

Before I left for Monash University in the suburbs of Melbourne, I was incredibly conflicted; should I do an extra year of university in a foreign country and graduate a year later, or should I choose the speedier option and start my post-university life one year earlier? This back-and-forth lasted for several months, ever since the idea of going down under was planted in my head by a friend who was certain he was heading off for the year, and only really came to an end about a week before I was supposed to (potentially) arrive in Melbourne. All my paperwork was filled out and I thought to myself that I would rather regret going than wonder what it would have been like to spend a year in Australia – a place I have always dreamed of visiting but never had the chance to go to. I purchased my tickets and before I knew it, I was on a plane to Hong Kong, where I would soon change flights to go to Melbourne for the first time in my life. Now my year abroad is over, and I am back home in Poland to relax for the summer, with plenty of time to reflect on my time spent in Australia.

My year at Monash University was my most rewarding academically, socially, and regarding personal growth; let me start by delving deeper into the academics of the past year. Counterintuitively, one of the main reasons why I consider the past year to have been so academically rewarding is because I was assured that the grades I would receive would not count towards my degree back at Warwick, giving me the mental comfort of being able to try different modules that I normally would not take. Having studied mathematics for my first two years at Warwick, I only wrote one essay on an academic level, and its structure and assessment is significantly different to a humanities essay. Now, for the first time in my academic career, I took several social science units from history, politics, philosophy, and economics, and I gave writing essays my best shot. Surprisingly, I did a decent job, but more importantly, I have gained experience in doing something other than mathematics and have had to learn how to go to a library, find the right books and book sections, do my research, and then translate all the newfound knowledge onto paper along with my own opinion on the matter at hand. Though my future career is still not certain at this stage of my life, I am sure that most career paths include being able to present arguments in a coherent and logical way – an invaluable skill that I have learned at Monash and that I most likely would not have learned as successfully by only studying pure mathematics (of course, I am not criticizing mathematics, it will always be my favorite subject!), which teaches the logic part of it, but not the presentation of arguments.

Furthermore, besides the skills that social sciences taught me, I could also explore different areas of academia to find what interests me most. Personally, I particularly enjoyed history and politics, and hope to pursue those subjects further in my private time. I have always been a staunch believer that while specializing in a certain field is the optimal way forward in life, it is also hugely important to learn about unrelated subjects in order to get a well-rounded view of the world we live in. Not having to worry all too much about the consequences of taking modules that I am completely unfamiliar with would have on my grades allowed me to pursue these interests at an academic level.

Another important lesson I learned at Monash University is not to get too comfortable or used to one method of teaching. I have found that whereas Warwick puts a great emphasis on independent learning and on exams (particularly in mathematics), Monash University lecturers tend to prefer a more hands-on approach, guiding students every step of the way. Personally, as an independent learner and being used to this independent way of learning where many of Warwick's vast resources are offered optionally, it was very difficult to adjust to the Australian way of being guided, which incidentally also reflected negatively on my final grades. Naturally, many students find it beneficial to feel that extra pressure to attend lectures and seminars (a lack of attendance is penalized in Australia), however I found it to be somewhat of a drawback, especially considering that I have significant troubles focusing for extended periods of time, resulting in many lectures being spent counterproductively on my part. At Warwick, my performance was at its best when I could sit down on my own, pore over the lecture notes and a range of other resources offered by the department, and go through the lengthy process of understanding all the complexities of mathematics through practice and independent research. At Monash University, this approach was impossible and while my exam grades were at a satisfactory level and proved my understanding of the subject, my overall grades suffered as a result of low attendance and badly written assignments. Upon deeper reflection of this situation, I concluded that in life, we rarely get given the perfect circumstances to excel and we need to learn to adapt to different situations, such as this method of teaching. Had I known this earlier, perhaps my approach would have been different. Still, an important lesson was learned, and receiving a range of different approaches to education has made me realize that I need to become more flexible.

Altogether, these are the three main experiences I brought back from Australia when it comes to academia, and though some lessons might be more painful than others, I consider myself to have grown as a result and hope that my return to Warwick will be marked by a refreshed approach to learning.

Of course, a significant part of university life, especially abroad when everything is an adventure, is the social aspect. Both Warwick and Monash are universities with highly diverse student bodies, and so I have had the pleasure of meeting people from a vast range of backgrounds and cultures throughout my academic career thus far. Still, one of the most jarring things was being so deeply embedded into an entirely different culture to what I was used to in the United Kingdom. Australians live life very differently, perhaps due to the remoteness of the continent or perhaps due to the warmer climate (though that is a topic for a separate essay), and as such it is a profound experience to be a part of this different way of life. I found my attitude towards life changing and growing as a result of spending the majority of my time with my new Australian friends: I became more relaxed, spontaneous, and I found myself wearing flip flops (or thongs, as Australians call them!) a lot more than I ever have before. Frequent barbecues became a staple of my diet, trips to the beach were regular, and excursions to Melbourne's bustling city center became the highlight of my weekends in Australia. I found Australians to be incredibly friendly and social, so it was with almost immediate that I felt at home at Monash University, and even Melbourne's fickle weather in the winter could not prevent me from having the time of my life. My accommodation was much larger than anything I saw at Warwick, a towering apartment building with thirteen floors and a basement, featuring a home theater, a music room, three TV sets, a study room, a pool table, a ping pong table, and a foosball table. Needless to say, even the rainy days were spent pleasantly relaxing indoors. Outside, we had picnic tables and a barbecue. Aside from all these ways to spend time with friends, the accommodation heads organized regular dinners, suppers, and group activities to ensure that no one was ever left out and everyone could always meet new people. The only drawback of all of this is that it took a considerable amount of self-discipline not to get too distracted from studies – though when it got to exam season, everyone in the hall collectively buckled down and started revising. I consider myself extremely fortunate to live in a time where I can stay in touch with the friends I made in Australia through social media, because having spent so much time with them, I am certain that they are my friends for life.

In terms of my social life, I would not change a single part of my experience at Monash University.

Lastly, I would like to touch on the subject of growing as a person during my time in Australia. Having lived in the United Kingdom for the first two years of my time at Warwick and being away from home for the first time in my life, I always thought I was an independent adult responsible for my own actions, and that was true to an extent. Still, in the back of my mind I always had the comfort of knowing that my parents were a short, two-hour flight away in Poland, and just a call away if anything happened. There were times when I went home for the weekend and received the most amazing home-made dinners. In Australia, over 15,000 kilometers away from home and an eight-hour time difference from Poland, I was alone. I had my friends, of course, but I knew I had to rely on myself to solve any problems I encountered (and as any human being, I did encounter many problems along the way). I could not go home for the weekend and parents could not help me immediately if something happened, so I learned to trust myself to be able to tackle anything that came my way – especially in a foreign country that I was not familiar with. While there were times that I struggled, I now take great pride in being able to say that I organized my entire year abroad on my own, from applying for my student visa to booking my flights back to Poland, without any help whatsoever, and that with all of these responsibilities resting on my shoulders I still managed to have the best time of my life. I believe that this was a huge step for me towards real adulthood and real independence, and I take comfort in knowing that when my time to graduate from university comes, I will not be thrown in the deep end but will manage to keep everything together. Following my return home, my friends and family often point out that I have changed, that I have become more confident, more mature, and more secure in myself – something that I, too, have noticed in myself and that I am very happy with.

Before I present my final conclusions on my year abroad, I would also like to discuss briefly my summer break which lasted from mid-November to the beginning of March (the seasons in Australia are flipped compare to European seasons). With over three months off, I decided to take advantage of being on the other side of the globe and traveled all over Australia and South-East Asia with a friend. For anyone considering going to Monash University for their year abroad, know that it is the perfect opportunity to travel the world. I have seen more landscapes and learned about more cultures in that one year than I have in

my entire life before. Traveling also grows a person academically by visiting various historic and geographically curious sites, socially by meeting new people along the way and spending time with friends you truly care about, and personally by having to rely on yourself to get from place to place. I cannot emphasize enough how much I recommend that everyone travels somewhere exotic at least once in their life. Going back from Australia to Poland, I visited New Zealand, the United States, and Canada on my own – an experience that I heard is worth having at least once. Traveling alone is one of the most difficult but also one of the most rewarding things I have ever done. I became truly independent and learned how to be comfortable being with only my own thoughts. As an introverted person, I also had to get out of my shell somewhat to meet new people. Traveling has developed from a hobby of mine into a true passion that I wish to pursue for years to come.

This past year spend abroad in Australia was likely the most rewarding year of my life – academically, socially, and regarding personal growth. I now have a lifetime's worth of memories and countless stories to tell my friends and family back home. The decision to go abroad should not be taken lightly because it is not all fun and games and there are difficult times of homesickness and other seemingly impossible to solve problems. Ultimately, though it may not seem like it at first, spending a full year in Australia is a challenge, and as a mathematician, I love a good challenge. By overcoming this massive challenge, I feel that I have become a more whole person. I would not trade my year at Monash University for anything in the world, and I will take the good with the bad any time.