



My Exchange Evaluation

Basic Information

Host University	NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE
Semester & Year of Exchange	S1, 2019
Otago degree(s)	BACHELOR OF SCIENCE
Major(s)	COMPUTER SCIENCE

Academics/ course load

Which papers did you take whilst on exchange?

Course title	Language of instruction	Otago equivalent	Otago credit value
CS3244 MACHINE LEARNING	ENG	COSC343	18
CS3230 DESIGN AND ANALYSIS OF ALGORITHMS	ENG	COSC341	18
CS3247 GAME DEVELOPMENT	ENG	COSC360	18

Any comments about these papers?

CS3230 is extremely difficult and the workload is immense – would not recommend for future students who are after a more balanced exchange experience.

How did the academic experience/ workload/ style of teaching differ from Otago?

Singapore is generally a very competitive country and this element of the culture unsurprisingly bleeds into academic life. Unlike Otago, where normalising the class's marks is only done in special circumstances, at NUS almost every paper in every department is normalised by what the locals fearfully refer to as the "bell curve". Especially in the sciences and business, this fear is palpable in the way people aren't willing to help out unless you are lucky to be close friends – a stark contrast to Otago where in most cases, any stranger beside you is more than willing to collaborate. This reluctance to come together, combined with a more rote learning style of content made it hard for me to deeply understand the subject matter and I found the academic side of the exchange needlessly stressful.

Accommodation

What accommodation did you stay in? What were the pros and cons of your accommodation?

I stayed in a residential college (RC4) in Utown and this was a great experience. The facilities are really clean and modern as the newest addition to the residential colleges in Utown. You can either be in a suite, which is a sort of apartment-like cluster of rooms in the corner of each floor, or an individual room along the corridors – I was in the former. Every house (3 consecutive floors) have a kitchen and laundry facilities and each floor has a common lounge with a big one on the ground floor for house or college events. The food from the dining hall is the one thing that wasn't consistently great the taste and serving sizes being generally underwhelming. Considering how much these meals cost in addition to the standard accommodation package (compulsory) I expected a little more. There is a good variety each mealtime though: Malay, Indian, Chinese and Western cuisines with vegetarian and vegan options as well.

Money matters

Please detail your basic costs, e.g. accommodation, flights, visa, food, insurance

Singapore is expensive. A one-way flight over was 1000NZD, however, I did fly in the holiday season and it is significantly cheaper to go July/August for Otago's semester 2. Accommodation came to 3700 NZD including the aforementioned meal plan. The meal plan does not cover lunches though, nor dinner on Saturday and breakfast on Sunday as most locals go home on the weekends. Eating out at the many hawker centres (food courts) around and near campus is incredibly cheap though, and a hearty meal will rarely cost more than 3 or 4NZD. The visa is complicated – they mess you around somewhat with application fees and processing fees, then acceptance fees etc – but it should not set you back more than 150NZD. Insurance was with OneCover Comprehensive (compulsory) for about 6 months, which was very reasonably about 450NZD. Additionally, with that, you can name as many countries as you like on top of Singapore and it covers you for whatever travel you might want to do as well. Many people exchange in South-East Asia to travel and this is really affordable from Singapore. Taking 2-3000NZD of savings will comfortably set you for 3 or 4 overseas trips.

What means did you use to access your finances? What would you recommend? (Credit card, Cash passport, foreign bank account, etc.)

I got a cash passport via BNZ which made accessing my funds in NZ really easy. However, everyday things are mostly cash-based so I would recommend withdrawing what you will need on campus and stashing it in your room. Better yet, since most of the locals and vendors use electronic payment apps (primarily one called PayLah) if you open a Singaporean bank account, you have that added ease of your wallet being a mobile phone and avoid a wad of cash in your room.

Visas & Insurance

Did you have to apply for a visa? What was the process?

The visa process is probably the most confusing to explain so its best to wait for your application to NUS to be accepted. From there, the portal you applied to the University from will redirect you to a site called 'Solar' which will guide you through the various steps and payments. Remember to have verified identification and a recent photo of yourself before starting.

Did your host university have a mandatory insurance?

They did, and it covers most instances where you might accidentally cause harm to yourself, others or University property. This is not expensive and easily payable through the 'myedurec' portal at the beginning of the semester and they show you early on how to use this resource.

Extra-curricular/Social Activities

What organised activities were available to students? What extra-curricular activities would you recommend to future exchange students?

NUS is a massive university with a broad range of clubs and societies and each residential college have even more 'IGS' (interest groups) to be a part of. I personally played basketball and represented RC4 at the inter-college games and took a weekly beginner Muay Thai kickboxing course with the University team. I found these a really good way to get closer to both locals and other foreigners and was a refreshing contrast to the tense academic environment. There are some niche groups I, unfortunately, didn't get a chance to delve into more that may be of interest to future students, for example, the Coffee Brewers Club and RC4Enviro.

What was the university/ city like?

Very modern, especially toward the Utown residential area. It actually looks like a resort more than an institution in some areas. For instance, there is a gym, infinity pool, food court, pharmacy, bookstore, mailroom and minimart in one building. The city is also unbelievably clean, a couple of times I saw men in uniforms picking up fallen leaves by hand. There is a real push for an environmentally friendly Singapore and many buildings are self-sustaining and/or smart. Transport is reliable with free buses on campus (download the 'NUSBUS' app for iPhone and Android for live updates and stop information and the 'SGBUS' app is great for buses and stops outside campus) and a great metro system. Getting an EZLink transport card and keeping it topped up will ensure you never get stranded in the deceptively small city-state as I embarrassingly did one time.

Any recommendations for things to do, places to visit, places to eat etc.?

Marina Bay is fantastic for going out in the evenings, be sure to see the light show and go for a drink on top of the Marina Bay Sands hotel – expensive but worth it for the view. Eat at hawker centres as food at established restaurants is really expensive. The Science Museum is a great day out you get to play with all the exhibits and Sentosa is a pristine and safe beach day trip. Make sure you go to Little India and Chinatown as well to experience intense pockets of Singapore's complex cultural web and hopefully pick up a bargain on some unashamedly counterfeit apparel. But whatever else you do - always order rice when ordering a curry because in general, it won't come with rice by default like in NZ - this was the worst thing about Singapore, a truly shocking and primitive aspect of the country.

Any tips for future students?

Prioritise making local friends, many of the Canadians who came over largely stuck to the same group of westerners. I celebrated CNY at a Chinese household, before the start of Ramadan at a Muslim household and Easter Sunday at a Catholic Tamil household. Even though the language isn't so much a barrier, culturally Singapore is unbelievably intricate and foreigners who take the time to try understand its nuance are really welcomed.

Overall Experience

Please write one paragraph (or more) about your exchange experience. Please include some photos!

I went on academic motivations but didn't study much at all. I didn't expect to make many close friends either. However I am now saddened to be leaving lifelong friends, passionate professors and perfect weather so soon.

Singapore is an extremely clean and safe place and is easier going than people generally imagine. At first, it was quite frustrating getting modules and visa details sorted, but things settled pretty quickly after that. My suitemates were really friendly and as soon as they moved in made their way into my room to say hello. I got close to two other stray internationals from Morocco and Hong Kong and we ended up spending almost every day together – pulling all-nighters outside the 24hr Starbucks, partying on Sentosa beaches, building apps and software at hackathons and eating every meal together.

My time at NUS was transcendent. A new perspective and an opportunity to be anyone and learn anything. I've made ambitious friends with plans to start a company, my game development Professor sorted two research positions for me at the University and a job for after I graduate and the overseas experience as a whole has afforded a clarity for the future I would not be enjoying had I stayed in Dunedin. I'd highly recommend Singapore for anyone looking for exceptional food, technology and people.

