



INTERNATIONAL
EXCHANGE

NAME

XUAN TROUNG

FROM

USA

TO

UK

DURATION

5 WEEKS



0123456789



Using Vocational Rehabilitation for a Personal Assistant Abroad

What if your major is International Studies or your degree requires you to take classes overseas? How can you study abroad during your college experience, and pay for your personal assistant while traveling?

These questions were always lingering in the background waiting to be answered for Xuan Troung, a student at North Carolina State University who has osteogenesis imperfecta, also known as brittle bone disease. To find the answers, she turned to her Vocational Rehabilitation counselor.

“I think my counselor knew that day was coming. She had never sent anyone abroad before, so she had to talk to other people in the state. She was really helpful, timely, and supportive of me going abroad.”

Vocational Rehabilitation paid for Xuan’s tuition, a plane ticket, and an hourly rate for her cousin to serve as her personal assistant for a five-week faculty-led study abroad program to London.

Xuan kept her concern about the “what could go wrong” and “what if” scenarios out of her mind until after she booked the ticket. Then she got busy contacting the airlines for travel arrangements with her power wheelchair, purchasing electrical convertors for recharging her battery, and researching equipment vendors ahead of time in London, even calling them to be sure they would be willing to work with her insurance for repairs if needed.

“I packed light on the mass produced stuff such as clothing, hygiene essentials, etc. You can buy those anywhere. I took everything I could possibly need relating to my condition. For me, I took two chairs — a manual and electric.”

Xuan and Julia Kinser Law, her contact in the Study Abroad Office, used resources and advice from the National Clearinghouse on Disability and Exchange, and also connected with the disability office on campus, to put together a plan.

Xuan is her own best advocate and resource. We wanted to make sure that we covered all bases, doing everything that we could to ensure a great learning experience for all program participants, including Xuan. Our Disability Services Office was immensely helpful and encouraging.

Xuan's personal assistant came along on field trips and to some lectures, but it was the day to day support that made a difference. Xuan learned the hard way that not all of the Tube (train) stations are wheelchair friendly. Also, most of the buses have ramps that board from the back. However, she needed to pay at the front of the bus and had to rely on a companion to swipe her card.

"The buttons to signal the driver to put the ramp down failed me on more than one occasion. There were a lot of things that were out of my control. I had to rely on my personal assistant, my classmates, and even random strangers. Everyone put out a helping hand without question. Even if it meant carrying me up three flights of stairs, they did it with a smile. It helped me to value myself again; I am still in awe of their kindness."

Xuan's career goal is to help improve the rights of disabled people in Southeast Asia. By going to London, she was able to see how disability inclusion policies are implemented, how the city was designed, and the overall model of another developed country.

"Career wise, it might have been a better choice to go to South Korea or Japan, but with the program options, and for the sanity of my parents, London was a safe start."

