Experience Report — Direct Exchange

UNSW Sydney, Australia

Host university: UNSW Sydney, Australia · Exchange period: Term 1, 2026 · Home programme: M.Sc. Economics, Freie Universität Berlin

Why Sydney, and why a direct exchange

I had never been to Australia before, and that was more or less the whole point. During my Bachelor's I already spent a semester in Bordeaux on Erasmus, so another European destination would have felt like a repetition. Several friends had studied or travelled in Australia and talked about it in a way that stuck with me, and the direct exchange was the obvious route to a continent I knew nothing about. UNSW made the decision easy: it is one of the strongest universities in the country, and that carried real weight for me.

Preparation

The application itself was manageable. The one genuinely time-consuming part was the language test. I had to sit a TOEFL, which is expensive and took a few evenings of preparation — not difficult, but you have to book it early enough. Beyond that you need letters of recommendation, which means approaching professors in good time, and the whole process falls into the first semester of the Master's. That is the real constraint: you have barely started your degree and are already organising an application for a stay that begins more than a year later. It is doable, but the timeline does not forgive procrastination.

The visa (subclass 500) was less painful than expected. It is an online application, you should set aside two or three hours for it, and the main thing is to upload everything carefully and completely. Mine was approved without any follow-up questions or complications. What does hurt is the price: the visa alone came to close to €1,000, and that is a cost people tend to forget when they budget.

For health insurance I went with Medibank OSHC. It was cheap — roughly €250 — easy to arrange online, and there is a medical practice on campus that settles directly with Medibank, so I never had to file a reimbursement claim at all. That convenience is worth more than a small price difference between providers.

Course selection was the most annoying part of the preparation. As an exchange student you can only choose from a fairly small catalogue, so the idea of simply picking whatever interests you does not really apply. I ended up sending several questions directly to UNSW to clarify what I could and could not take. Recognition at FU, on the other hand, was easier than its reputation suggests: you contact the individual chairs, find a matching course, and get it confirmed. In the one case where I got stuck, our degree programme coordinator helped me out quickly. Ask early, and go to the coordinator sooner rather than later.

Accommodation

I lived in Kingsford, ten to fifteen minutes from campus, in a shared flat with a nicely renovated room, and paid AUD 375 per week. Compared with what other exchange students I met were paying, that was cheap. I found the room on flatmates.com.au and took the very first place I inspected. The deposit was two weeks' rent. I got on well with my flatmates and with the landlord, who was relaxed and kept passing on tips about the city.

My clear recommendation is to look for a flat on the ground rather than from Germany. There are a lot of scam listings, and from the other side of the world you have no reliable way of telling them apart — being physically present at an inspection is the only real filter. What you should organise in advance is the first week: book a hostel or something similar and use those days for viewings. One caveat on my own experience: I arrived in January, before Term 1 started in February, so I was searching ahead of the main wave of students. If you arrive right at the start of term, expect more competition and plan more time.

Kingsford itself was a pleasant surprise. It has a large Asian community, a bit like a second Chinatown, with very good shops and restaurants. A tram stop nearby got me into the city centre in about twenty minutes.

Finances

Realistically you should plan for €1,800 to €2,000 per month if you also want to do things while you are there. Rent alone is around €1,000 and often more, and the rest goes quickly once you go out in the evenings or add extras like surfing. There is not much point pretending otherwise: you are there for a limited time and you will spend money.

On top of that come the one-off costs. The visa was the big one at close to €1,000, insurance about €250. My outbound flight cost around €2,100, but that is not a fair benchmark — I flew via Taiwan and Thailand and spent two weeks in each. The return flight was about €700. There were considerably cheaper options routing through the Gulf, but given the security situation in the region at the time I did not want to take the risk. I financed the stay through a PROMOS travel allowance and savings from my previous working-student job.

On banking: I did not open an Australian account and never missed it. Card payment works essentially everywhere, my Visa credit card covered day-to-day spending, and I could withdraw cash for the rent from an ATM with my German debit card. One of my flatmates did get a local card, which is fine too, but it is not necessary. Cash really only matters if your landlord wants the rent that way — clarify that when you sign, because plenty of people pay by transfer.

The university system

This is where my verdict is mixed. The workload was not hard, but it was constant: at least one small assessment per course per week, plus a presentation, plus a final. Nothing individually demanding, and I took good grades back to Berlin. But the sheer number of small deliverables meant I was permanently working through minor tasks instead of thinking about anything properly. There were some attendance requirements, though not many.

Honestly, I found the courses at FU better. They are more relaxed in the sense that you organise your own time, and more interesting because they are more demanding and let you go into depth. Looking back, I would probably have learnt more in one semester in Berlin. UNSW is far more school-like than I am used to, and that did not suit me. Choose your courses carefully — you want a good semester, but you also want to get something out of it.

One practical warning about grades. The standard conversion at FU is generous at the top and harsh below it: a High Distinction becomes a 1.0, a Distinction already becomes a 2.0, with nothing in between. That is not a fair reflection, since the German system has gradations for a reason. I found a conversion table published by TU Berlin that explicitly listed UNSW, submitted it, and it was accepted. If you do not come home with straight HDs, look into this rather than accepting the default.

What genuinely impressed me was the campus. There is a pharmacy, a hairdresser, a small supermarket, plenty of food options and cafés, and libraries where I always found a seat. The range of sports courses and societies is enormous and covers just about anything you can think of. It has the Anglo-American flavour you would expect, but with real infrastructure attached, and that side of it I liked a lot.

Everyday life and cultural differences

What surprised me most was how relaxed everyday life is. In many places you feel a background level of stress in how people go about their day; in Sydney you simply do not. It is a very liveable city and you notice it in the people. University and working culture matched that: hierarchies were essentially absent, the tone was direct, and people were easy to approach. That suited me well.

The city is extremely international, as is UNSW, so meeting people from all over the world takes no effort at all. The Australians I met were open and approachable — some more reserved than others, but there was a general openness that made things easy.

My one honest disappointment: Australia has no cuisine of its own. There is nothing culinary that is distinctly Australian, and you largely eat the same things you would in Europe. The immigrant food scene more than compensates for it, which is exactly what made a neighbourhood like Kingsford so good.

Conclusion

It was worth it. I am not sold on the university system, and I would not claim the academic content was the highlight. But seeing a different model from the inside was interesting in itself, and the rest of it — organising the whole thing yourself, living on another continent, getting a different perspective on how life can be arranged — is where the real value was for me. It has given me professional impulses that I am putting into practice in an internship right now.

If you like a structured, Anglo-Saxon system with a fixed rhythm and constant feedback, UNSW will suit you very well. If you are someone who prefers to work independently and set your own pace, go in with your eyes open. Either way, I would do it again.