During the Summer of 2015 I went on exchange to Monash University in Melbourne Australia. Second semester in Australia runs from July to October so I gave myself extra time afterwards for more travelling so I came home to Vancouver in December. As a student in SFU’s School of Interactive Arts and Technology I made sure to look for universities that offered similar programs. Monash houses their School of Art, Design, and Architecture at their Caulfield campus, a campus similar to SFU Surrey.

In preparation for exchange I made sure I was organized with all the information and documents that I had to keep track of by creating a designated section of my google drive. Once receiving the Confirmation of Enrollment from Monash I had to begin the process with purchasing flights. A non-stop flight from Vancouver to Melbourne was available, however since it was quite a long flight I decided to break it up and take a stop in Tokyo for a few days. I also booked in my return flight so my overall cost of airfare was about $2600. Other than flights I also purchased my required health insurance and applied for my visa which only took a week to receive. Finding accomodation was the only thing that required more effort. Many other students stayed in hostels during their first 2 weeks in Melbourne while going on inspections and looking for places to live if they weren’t already going to live on campus in the residences. I actually wanted to avoid that so instead of looking at resources such as flatmates.com.au or gumtree, I found a school Facebook group called Monash Stalkerspace where students would sometimes advertise spaces in their sharehouses. One quick skype call and I already had accommodation set and a ride from the airport for when I arrived.

I brought a big piece of luggage, a carry on sized suitcase, and my backpack with me. There are many resources online that will compile a list of things to bring for a trip, and that’s mainly what I used when deciding what to bring. The only issue I had was finding clothes that would be suitable for the hot weather in Australia which I eventually had to purchase myself. I also opened a bank account with Commonwealth Bank online before I left. They have a specific student account available for exchange students which was very handy. Melbourne is a fairly expensive city much like Vancouver so I honestly didn’t see a big difference in the cost of living. All forms of payment are also accepted throughout the country, I never had any money problems while in Australia.

When I arrived my roommates came to pick me up and I had about a week to settle in before orientation. I lived with 4 other Monash students in a sharehouse about 10 minutes away from the Clayton and Caulfield campuses. My roommates were amazing and super friendly, we never had any problems and they always included me with their friends as well. I actually spent a lot of time with locals because of them. Living off campus also saved me a lot of money. The house itself was fine, but nobody other than
college students would consider living in it, so we were only paying $400 a month for it plus utilities. Though school itself was really great. I was happy that I attended orientation, they definitely helped with answering many of the questions I had and provided an opportunity for me to meet other students. It’s amazing how much people can bond over a free pancake breakfast and a free lunch.

Academically, studying in Australia is similar to the way education is structured in Canada. I was lucky enough to get into classes that let me still study in my field, but also let me branch out. The SIAT-esque courses that I took were Illustration as Design, Advertising Design, and 3D modelling. All of which are types of courses that SFU currently doesn’t offer. I also took an introductory course to marketing to try something new. Projects and assignments are handed out weekly, as well as quizzes and finals exams. However their grading system is different. They break it down between High Distinction (80-100), Distinction (70 - 79), Credit (60 -69), Pass (50 - 59), Near Pass (45 - 49) and Fail (0 - 49). Schedules are structured the same way, although the courses I took were all labs or studios, but many others do have lectures that need to be attended. With only 12 weeks of class I felt like the time really flew by. I found myself to be much less stressed out compared to a semester at home. There is a much more lax environment which I found was very helpful and let me also focus on exploring and seeing the city as well as studying.

One of the first trips I took was to the Twelve Apostles along the Great Ocean Road, a must see. I wouldn't say there are a lot of options for day trips around Melbourne but there is Phillip Island which is also a popular destination. My roommates would often go camping on weekends so if you're outdoorsy unlike me, there are definitely things to do. In terms of extra-curricular activities, I didn’t participate in much. There are always events being held on campus, free food, performances, petting zoos, etc so there was enough to do. Downtown Melbourne however (aka the CBD) is amazing and I loved spending time in the city. People often describe Melbourne as the more cultural, vibrant, and hipsterly sibling to Sydney. Cafe’s everywhere, amazing food, great bars and great views along the Yarra river. I would say it reminds me most of Gastown in Vancouver.

I also did get to see other parts of Australia. During orientation they mentioned a trip hosted by Extreme Adventures called One Fish Two Fish. A 9 day trip for 58 international university students that takes you from Brisbane all the way up the coast Cairns, an absolutely amazing trip not only for sightseeing, but also partying. I would say that this trip, even though it was expensive, was worth every penny and was basically the best thing I had ever done in my life. I made friends for life on this trip I will always cherish my memories from that one week. They also hosted a weekend trip
to Sydney during halloween. Now halloween is not popular in Australia yet, but we had about 120 international university students from all around Australia walking around downtown Sydney in decked out in halloween costumes. People were taking photos of us, and it was great. I wish I had more time in Sydney but we managed to see all the sights of the city and I truly loved it and hope to visit again.

Exchange is not only meant for studying abroad. Its for growing as a person, and I would say that I definitely came back to Canada as a different person. In the span of 5 months I had travelled to Tokyo, throughout Australia, Fiji, and New Zealand. I made friends for life, I learned new approaches, perspectives, and branches of design, I even became vegetarian and got a tattoo. You can’t come out of an experience like this without it changing you. For once in my life I had to take care of myself and be independant. I never realised how much you have to do just to live, I had to track my budget and spending, and grocery shopping every week! Not to mention time management and even putting yourself out there into uncomfortable situations because you want to meet people and make friends. However the one thing I wish I had known before I left was how expensive alcohol is and how often I would be drinking it, that is something I definitely didn’t budget for.
Caulfield Campus
A shot from Flinders Street Station of St. Paul's Cathedral and a city tram going by.
Feeding a baby wallaby at the Moonlit Sanctuary
Brighton Beach Bathing Boxes