

Exchange semester at the University of Melbourne Term 1 (2019) - February-July 2019

The reasons why one should gain international experience during their studies are countless, and here's why I chose to do it at the University of Melbourne, Australia.

If you are considering applying for an exchange, please start preparing for the application process early, regardless of what country you would like to go to. Even though I was planning to go on exchange in 2019, I had to sit IELTS language exams at the end of 2017 - more than one year before the planned trip. The application process at Büro für Internationale Studierendenmobilität is very straightforward and smooth. Once your exchange is confirmed, start thinking about the visa application, health insurance and flight tickets. Not only are all these time-consuming and research-intensive, they might make you dip into your savings too. The language exam (ca. 230 €), visa (ca. 350 €), flights (min. 350 €) and health insurance for the duration of your stay amount to a considerable sum, so make sure you check all scholarships available to you. I was eligible to apply only for one - PROMOS. While still at home, I received an email informing me I had ended up on the waiting list for PROMOS financial support. Yet, 3 months into my stay in Melbourne I received good news and got my flight tickets reimbursed. So if you end up in the same boat, do not get discouraged and go on your unforgettable adventure.

Bottom line: even though the application process takes place early and a lot of planning, I would highly recommend applying for an exchange. Most students receive financial aid in some form, and there is always an opportunity to find a student job in Melbourne, which I also did and had a great experience with.

The city and accommodation

Many say that Berlin and Melbourne are similar in many respects - they are both multicultural, liberal, accepting and quirky. The pain of searching for an affordable accommodation in Melbourne's inner suburbs is also similar to the one in the German capital. The student accommodation recommended by universities is usually more expensive than shared housing. Yet, the latter is also not so easy to find for a reasonable price in a good location. However, I would definitely recommend it. Firstly, most people in Melbourne's inner suburbs live in houses. This is something you would rarely experience in big cities in Europe. I ended up in a massive shared house with a garden, tremendous kitchen and a golden retriever as a housemate. I lived with four other people - 3 Australians and 1 New Zealander who were friendly and always helpful. Make sure you start searching for a room early - before all other incoming students begin to do the same. I found the Facebook group "Fairy Floss Real Estate" very helpful, however, be prepared to send 10 messages a day and get zero responses.. As frustrating as it can get, keep looking and you will be rewarded with a lovely home! Unfortunately, frustration from endless searching is not the only downside to shared housing - quite often the rooms come unfurnished, so be ready to invest into some furniture too. Luckily, you can buy it cheap off Facebook marketplace and sell it there at the end of your stay too.

The University of Melbourne

The University of Melbourne offers a wide range of captivating and up-to-date courses. It is among Australia's top research-intensive universities with comprehensive study programs. It has a massive campus with all possible facilities and services, ranging from the state-of-the-

art gym and a swimming pool to its own medical services. Studying there was truly the best part of my stay in Melbourne. I signed up for 3 subjects - this is a minimum requirement for the student visa. Even though most students settle with 4 subjects, I believe that 3 per semester is the way to go. One can dedicate more time to each subject and is available for extracurricular activities like clubs and societies at the University of Melbourne. In my case, I also took up a student job, which I will go into more detail about in the section below. It is important to mention that exchange students can pick any subjects from any departments, so you are not bound to your major and can finally take that course you always thought was very interesting! I remained loyal to social sciences, yet, put on a gender-sensitive lens on my usual political science curriculum. I took advantage of the subjects that are not offered at my home institution of Otto-Suhr-Institut für Politikwissenschaft - *The Politics of Sex, International Gender Politics* and *Aboriginal Women and Coloniality*. I am very happy with my choice as I discovered a passion for something I had not studied before. I could even say it was a life-changing learning experience, because it gave my future studies a new direction.

Another aspect of the university life at the University of Melbourne worth mentioning is its clubs and societies. Do not shy away from taking advantage of numerous clubs you are interested in as they will give you an opportunity to meet a lot of like-minded people. However, do not get carried away at the beginning of your stay when signing up for them. Everything sounds amazing, but realistically you will only have time for about 2 to 4 clubs and societies.

Working

Legally students are only allowed to work up to 20 hours a week during lecture period and full-time during vacation period, so if you are considering finding employment during your stay, keep this in mind. Apart from having less free time, working in Australia involves another level of complexity that is having to open a bank account at the local bank and applying for a tax file number (TFN). The latter usually takes at least three weeks to obtain. Luckily, I had a local friend who guided me through this experience. Melbourne has a vibrant coffee scene and has cafes scattered around everywhere. Being an experienced barista myself, finding a job in a nice little coffee shop was fairly easy. If you do not have any similar experience, you can find a job as a waiter/-ress too. Be friendly and proactive, Aussies are very outgoing and chatty, i.e. dream colleagues and customers. The wages in Australia are relatively high and would be enough to finance your stay even if you do not receive any external financial help. If you have an opportunity to arrive in Melbourne a few weeks before the beginning of semester, do it and start looking for a job immediately. Firstly, you can start working and become comfortable with your new job before uni kicks off. Secondly, you get paid weekly in Australia, so if you have already exhausted your financial resources on temporary accommodation, flights and public transport, working will ensure you always have money in your bank account. And most importantly, working in a local cafe gave me an opportunity to meet a lot of great people and experience Melbourne like a local.

Conclusion

If you are considering going on exchange to Australia, do not shy away from the challenges that come with it, because it is totally worth it. This is guaranteed to become an unforgettable and rewarding experience. Be prepared and organized, and the rest will follow - new friends, travels, adventures, knowledge and tons of new experiences.