 50-80%). In some cases, a large, end-of-semester project replaced a class’s final exam. Homework did not count toward our grade in any class. Rather, homework served as an optional method for us to practice concepts for our own benefit. This meant that if we understood a class very well, we did not need to worry about completing “busy work” to maintain a good grade. However, this also meant that we had a greater responsibility to stay on top of new concepts, or else we risked quickly falling behind and having difficulty when the time for an exam or project came. Lastly, grading was much more rigorous in the UK than in the US, although the point-values assigned to the A-F scale was more forgiving. Still, it was a rewarding challenge to work on extended projects/papers for weeks at a time, or even the whole semester, and we felt that this was a beneficial experience as we go into senior design and elective courses this coming senior year.

Our experience studying abroad at the University of Edinburgh was fun and exciting, challenging and rewarding. Scotland is not an entirely foreign country, which we appreciated.
However, the education we received and time we spent living there combined to give us a unique perspective—one that complements our holistic education at CUA. We are glad to have taken advantage of this opportunity, and we hope that future engineering students will be able to do the same.