

The University of the South Pacific

Student Exchange Study Report

Victoria University Melbourne.

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Forward

This report has been compiled to provide coverage of my overall experience as an exchange student, which commenced on the 22nd of July – 31st December 2011. Blessed with the opportunity of representing my country, Samoa, but the University of the South Pacific abroad, was a lifetime achievement I'll be forever proud of.



Expectations

After receiving confirmation that I was to be an ambassador of the University of the South Pacific to Australia – I was overwhelmed, for I had never been granted with such an opportunity, not to forget the obligations that came hand in hand with such a commitment. However, pushing oneself to ones limits can ultimately mould ones character – which was one of the initial reasons I had applied to be part of the student exchange scheme.

To expect the unexpected, became a constant reminder, my Pacific lifestyle would have to learn to adapt to a new environment in a period of 6 months, and the need to research to prepare myself became crucial. Research and planning for the upcoming trip relieved me somewhat from the anxiety within. Ella Bennion (International Officer) became a critical member for my transition from USP to VU, being a great counselor, guiding and directing us through the various processes that would make the impending trip a success.

Personally, the only difficult aspect of the trip was all the running around and trying to complete the paper work before taking off; poor Ella had so much to deal with – but as it was no surprise, she handled everything with ease.



Environment

Host University

One of the main reasons I chose Melbourne was the undeniable fact that I had always secretly wanted to attend Victoria University. Owing the bragging rights to most of the Pacific's successes, Victoria University is renowned for its Faculty of Business Studies, its provision of innovating teaching and high quality tertiary education to students from all backgrounds. Not to mention having a diverse and multi-cultural student body, somewhat similar to USP. The university owns 7 campuses around Melbourne and houses more than 7000 students annually.

Student Life

There is more to a University than education, and being part of the many social events that VU offered made me feel like a student on holiday. Some of the social events that improved campus life included – Uni beer fest, Bands & BBQ's, annual ball, boat parties and more. Partying was not forbidden, but taken in stride with the workload and it became a culture for VU students to experience Uni-life as thoroughly and as enjoyable as possible.

The international students welcoming function was my first social event, grasping it as an opportunity to advertise and make known to our fellow VU colleagues the small but very much active University of the South Pacific and its many good qualities.

Melbourne

Many would have made Sydney their first option – however, Melbourne is a city offering many things that would attract far and wide. Melbourne is the capital city of fashion in the Australian scene, hosts the Melbourne Cup and offers a laid back & settled kind of lifestyle making Melbourne a most unique destination.

What I have come to learn and also appreciate, is that Melbourne combines country and city life into a distinctive blend that also takes into consideration the many different cultures that have made this city their home – racism is very much unheard of!

I was also able to travel Australia during my short stay, from the Sydney Opera House to the beautiful sunny beaches of the Gold Coast, however, with all these trips combined, it could not outshine the Samoan social nights held within the city lights of Melbourne City.

Experience

Lifestyle

Accommodation was a big threat to the smooth plans I had in mind, whether to stay on campus or outside. After much time I confidently chose to live outside with family – not only it made me feel much more at home but significantly helped financially. However, if you are a student who is punctual financially then student village would be a haven, offering its ongoing student events, and although I lived off campus, I spent many nights in student village with friends and enjoying the company of those who lived there.

My daily routine consisted of a 20minute train ride to school and after hour library sessions, visiting the gym and prayer time with the family was also a big part of my schedule. The great feeling about living with family eliminates the feeling of homesickness.

Changes I underwent as a result of this exchange scheme was, being more punctual to class, since living out of campus with family gives you that extra nudge to do better and attend everything. In addition, I learnt to better manage my finances; I found a part time job that supported me through my stay. And last of all I became more flexible and more open to change, being in Australia allowed me to accept an abundant amount of things such as others opinions, views, culture, which ultimately helped me with the choices I made in my current and future environment.

Activities & Events

VU offered such a broad range of active events that catered for all types of students, and listed below are some of the memorable functions I was most privileged to attend :

- International Students Welcoming, which was held in the city campus on the first night we arrived where we met all the other exchange students from different countries.
- Samoan social nights, which were held every Friday & Saturday nights, live band with Island dishes to suit the mood, only problem was the fact that we have to buy our own drinks.
- VU Oceania Association, formerly formed last year with the aim to be VU recognized as an individual association under the Victoria University Students Union. Held parties and functions for Pacific students to further strengthen the bonds of culture and friendship. Myself and Malu Tapaeko played a major role in forming this group to pave the way for any future USP candidate whom wishes to attend VU.
- Melbourne Cup, the festive highlights of all horse racing. Formal fashion was in the atmosphere and all were in leathered boots to the high bidders suits, even VU students were all styled up.
- VU Volunteer day, a whole days work of cleaning and gardening for the elderly was all worthwhile with a single thank you from the organizing committee.

Other great activities I enjoyed in Australia were the trips up to Sydney, Brisbane and Gold Coast that provided endless new scenic tours. And not forgetting the delicious food I had there.

Personal Attributes attained

This program has not only provided me with academic knowledge but with valuable intrinsic attributes that has helped perfected my character.

- Respect, having great respect for others culture and perspective in a diverse environment. Especially the respect for myself and my achievements.
- Individualism, adaptive and accepting responsibility on my work without the dependence on others.
- Punctuality, being on time to set events with more control and planning towards my financial stability.
- Organization skills, consistent planning and organization of my duties to enable a free mind to profound activities.

On this note an invaluable skill I've learnt from Australia is how to make Pizza, shockingly I was able to perform the task of cooking Pizza thanks to my workplace Jessie's Pizza where I was employed for three months.

Challenges

Certain difficulties were experienced during and before the trip. These obstacles were merely part of the obligation to be faced and solved by the candidate.

- Accommodation was the starting base of all challenges on arrival, where to stay and how it would impact my mode of study.
- Financial assistance, funding the many activities planned requires core attention before participation as the establishment grant from VU comes rather late into the program. Relying alone on the grant is not a recommended idea as in time I needed financial allowance, yet the grant came in late and travelling academic and social expenses piled in.
- Correct units of study, the beginning weeks of lecture saw a lost in understanding of the unit curriculum in comparison to the units studied in USP.
- Homesickness, although a minor to me it still showed signs at certain times.

Solutions

Every problem has an answer and to my experienced difficulties required some innovative thinking and adaptive learning that helped me process through the trip.

- Accommodation was settled by consistent planning and researching before the trip. Investigating the costs and benefits of staying within or outside campus. None the less, outside offered more safety measures as living with family was more convenient in the terms of monetary support and the advantage of them being close to campus.
- Financial Assistance was fundamental issue that worried me, but in the end it presented no damages as I was supported by my family. And further secured by my AusAid scholarship allowance and part time job. Working in Australia is a recommended idea as the hours were flexible and the pay rate was more than sufficient.
Also take advantage of all monetary support available such as the USPSA grant and others.
- Unit understanding is more relevant if you have a direct line of contact with your unit coordinator in USP and the coordinator in the host university to eliminate any suspense of course misunderstanding.
- Homesickness was never a major problem, as I had family and my independent personality pulled me through. However when I had emotions of missing the islands my night walks through Sunshine Avenue cleared such thoughts.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I've experienced and learnt a lot from this scheme and such program has brought me everlasting memories that I'll be cherishing forever. Along the way I've made new friends, visited new places, laughed and dropped many tears throughout the journey. It seems so near when I last left Melbourne Airport to the welcoming of the cold winter season. Straight to Watergardens it was on Friday nights and Decca the following. Roaming the city for shopping and to the food courts for the yummy Sushi, there was rugby Saturdays as well but don't forget the after function for the team it was the most important event, Footscary Bulldogs were high prided win or lose we had food and drinks after.

Planning and researching ahead is always the idea of travel, so I learnt to always love what I was doing and this program allowed me to be part of such a great community. Never was I lost or had failed to reach my intentions as the blueprints of my trip was already noted. I've accomplished my target for 2011 and now looking ahead, proud and head high as I have created a new chapter for my life.

And in last words I'd like to Thank USP for granting me the opportunity in representing its name, never had I failed or ashamed to praise its image abroad. Also to all who helped me through the program, the USP international office Ella Bennion and the crew to my sponsor and counselors, thank you all.....





