

Final Report: Exchange Semester at the University of Melbourne

If you are considering applying to or choosing the University of Melbourne for your exchange, let me wholeheartedly recommend it to you. With this report, I hope to answer some questions and give you an insight into my organisation and experience.

Application

When I was applying in 2022, I was a cognitive neuroscience master's student in my 3rd semester, planning to do my exchange in my 5th (which was Term 2 at the UniMelb). I would be done with my official coursework in Berlin already with "only" the master thesis open. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic cancelling my study-abroad plans in my undergrad, I was already quite late in my studies and a little nervous if I would still get a spot offered. Luckily, it worked out.

I planned to do courses in Melbourne in fields outside my main subject. I hoped to gain insight and knowledge in courses that I wouldn't otherwise have the possibility to study and that would broaden my horizon beyond what I was doing in my master's. That worked out well for me: Melbourne has an abundance of interesting courses on offer.

Since my master's program is taught in English, I didn't need a TOEFL (and Melbourne accepted that as language proof). However, consider checking the language requirements for the FU *and* the exchange unis you're applying for, so you're not stressed in case you do need a TOEFL.

Funding

I got my nomination email from the FU end of December 2022, and I started organising right away.

The pretty much first thing I did was apply to *AuslandsBAföG*. That sounds counterintuitive but: even though your application will miss almost all proving documents, do apply already if you might be eligible! The earlier your initial date of application the sooner they process it. I could hand in most of my documents only in May-June but my files were already quite ahead in the "queue". Luckily, I was eligible, but I received the funding only in October '23. So, keep in mind that you need money to live in advance and BAföG won't necessarily arrive in time (sadly so...).

I also received funding through *PROMOS*, I worked quite a lot before the exchange to save money (plus my savings from my cancelled exchange from Covid times) and I received support from my family. All these things together put me in the privileged position to be able to do this. But still: the trip to Australia was eating up a lot of money. Don't get me wrong, it was worth every penny I spent and if you can make it happen, do it! I'll put some of my money-saving tips throughout the report.

Just a heads up that it might be worth making a solid plan on how to best fund it, so the trip is not overshadowed by existential fears. I did not make use of it, but the student visa also includes a working permit for up to x hours during the semester!

Travel Documents

I booked my *flights* in February. I was quite early with that, some others waited until they received their Certificate of Enrolment. I just didn't want prices to skyrocket, so I "gambled" this would all work out from here – it did. I arrived a week before the orientation week started.

Do look out for student discounts, some Airlines/Websites offer deals for students, and it might even be worth signing up for Frequent-Flyer Programs! It's tedious work, but I shot a good deal in the end.

I booked the mandatory *OSHC* through BUPA and was very happy with that, it was about 235€. Additionally, I bought private health & travel insurance for dental and some extras that weren't covered by the OSHC for about 130€.

Consider applying for an *international driver's license*. It cost 15€ and took about 2 months

to process and it was well worth it: I was driving quite a lot when I was travelling after the semester ended. If you need to get one when already in AUS it is more expensive, so consider getting one now.

After going through the application process at Uni Melbourne, I received my *Certificate of Enrolment* (CoE) roughly 2 weeks later at the beginning of May.

As soon as you receive the CoE you can apply for the *Visa* (for me that was a Student Visa 500, which cost: ~420€). Don't stress too much about the processing times: for me, it was granted within a day and for most others I met who got all their paperwork together within a week! So, if you're considerate with the application, this shouldn't stress you out too much! Keep in mind that you need to sign up for a minimum of 37.5 credits (~3 courses) to fulfil the visa requirements. My Visa ran until the end of January, giving me plenty of time to travel after the end of term 2. If you want to apply for a tourist visa after, it might be easier to leave the country (I did a trip to New Zealand) and apply from there – worked for me!

Housing

There are options for student housing on campus and in the CBD. Since I am a master (putting you in a higher-paying class) they were too expensive for me. The best alternative is finding a sharehouse to join. I joined a sharehouse in Brunswick (the best suburb next to Fitzroy, I will die on that hill) and for me, it was the best decision I possibly could have made. I found mine over Facebook Marketplace in the group FairyFloss. But I also applied to places over flatmates.com.au. Take care, sometimes rent is indicated per week (not per month). I started interviewing from Germany and found a place even before my flight. However, I met other exchange friends who stayed in a hostel in Melbourne and started looking once they arrived. Both work but I liked having it settled before the journey started. Unfortunately, the housing crisis also hit Melbourne and rooms can be quite spendy. Don't be discouraged if something a) doesn't feel right or b) doesn't work out - you'll find the right place for you!

My room was tiny and the house old and it cost me 870 AUD per month without bills (which was comparably cheap). And: it was the best ever. I loved the house, my housemates are now really close friends and living in Brunswick has shaped my experience extensively. I lived with an Australian and a Kiwi and since we got along so well, I also started meeting their friend groups. Through them, I got to know new people outside of the Uni and Exchange student bubble. You might miss out on the communal "all exchange students live in the same house" vibe which also has its perks. Do, what you feel most comfortable with! I was lucky enough to be able to buy off the furniture of the girl who lived in my room before. Sold it in the end as well and came out with net zero. If you need to organise furniture, Facebook Marketplace and OP shops are your best, money-saving shots.

Arriving in Melbourne

Once at the airport, if you need to go into CBD or close to Uni, you're eligible to book a free shuttle from the Airport for exchange students (once per student)! Check the UniMelb websites, you'll need to pre-book it a few days in advance.

To get *phone service*, I bought an E-SIM over Amaysim (using the Optus network) but there are several providers available. Having an Australian number is well worth it.

Some friends of mine opened a *bank account* in one of the big Australian banks (e.g., ANZ). I instead had a Wise account (through which I had an account with Australian details). That worked quite well for me.

To stock up with linen, or other house stuff you need: OP shops are everywhere and offer an amazing opportunity to buy stuff and clothes cheap and with a good cause in mind. K-Mart is also a good, and cheap option for getting some essentials.

To access public transport, you need a Myki card (available at vending machines and every kiosk). For undergrads, there is a possibility only to pay half price! However, graduate students (like me) need to pay in full. Which made me thrift a bike in my first week: best decision ever. I biked basically everywhere from then on and only used public transport for

going clubbing or when it was raining heaps. Be aware that wearing a helmet is mandatory in Victoria (and necessary).

University of Melbourne

With your application, you will also need to hand in the courses/subjects you want to do. There is a list of pre-approved undergrad courses where you can just enrol and some sound fun! As a graduate student, 50% of your final coursework must be in graduate courses. I started by signing up for 4 courses (2 grad, 2 undergrad) but I dropped down to 3 after the first week. The reason was that I was working on my thesis in parallel and the workload was a little high. I chose topics that are a little peripheral to what I'm usually doing. That meant that I also needed more time and energy sometimes to work through the coursework. Especially the graduate courses were more time-consuming than the undergrad ones. However, I enjoyed them, and I learned so much. The most pronounced difference to Germany to me was that you have a much more consistent workload. There might be homework, projects, or quizzes throughout the whole semester instead of just at the end. Keeps you busy but also makes it easier to earn your points and not have a big bulk at the beginning of summer.

Also, make sure to visit the orientation week. I struggled a bit with bringing up the motivation to meet new people and get out of my shell directly after arriving, but it was worth pushing myself. There are a bunch of different offers, and it is quite easy to start talking to people (remember, a lot of the people are pretty much in the same boat!). I also met people through group work in my courses. I made the experience that the student community is busy but beyond supportive and helpful. I signed up for the mountaineering club (although I did not take part in much, I planned trips on my own with friends) and the diving club (completed my open water license with them! Was a lot of fun). There are heaps of clubs, do check them out!

Melbourne Tips

I enjoyed Melbourne a lot. It is a busy and lively city and you'll never be bored. Five months were not nearly enough to try out all the places that the city has to offer. And if you need a break, it has a lot of places to just chill and be on your own as well. Here is a very non-exhaustive list of tips:

- I did a free walking tour in my first week. Touristy but a nice way to get to know CBD!
- A lot of museums are free: Melbourne Museum, Immigration Museum, Scienceworks, and ACMI. Check out NGV as well.
- CBD has lots of nice bars, clubs, and some rooftop places. A little spendy sometimes.
- Melbourne is the city of coffee. And it's comparably cheap (I had so much, oh my god). Hard to suggest places because almost all are great. Little Rogue is a nice treat in CBD. Padre in Brunswick was one of my go-to spots and I miss it already.
- Cinema Nova in Carlton offers student tix for \$10 on Mondays!
- Keep an eye out for food markets @Victoria Market
- Saturdays' Fitzroy Markets are just superb for thrifting and general vibes
- Go for a night out in Chapel St. or Smith St. if that's for you. It's fun.
- Cheaper buy miles: supermarket offering cheap stuff that other chains couldn't sell anymore for one or the other reason. Amazingly cheap food but you never know what you'll get in advance.
- I am not a sports fan but do consider going to an AFL game at the MCG. I went with an Australian and some exchange friends and I had an amazing time (Go Hawks).
- Some random food places, I really enjoyed and will miss a lot: A1 Bakery, Very Good Falafel, Bagel & Co., Naked for Satan, Good Times, Nico's Sandwich, Elektra, Stefanino Panino, Monelli, ...
- Close to Uni in Carlton, there are some nice cheap lunch options: Heart of Carlton or Don Tojo just two of my faves

- The uni offers a free food support program for students in need (you will get info during orientation).
- Study in the Victorian State Library if you're sick of uni and want to be humbled by an old, classy library.
- With the train system, you can get out of the city for \$5 and do a hike in nature! Otherwise, I can recommend biking the Merri Creek Trail or walking through the Royal Botanic Garden.

I loved studying in this vibrant city and exploring this vast country more than I imagined. However, it is a huge place on the other side of the world, and I did feel lost sometimes. Both are more than ok and part of the process. It's okay to take it slow, get some rest, get out, be busy, do something or not do something. And what I learned over the last couple of months: it's also okay to ask for help, clarity, or support. You're not alone.

I keep my fingers crossed for your endeavours and wish you the best of luck and so, so much fun wherever you go. I'm sure it's going to be a great experience! And if you happen to go to Melbourne: say hi to it from me, will you?