Personal review of my semester abroad in Australia
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**Application Period**

From the very beginning I was aiming for a semester abroad in Australia. Personally, I went to high school on the East Coast for a couple of months when I was 15 years old and I could not wait to get back to this very different place. Since I applied for the Master’s network Quantitative Techniques for Economics and Management (QTEM), which is offered by TUM in cooperation with various other universities worldwide, a semester abroad was mandatory anyway. Moreover, the usual hustle with applying, rankings etc. for TUMexchange and SOMex did not apply for QTEM students, only a list of preferred universities was necessary (have not met any QTEM-student yet who did not get his or her first choice). In March, the universities were announced, in my case: Monash University in Melbourne.

**Preparation**

Of course, there were some administrative matters that needed to be taken care of upfront. The responsible at TUM and Monash were very helpful and provided all necessary information. The three most important points are the Visa, flights and course selection.

**Visa**

I would recommend applying for a visa as early as possible. Usually, it does not take longer than 2 weeks. Nonetheless, Australia can be very strict when it comes to compliance and visa requirements. For instance, my worldwide private insurance was not accepted and I had to pay for an additional health insurance offered by only 5 pre-approved healthcare providers. This insurance was around 300-350 AUD. The Visa itself takes around 3 hours to fill out. Many information about you, your relatives and past travels are required. The Visa was around 600 AUD.

**Flights**

Personally, I did not have concrete plans for the period immediately after the semester abroad. One the one hand, because semester times were not 100% clear since the exam schedule was, of course, not published yet and on the other hand, I was indecisive about either travelling or doing an internship abroad. Consequently, I could not book specific dates for my flight back. In order to avoid wasting time, I booked an ORT-ticket (Open Return Ticket) with STAtravel. Since the semester in Australia finishes quite early (around mid November), I highly recommend visiting New Zealand or travelling in Australia itself. If you do not want to plan everything beforehand, the ORT-ticket comes in quite handy since you may change your airport and flight time (usually cheaper than booking two individual flights).

**Courses**

The webpages of Monash University and its different faculties are, as usually, a jungle when it comes to course selection. Many courses are offered, some well described, others not. In the chapter “Studying at Monash” I will list the courses I have taken (mainly information technology). If you are a QTEM student, check out the QTEM intranet. This gives you a good overview which courses are already approved QTEM courses with a brief summary (content, which term it is offered etc.) and a hyperlink to a more detailed description in the previously mentioned webpage jungle.

All the courses I have taken were part of my 30 “free-choice”/ elective ECTS. Thus, I did not have to deal with credit transfer. All I know is, if you can avoid it, do it.
All in all, in the orientation week you are still allowed to change your courses. At this point I would like to thank Ms Claire Lovegrove, the Monash QTEM coordinator. She always made the impossible possible.

## Arrival

### Accommodation

One of the first things you will be facing upon arrival is finding a suitable accommodation. Most students decided to stay in a hostel or Airbnb for the first days and scan the flat market while being present. I can highly recommend this because you can make appointments for sightings which is usually preferred by the landlord and it helps you to avoid scams. I managed to move in after 7 days. For the first week, I stayed in a hostel named habitatHQ in St Kilda around 25 minutes by tram away from Caulfield campus. All in all, it was clean and nice. Almost every student found a flat within 14 days. A good platform to find a flat is flatmates.com. I would also recommend getting a premium account for around 20$. This makes getting in contact with landlords way easier. Some students decided to stay in the Monash student halls. I did not see the point because they are more expensive than flats within the city and the halls are almost 1 hour away by train from the city center. In general, when it comes to selecting a suburb you should consider the distance to Monash. Here some (in my opinion) suitable places:

- **Richmond and Cremorne** – very lively area with great bars, close to CBD and perfect train, tram and bus connection (10 minutes to Caulfield campus).

- **CBD, South and East Melbourne** – literally the city center itself. Connection from CBD to Monash around 15 minutes, while South and East Melbourne way longer. Beautiful areas though.

- **St Kilda** – suburb next to Caulfield. Hence, close to Uni. But train connections rather limited and Tram is awfully slow. St Kilda beach is a great place but in winter very cold and windy. CBD around 30 minutes by tram.

- **Fitzroy and other suburbs north of Melbourne** – Known as hipster hotspot. One of the best places in Melbourne when it comes to Bars and Nightlife. Absolutely great! But getting to Caulfield Campus takes up to 1 hour.

Rents in Melbourne can be compared to Munich. The quality of most buildings and the perception of tidiness and hygiene differ dramatically to German standards. It seems like most buildings are made of paper. That also means that isolation is a foreign concept. Consequently, since it gets close to zero degrees around August, it can be very cold inside, be prepared (one of my first investments was a small fan heater, that was a blessing). In the places mentioned above, you can expect rents between 180 and 300$ per week, with CBD on top of the scale. If you invest some time and effort, 200$ p.w. are possible. Do not take the first offer that is okay, rather stay a couple of days longer in a hostel and find something good. Other students also changed their accommodations multiple times during the stay. As Australians would say: no worries. All in all, getting a flat is less bureaucratic and faster compared to Germany.

### First weeks

There are a couple of orientation events in the first 2 weeks, mostly information sessions though. As previously mentioned, you also get the chance to make changes to your previously selected courses. Moreover, you are introduced to finding a flat in Melbourne, studying at Monash, student associations etc. Additionally, all QTEM students were invited to a first lunch. That was a great event
since it gave us the chance to meet some responsibles and get to know each other. In the end, I became very close friends with most of the other QTEM students.

Public transportation
Public transportation Victoria (PTV) offers for Australian circumstances a great PT network. Compared to European standards, it can be a little bit frustrating from time to time. As an undergrad student, you can apply for a concession card (explained in detail during the orientation week) which leads to 50% off of all fares. As postgrad (from another country), you are not allowed to get this concession. Full fares apply. Nonetheless, you may find a workaround to get your concession anyway.

Studying at Monash

The two major Campuses
Monash University is one of Australia’s top universities. Since university fees are quite high in Australia (comparable to the US), the facilities are usually great. Unfortunately, Monash University is not located in the city center. The two major campuses are Caulfield and Clayton. While Caulfield Campus is located directly next to the train station and a 15-minute ride away from the city center, Clayton (the main campus) is almost one hour away from the city. Consequently, I tried to avoid selecting courses which are in Clayton. Most courses in Information Technology, Economics/Econometrics and Finance are held in Caulfield anyway.

My courses
Most of my courses where part of the IT faculty. Exemplary, I have listed them in the following. For further up-to-date information on the curriculum, search for the unit code on the Monash homepage.

ACF 5320 – Business Analytics: Data modelling, basic statistics, Data Mining, Optimization
FIT5145 – Introduction to Data Science: Introduction to concepts and theory, R, Python, PERL etc.
FIT5202 – Data Processing for Big Data: Distributed Systems, Hadoop, HBase, Scala, data manipulation
FIT9133 – Python programming: Introduction to Python, comparable to “PGdP” with normal workload

Teaching style
All courses I know about consist of lectures and lab sessions. Lectures are held in front of a large number of students and are more interactive compared to German lectures (e.g. you are often encouraged to ask questions or participate in real-time surveys). The lab sessions (like a “Tutorium”) are smaller groups (10-20 students) and deal with practical tasks (e.g. programming or calculating). All in all, everything is less theoretical but more application oriented. In most courses, around 50% of the total grade can be achieved with in-semester assignments. On the one hand, this is great since you deal with the content of the lectures frequently which ensures a good learning outcome. On the other hand, most assignments were not complex but sometimes very time consuming. This interfered a bit with my travel plans.

Campus life
In terms of campus life, there are many events happening each semester such as parties, workshops and other activities. Most of them happen in Clayton, some in Caulfield and sometimes there are parties in the city center organized by student associations. If you are thinking about signing up for a gym, Monash sports association is a good choice. A gym membership in Australia is usually expensive (cheapest I found was around 20$ per week, offering shitty equipment). Monash sports offers a half-year membership for exchange student for around 240$. The facilities are great. The gym in Clayton...
also has a small spa area and a swimming pool. The one in Caulfield is smaller but enough and offers great complementary courses such as boxing, yoga etc.

**Staying on Campus**

At Monash University, you may be able to stay on-campus in student halls. Initially, I applied for it but did not get a room in the first round (luckily, I have to say). The halls are expensive and located on Clayton Campus, so really far away from the city. Clayton, as the main campus, offers many activities (sport and social-wise). I have met people staying in the halls. The had a good time but most of them where not satisfied with their choice. Of course, they had a great time since you meet so many new people and there is always something happening on the campus. But most of them barely experienced Melbourne as a city since it took around 2 hours to get there and back (additionally, public transportation services terminate quite early in the night). To be honest, I do not see the point of flying to one of the most interesting cities I know on the other side of the world and then stay on the campus itself, but this is just my individual opinion.

**Grade conversion**

At Monash, the grade scale is 0-100. Usually, 50% is needed to pass. There are 4 grade categories with HD (high distinction) being the highest. For a HD, only 80% are needed.

Initially, I was afraid of how the grades are transformed to the German grading system since I have heard some upsetting stories about it. Luckily, the “Bavarian grade formula” assumes an upper bound of 85% instead of 100%. Of course, this might change. The international office may be able to provide up-to-date information.

**Living and Travelling**

**Australia**

Australia is indeed a special place. The good news is, there is a lot to see and explore. The bad news is, you will not have enough time, I guarantee it. Inland flights are cheap if booked in advance, which makes it also easy to spend the weekend in other cities such as Sydney and Brisbane. Nonetheless, do not underestimate the size of the country. For instance, flying to Perth takes around 4 hours.

You should definitely check out the east coast (Fraser Island, Noosa, Byron Bay), Cairns and its rain forests and do not forget the west coast from Perth to Monkey Mia.

When it comes to the daily live, you will notice that due to different purchase powers, Australia is expensive. Especially vegetables and fruits can be very expensive. Alcohol is even worse. Luckily, there are often special offers. Additionally, happy hours can be a true blessing and make many things affordable. A great app to check out happy hours is “happiest hour”. If you stick to the right places at the right time, you will manage to cut costs a lot.

**Melbourne**

If I have not mentioned it yet: Melbourne is awesome!

It is less about historically significant places and buildings. The city is just pure life. I have no clue how so many bars, cafes and restaurants can exist in one place. And the worst is: almost all of them are great. Every week is some kind of festival, event or market, especially in spring and summer time. There are countless great music bars in Fitzroy and a very huge art community. And if you get sick of the city, there are great hikes and national parks close by. I highly recommend the Grampians and of course the Great Ocean road. Both are perfectly suitable for a weekend getaway.
A good way to get a first impression after arriving is to participate in one of the free walking tours.

**Conclusion**

Be aware of the fact that the semester starts very early and you will not be able to write most exams in the preceding semester. Consequently, the semester also finishes early (approximately mid-November). Hence, you get the chance to travel a bit and write exams in Germany in February if necessary.

Melbourne is not the cheapest place on earth but it is worth every dollar. Be prepared to spend at least around 10,000€. All in all, if you have not noticed yet I highly encourage a semester abroad at Monash in Melbourne and do not regret the decision at all.

If you have questions about live in and around Melbourne, the University or Down Under itself, please do not hesitate to contact me: marek.schumann@tum.de

**Impressions**

*Part of the Skyline of Melbourne*
View form St Kilda Beach

12 Apostles (Great Ocean Road)
West Coast: camping on the beach

West Coast sunset