Experience Report Singapore Management University

Winter Semester 2019/20

By Aleksandar Vankov

Table of Contents

1. Application Phase ........................................................................................................................................ 2
   1.1 Applying through TUM SOMex ........................................................................................................... 2

2. Preparation ................................................................................................................................................ 3
   2.1 The city of Singapore .......................................................................................................................... 3
   2.2 Finances ............................................................................................................................................. 4
   2.3 Accomodation ..................................................................................................................................... 4
   2.4 BOSS Bidding ..................................................................................................................................... 5

3. Arrival ..................................................................................................................................................... 6
   3.1 Welcome Events ................................................................................................................................. 6
   3.2 Buddy Program .................................................................................................................................. 6

4. Studies ..................................................................................................................................................... 6
   4.1 Study process .................................................................................................................................... 6
   4.2 Courses ............................................................................................................................................ 7

5. Student life ................................................................................................................................................. 8
   5.1 SMU Campus ..................................................................................................................................... 8
   5.2 Nightlife ............................................................................................................................................. 9
   5.3 Travelling .......................................................................................................................................... 9
1. Application Phase

To apply for an exchange semester in Singapore, there are two possibilities provided by the TUM. One is the Joint International Program – EEP – which is a TUM exchange program in collaboration with the NUS Overseas Colleges for master students. The other, which I will be focusing on in this report, is an exchange semester in the Singapore Management University (SMU) offered by the TUM program TUM SOMex. Information on the EEP can be found on the TUM website.

1.1 Applying through TUM SOMex

Information on the application process itself is provided very thoroughly on the TUM page so I won’t go into too much detail on this. To give a brief overview, before the application process officially starts, the main thing to pay attention to is that you have your language certificates ready before the application deadline. For the SMU, proof of English language must be provided – either a TOEFL test taken within the last two years, or the DAAD test which TUM offers. I would recommend taking the DAAD test, as the process is quite simple, and no additional fees must be paid.

I would also recommend participating in the TUM Buddy Program in the previous semester and choosing to be the buddy of a student from Singapore, as this will give you the opportunity to already communicate with Singaporean locals and get a feeling for their culture. Additionally, this gives you a bonus in the application process and raises your chances of receiving a spot.

For the rest of the process, it is sufficient to follow the instructions of TUM outlined here, as well as those provided by SMU representatives in the later stages of the application. Make sure to send in all your requested documents in time to avoid any inconvenience. Otherwise, the process is simple to follow. In Figure 1, you can see the timeline provided to me by the SMU Inbound Team upon acceptance in the program.
2. Preparation

2.1 The city of Singapore
In one way or another, everyone has heard many things about Singapore. Whether it’s about how technologically advanced the city is with all the extravagantly built high-rise buildings, how great the food is, how different their culture is, or how expensive living there probably is, we all have our preconceived notions about the country and city. I’ve put this section within the “Preparation” chapter, as the first thing you should do to prepare after you’ve received your acceptance letter, is to get excited about the four to five months you will be spending there.
Singapore is, in my opinion, probably the best place to go on an exchange semester if you are interested to explore Asia. Due to its English-speaking people, ethnically diverse population and general closeness to a lot of Southeast-Asian countries, it enables foreign visitors to experience and get to know a lot of the culture in a short time span. It is also a great place to study for students with a German background, as the methods of teaching are vastly different to those offered by German universities. This provides you with the opportunity to broaden your horizons in terms of the methods of education out there. I will go deeper into these topics in further sections relating specifically to them.

2.2 Finances
An important thing to go through when discussing a four-month exchange semester, especially one in one of the most expensive cities on the world, is how much this experience would cost. In this section I will try to give you an idea of how expensive spending your semester abroad in Singapore.

Accomodation: 700-1200 SGD/month
Food: 400-500 SGD/month
Travel expenses (1 trip per month, not including tickets from Germany to Singapore): 400-600 SGD/month
Fixed costs (flight tickets to Singapore and back): ~1000 EUR
Going out: 200 SGD/month
Total: between 1300 and 1500 EUR monthly

2.3 Accomodation
Finding accommodation in Singapore will be one of the greater challenges of your trip. The SMU unfortunately cannot assist with the matter, as there are no dorms associated with it. The only two options left for exchange students are to find student housing or to share an apartment with several other people. Most exchange students I met (me included) shared rooms with one other person in a 2 or 3-bedroom apartment (4 or 6 people total) in so-called condominium complexes (condos). The apartments are usually big enough, so everyone has their own private space, with 2 bathrooms, a kitchen and living room. These condos usually have various facilities included such as a swimming pool, gym, rooftop for bigger gatherings etc. Unfortunately, I cannot comment on student housing as I have not had any experience with it, but I’ve heard there are a few student hostels around SMU which are a bit cheaper than condos, but this is reflected in their quality as well.

For the actual process of looking for roommates, the SMU Exchange Students Facebook group is the main medium. People write there looking for potential roommates and then get to know each other and match with the people they think would fit best. Although this matching almost
always makes for an interesting international group of housemates, I would strongly recommend to have a Skype call with your potential housemates, as I’ve heard many horror stories of people not getting along with each other and having to look for a new apartment only a month after they’ve moved in.

When you have a group of students ready to move in with, your next move is to find an agent. I, along with most exchange students in my semester went for singaporehousingcompany.com, who have a big collection of apartments at their disposal and will assist until you find the right one. They also provide chauffeur services from the airport when you first arrive in Singapore to your accommodation. Although they are a legitimate company and will definitely find you an apartment, their reputation in the exchange student circles after a few months was questionable as a lot of students had various problems, from uncomfortable beds and lack of towels to swimming pools in the condos being closed. I would advise you to try negotiating for every small inconvenience you run into, as this is how I, along with my housemates, were able to lower our rent by 150 SGD/month.

In total, the rent you will be paying can vary between 700 – 1200 SGD, according to the apartment’s size, the complex’s closeness to the university and the additional facilities in the building.

2.4 BOSS Bidding

An important thing to pay attention to before departing for Singapore is finding appropriate courses for your studies at SMU. Picking and applying for courses is much different than at TUM and takes place through the BOSS Bidding system. Essentially, every student receives 100 e-dollars to bid on courses with. There are three rounds of bidding, the first one taking place before the semester begins, whereas the next two start around the beginning of the semester.

I would strongly recommend reading up on results from the bidding from previous years for the courses you are interested in and choosing accordingly. As e-dollars are a very limited commodity, allocation is extremely important, so do not underestimate the bidding process and spend enough time on thinking about a strategy to ensure you get a good result. Some patterns I have noticed are:

- Courses on Tuesday and Wednesday, and to a lesser extend Thursday, tend to be much more expensive, as exchange students really push for them in order to have the weekend free for travelling
- Midday/afternoon courses also tend to be more expensive, so if there is a course you’d like to take which is also historically very popular, try going for a less popular timeslot
Other than allocating credits, you also have to pay attention to the prerequisites of each course and make sure you cover them. In case you have doubts, don’t hesitate to contact the professor. Some professors are very strict on prerequisites and have doubts about the seriousness of exchange students, so double-checking is always a good idea.

3. Arrival
3.1 Welcome Events
In the first week of your semester in Singapore, there are a lot of events organized by the university which can be a great opportunity to meet other exchange students. These are usually very fun and well-organized, and I can only recommend going to all of them. In my case, there was an orientation event and a campus tour, as well as a bus tour around Singapore.

3.2 Buddy Program
Another great opportunity to socialize, the Buddy program matches exchange students together, along with mentors from SMU, in a small group, the purpose being to have fun events together throughout the semester, learn about Singapore culture from the mentors and enjoy the great local food spots in good company. Overall, it is a great way to experience local cultures and make some contacts.

4. Studies
4.1 Study process
Studying at SMU is a very different experience to the one at TUM. Courses are usually taught in small groups of up to 45 students and teaching is very interactive. Attendance and participation are big parts of grading in most courses. I found this to be very beneficial, as the small groups and incentive to participate elevated my interest in some topics. Consequently, I was more engaged and better able to follow the material throughout the semester.

Furthermore, group projects and assignments often constitute another big part of your grade at the end. Combined with the mid-term exams in some lectures, grades are much more comprehensive than in TUM and keep your interest for the entire semester, as opposed to taking a single exam at the end of the semester that constitutes your entire grade.

An advice I would give here to future exchange students is not to hesitate asking questions and making comments on the material taught during lectures, this is common practice in Singaporean universities and will be expected of you if you are striving for good results. Courses tend to be very challenging but are achievable with consistency throughout the semester and focus during class.
4.2 Courses

As I wanted to have a good balance between studying and exploring Southeast Asia in my exchange semester, I decided to only take three courses. As I mentioned previously, studying at SMU requires constant engagement and a lot of effort to keep up with the pace of the lectures. For that reason, you should probably limit yourself to no more than four lectures per semester if you’d like to enjoy Singapore and its neighboring countries beyond the lecture halls and libraries. Four courses is considered by SMU students to be a complete semester. Below is a description of the courses I took in my semester abroad:

**FNCE 201 – Corporate Finance**

This course is equivalent to the one offered at TUM by Prof. Kasserer and you can easily get your credits recognized for it. I found the course structure to be very dynamic, practically oriented and engaging and would recommend it to anyone looking to expand their knowledge in finance. I’ve compared the materials to the ones at TUM and definitely prefer the way it is taught at SMU. This is mostly owed to the small groups it is taught in – up to 45 people – and its practical orientation. The professor I had the class with – Wei Chi Shen, made sure to draw parallels between the theory taught in textbooks and relevant recent developments in the financial world. After the theoretical part of each lecture, we had to apply the knowledge learned by analyzing articles in leading financial journals. This piqued my interest in the topic and provoked me to spend more time understanding the subject matter.

The best part of the course was the group project we had to do toward the end of the semester – together with a group of 4 more students, we had to pick an exchange-traded company and analyze its capital structure, making an evaluation on its balance between debt and equity. Not only was this a great way to test my knowledge in the course and apply it in practice, it also gave me an opportunity to exchange with local students.

The course was graded as follows – 10% of the grade constitutes one’s attendance and participation in class, another 20% is for online homework, 20% for the group project I mentioned before, and 50% for the final exam.

**ECON 203 - International Economics B**

This course deals with different theories on trade between countries and vastly expanded my knowledge in economics, both micro and macro. It is quite challenging as some of the theories are very complex, but it was manageable and quite interesting. Material taught in class was exemplified by relevant developments such as the trade war between the USA and China.

I would recommend taking this if you are interested in economics and do not mind a more theoretically oriented course. It is quite cheap in terms of e-dollars, so if you don’t have a lot and need one more course, this one is fitting. The course can be recognized as an elective at TUM.
Grading structure – class attendance and participation (20%), midterm exam(35%), final exam(45%)

COR-IS 1702 – Computational Thinking

This course is similar to Algorithmen & Datenstrukturen at TUM. I originally wanted to recognize it as an elective from my technical specialization - equivalent to the one I mentioned. Unfortunately, this wasn’t possible so I could only recognize it as a general elective.

If you have a specialization in Computer Science, this isn’t too much of a challenge, while still being interesting enough to keep you engaged. After learning Python and refreshing your knowledge in combinatorics in the first few weeks, you will be looking at different data structures and algorithms. There is a lot of coding and a very challenging coding project in the latter half of the semester. I found the course to be quite useful in terms of the knowledge it provides and the projects are very fun to do. Still, given that it can’t be transferred as a technical elective, I wouldn’t take it if I were to make the decision again. It is also quite expensive as it is a fundamental course for students studying Information Systems so the demand for it is quite high – I spent nearly half of my e-dollars here.

5. Student life
5.1 SMU Campus

SMU has a very modern campus in a great location in the center of the city. Upon my arrival for the orientation event, I was pleasantly surprised by the architecture and overall appearance. The university offers a lot of facilities, including a swimming pool on the roof of the administrative building of the university, as well as a gym in one of the other buildings. The libraries are also very modern and well-equipped. Books must be reserved in advance as availability is quite low, so I would do this as soon as you know which ones you need for your courses.

All faculties are located next to each other and are connected by an underground passage, which makes movement from one lecture to another very convenient, especially in the rainy season. There are a lot of options for food near the university - a food court in the university – ‘Koufu’ – which offers all kinds of Asian cuisine at affordable prices. Additionally, as the university is located in the center of the city, there are a lot of great spots for food around it.

One thing to mention here are extracurricular activities. I recommend going to the event at the beginning of the semester that gives information on all of the clubs the university has to offer and taking part in any one that sounds interesting. There is something for everyone here – swimming, football, rugby, philosophy, an AI enthusiasts club, real estate, cocktails, diving and blockchain are but a small part of the clubs you can take part in. This is a great chance to meet
new people with similar interests and find a new activity or develop in something you’ve always wanted to do.

5.2 Nightlife
When it comes to nightlife, Singapore is quite well known for its fancy rooftop bars and clubs. While going out in the city is very pricey, it is worth checking out some venues, and there is an opportunity to do this on a budget – a Facebook group called Hazel’s Guestlist. It is oriented primarily towards exchange students and organizes parties at various venues around Singapore, usually without entrance fees or with special deals.

5.3 Travelling
A big part of the exchange semester of most students is travelling around Southeast Asia. Singapore is in the perfect location to do so, acting as a travel hub in Asia that offers direct flights to a massive number of locations. Personally, I was able to visit eight countries during my stay in Singapore and this elevated my exchange experience as I could experience different cultures, cuisines and nature around Asia. Flight tickets from Singapore are very affordable, for example with the right timing one could get a two-way ticket to Thailand for 80 SGD. In my opinion, travelling is a huge part of the experience and is not something to miss out on if you have the opportunity. It is therefore beneficial to allocate some budget to it in advance.

Some locations a lot of my fellow exchange students went to:

- **Malaysia** – Kuala Lumpur, Tioman Island and Borneo
- **Indonesia** – Java, Bali and Lombok
- **Vietnam** – Hanoi, Hoi An, Ho Chi Minh City and Mekong River
- **Cambodia** – Phnom Penh, Siem Reap and Angkor Wat
- **Hong Kong** – I personally went there and was able to enjoy the city, but I don’t know if it’s currently a good idea given political tensions
- **Thailand** – Bangkok, Phi Phi Island, Chiang Mai and Ko Samui
- **Philippines** – Palawan, Cebu and Siargao Islands

For contact:

Aleksandar Vankov - a.vankov@tum.de