

Personal Report

Partner University: University of Sydney

Period: Semester 1, 2025 (February - June)

Study Program in Freiburg: Economics (Master's)

Courses Taken: Advanced Microeconomics, Macroeconomic Analysis, Consumer Behavior, Visual Data Analytics

Introduction

When I arrived in Sydney for my exchange semester, I thought my previous experience at UW-Madison would have prepared me well. But Australia presented an entirely new set of challenges and surprises - from the shockingly expensive visa fees to the unique rhythm of life in a harbor city. What began as an academic journey unexpectedly became a masterclass in adapting to different ways of living, studying, and connecting with people from all over the world.

Preparation

Visa Process

The Australian student visa application was straightforward but painfully expensive. Despite only staying for four months, I had to pay AUD 1,600 for the visa - and I later learned the fee increased to AUD 2,000 just months after my application. For context, this was:

- Non-negotiable even for short-term exchanges
- Required additional expenses like biometrics and certified translations

Health Insurance

I purchased the university's recommended OSHC (Overseas Student Health Cover) for about AUD 300 for the semester. Like during my U.S. exchange, I still had to maintain my German health insurance to keep my enrollment at Freiburg - a frustrating but unavoidable double cost. (for international student in Freiburg)

Housing Challenges

Sydney's rental market felt like a competitive sport:

- **Student housing:** Affordable options (e.g., AUD 380/week) would disappear within 2 hours of being listed
 - **Private rental:** After 3 weeks of relentless Facebook group scrolling, I secured a shared house in Newtown (25-minute walk to campus)
 - **Reality check:** My AUD 390/week room (utilities included) was:
 - 50% more expensive than my Madison apartment
 - 3x my Freiburg rent
 - ...with peeling wallpaper and a shower that alternated between scalding and freezing
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Academic Experience

Structure & Workload

My four economics courses followed a continuous assessment model similar to the U.S., but with distinct twists:

- **Assessment spread:** Weekly quizzes (10%), midterms (30%), finals (50%), participation (10%)
- **Class sizes:** 300+ students in core courses vs. 80 at UW-Madison - making office hours crucial
- **Grading culture:** An 85+ (High Distinction) was rare, but the system felt more easier than Germany's numeric grading (from my personal experience)

Key Observations:

1. **Fisher Library's 24/7 sanctuary** became my lifeline - complete with:
 - Soundproof pods for recording presentations
 - Free charging stations and laptop loans
 - A surprisingly good cafeteria (the chicken pesto panini saved many study nights)
2. **Tutorials were goldmines** for actual interaction - I made sure to always sit next to different people

3. **Visual Data Analytics** stood out - we used Tableau to map Sydney's housing price disparities (awkward when my tutor asked why I was analyzing Newtown rentals!)
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Cultural and Social Experience

The Urban Campus Dynamic

USYD lacked the "college town" vibe of Madison or Freiburg, but offered something equally valuable:

- **Pros:**
 - Coffee runs to Glebe's artisan roasters between classes
 - Spontaneous harbor swims after exams
 - Meeting non-student locals at Surry Hills bookshops
- **Cons:**
 - Study groups required WhatsApp coordination weeks in advance
 - Most classmates vanished to distant suburbs after lectures

Finding My Tribe

The **Canoe Club** became my anchor:

- Biweekly paddles past Cockatoo Island at sunset
- Learned that "Yeah nah" means "no" while "Nah yeah" means "yes"
- Was adopted by a group of environmental science students who taught me to spot blue-ringed octopuses (from a safe distance!)

Travel Highlights

- **New Zealand:** Tongariro's volcanic landscapes made me understand why they filmed Mordor there
- **Melbourne:** Hidden laneway bars where economists argued about crypto over A\$12 craft beers
- **Canberra:** Oddly satisfying symmetry of Parliament House - and the best Vietnamese pho outside Saigon

Conclusion and Advice

Unexpected Lessons

1. **Urban adaptability:** Navigating Sydney's sprawl taught me to find community in unexpected places - from rock pools to 6am bakery queues
2. **Academic resilience:** When 300-person lectures felt impersonal, I learned to seek help through:
 - Peer-assisted study sessions (PASS)
 - Reddit groups for each course (yes, really!)
3. **The "Sydney shuffle":** Budgeting required constant adjustment - I became expert at:
 - Happy hour oyster specials
 - Discount museum entry days
 - Concession opal card travel caps

For Future Students:

"Don't come expecting another UW-Madison or Freiburg. Come ready to:

- Refresh housing listings every 30 minutes
- Embrace the library as your social hub
- Let the city surprise you - my best memories happened when I got lost purposefully"
- I have to say, the sunset is fabulous in Sydney

Final Reflection:

"Sydney taught me that growth happens outside comfort zones - whether that's presenting to a tutorial group of strangers, navigating a new subway system during rush hour, or simply learning to enjoy my own company while watching the ferries criss-cross the harbor. The city doesn't hand you community on a platter like a college town might, but if you're willing to paddle out a little further (sometimes literally), you'll find connections as deep and unexpected as the Pacific."