

Study Abroad Report 2018/2019 – Nagoya (Japan) – James Boyle

As I write this I have just returned from studying abroad at Nagoya University in Japan under the NUPACE¹ programme. In what follows I shall attempt, in an inevitably somewhat mish-mash fashion, to summarise my experience over the last year and provide some information that could be useful to anyone considering studying in Japan.

Application

The study abroad team and NUPACE website will no doubt be able to provide you with more detailed information, but as I remember the application process was fairly simple. It mostly involved an online application, consisting of basic details about yourself as well as a short report on why you want to study at Nagoya University, and sending off a couple of documents such as a passport photocopy. The only two bits which I remember being a bit of a hassle were acquiring an official note of health, which required a trip to the Warwick campus clinic, and acquiring a student visa. Nagoya University will send you all the required documents, but getting the visa did require two trips to the Japanese embassy, which depending on how close you live to either London (or I think there may be a branch in Edinburgh) could be a bit of a pain.

Arrival in Japan

Entering Japan is fairly simple. Before going you'll be sent a "certificate of eligibility" by your university, and all you need to do is present that and your passport and visa at immigration and they'll issue you with a residence card and you're free to enter the country. Just be aware that you may, as I did, have to wait quite a while, as in a couple of hours, at the airport.

After you arrive at Nagoya, there are about two weeks of orientation activities. While this may sound like quite a long time, I personally thought it was a good idea. For one, there are quite a lot of things you'll need to do to prepare for the year, such as officially registering your residence in Japan or setting up health insurance, and although none of these are individually that difficult, in Japan these things do have a way of taking a very long time². These two weeks are also a good opportunity to focus on setting up your life, e.g. buying household appliances etc', exploring Nagoya and the local area, getting used to life in Japan, and getting to know your fellow international students, without having to worry about academic work. While the orientation is spread out over two weeks, you'll have many days and half-days where you're free to do whatever you want, so this is a good time to as mentioned above, explore Nagoya and the surrounding area, and get to know your fellow students. During this time, various student groups run quite a few activities aimed at international students, such as a bazaar where you can buy things like cutlery or rice cookers on the cheap, welcome parties, or trips to local supermarkets, restaurants etc'.

Everyday Life

In the broad scheme of things, everyday life is not too different in Japan to in the UK, but there are definitely some differences which are worth noting. For one, prepare to have all your norms about what is and what is not expensive completely destroyed. For example, fruit and veg and other groceries are generally quite expensive, but eating out is a lot cheaper, so I ended up eating out a lot more and cooking for myself a lot less. Nagoya University also has plenty of very affordable cafeterias, so I and my friends would often have lunch there.

¹ Nagoya University Programme for Academic and Cultural Exchange, in case it wasn't obvious...

² Prepare for many hours of waiting at the ward office

If it's your thing, Japan also has plenty of options for going out. The usual place we would go for food and drink would be an *izakaya*, which are basically the Japanese equivalent of pubs (though again quite a bit cheaper). Japan also has bars and clubs which are broadly similar to those in the UK. One more unique thing Japan does have though is Karaoke. Unlike in the UK, where Karaoke usually consists of embarrassing yourself in front of a bunch of strangers, in Japan you and your friends get a room just to yourselves and a TV with microphones and an impressively wide selection of both Japanese and western songs. As you're only embarrassing yourself in front of your friends, I found it to be a much funner experience, and definitely worth trying once or twice.

One other notable difference is the prevalence of cash. In Japan there are still many places which only accept cash. Even the bank account I applied for through the university didn't even give me a debit card, only a cash card I could use to withdraw cash from ATMs. To pay my bills, I had to go to the convenience store and pay in cash. As such, I would recommend you always keep a substantial amount of cash on you.

This prevalence of cash is an example of another notable difference between Japan and the UK which is the preference for physical paper as opposed to anything online. Pretty much all admin procedures are done by filling out and handing physical paper forms. As a result of this, you will quickly accumulate vast amounts of paper related to various official procedures such as health insurance receipts, I would recommend that early on you safely store these, as you will occasionally need some of these and it can be a real pain if you don't have it.

Food

As a vital component of one of the seven life processes, and an essential part of daily life, what one eats is very important, and one may be wondering about the food in Japan. Luckily, I found the food in Japan to be absolutely fantastic. From Tonkotsu Ramen to Misokatsu to Takoyaki, there is a vast array of new and exciting food to be found in Japan, and pretty much all of it is delicious. Of course, as one may expect, culinary preferences are quite different in the land of the rising sun, and in particular if you want to cook for yourself the sort of ingredients you are able to find affordably do differ quite significantly. Also, if you are vegetarian or vegan you do have to be careful. While you certainly can eat vegetarian/vegan in Japan, especially when eating out your options will be quite limited, though the prevalence of such options is growing, and you do have to watch out for the occasional case in which in what looks like a vegetarian/vegan dish the carrots or something have been cooked in a meat broth. Thankfully one place that was pretty decent for vegetarian options was the main university cafeteria, so on a daily basis you shouldn't run into too much trouble.

Accommodation

Although you don't technically have to, pretty much all international students choose to live in one of the student dorms provided by the university. The price and quality does vary by dorm, but in general they were all a lot cheaper than in the UK, although they were correspondingly a little more spartan (the "kitchen" I had in my room was pretty much the size of my parents' TV). Overall I was satisfied with my living arrangements, though one thing I would say is that though the price did vary quite considerably across the different dorms, I found that the quality did not actually vary too much, so I would recommend applying for one of the cheaper dorms – you'll save a lot of money without that much loss (in fact, I got put in the most expensive dorm but looking at my friends' rooms thought that some of the cheaper dorms were abjectly better!).

Classes and University Life

There are quite a wide variety of classes taught in English you are able to take at Nagoya University. Of course there are the Japanese Language courses (more on these later), but there are also many courses on a variety of subjects run under the NUPACE programme. Nagoya University also runs many entire degrees all taught in English in a variety of subjects under the so called "G30 programme", and providing they meet any academic pre-requisites, NUPACE students are free to take any of these as well. This leads to a very wide variety of modules one can take, so you shouldn't have too much trouble finding classes to collect the required amount of credits. Unfortunately though, Maths is not one of the subjects in the G30 programme, so there are really only one or two maths classes per term taught in English that would be suitable for a Warwick student who has completed two or three years of a maths degree, so you will likely have to either take a ridiculous amount of Japanese courses, or take some classes from some new subject in order to obtain the required amount of credits³. Of course, this is also an opportunity to study something outside the usual wheelhouse, and indeed I found many of the non-maths, non-Japanese courses I took very rewarding.

From my own experience, one course I took that I found particularly rewarding was a first-term course entitled "A Multicultural Approach to Contemporary Issues". While the title and course description do make it sound incredibly boring, it was actually a super interesting class studying many aspects of Japanese culture. Being targeted at the general international student, it was also a very accessible introduction to the field of culture studies for someone like myself who hadn't done anything like it before. Other courses I would recommend include one called "Fundamentals of Earth Science", a basic but interesting course with a good teacher, and a course in the second term on Japanese literature. I know the word "literature" may give many a maths student a mini heart attack, and I too was trepidacious about the class at first, but the teacher was very good and the content was surprisingly interesting. For maths courses, there is a "Perspectives in Mathematical Sciences" course that runs each term which is at about the right level, though the topics covered each term do change so just check to make sure you're not signing up for something you don't want to study. There's also a "Special Mathematics Lecture" course run under the G30 science programme each term. Again the topic changes each term but the teacher is super enthusiastic and generally picks interesting topics.

As for the classes themselves, I found them not to be too different. Lecture is the dominant style of teaching, and I found in particular the maths classes to be pretty much identical in format to those at Warwick. The only big difference was that the classes were 90 minutes in length as opposed to 50 minutes. The benefit of this is that it does allow teachers to go more in depth and cover more in a single lesson, however I must admit I never quite became able to properly concentrate for 90 minutes at a time, and after an hour or so I would sometimes find myself itching to leave and switch to studying another topic.

Japanese

Of course one class that pretty much all international students end up taking is Japanese language class. The NUPACE Japanese language programme is split into 8 levels: 3 elementary levels, 3 intermediate levels, and 2 advanced levels, each of which consists of 5 classes a week, though for levels 4 and above these are split into groups of 2, 2 and 1, focusing on speaking and listening, reading and writing, and grammar respectively. In addition to this NUPACE students can also enroll in the G30 Academic "Listening & Speaking" and "Reading & Writing" Japanese courses, which are

³ or if you are really averse to any non-maths course, you could take the G30 science programme's equivalent of Analysis 1 if you fancy some boring but easy credits

offered at intermediate and advanced levels, as well as Kanji (Chinese characters used in Japanese) courses which are split into 5 levels which go from zero to all approximately 2000 Kanji. Before going to Japan, I had studied Japanese for one year at Warwick, I took the Beginners Accelerated Japanese Course in my second year, and at Nagoya I took the level 3 course in my first term, and a mixture of courses from the level 4 and 5 NUPACE courses, the level 3 Kanji course, and the lower intermediate Academic Speaking & Listening course in my second term. Overall I found these courses very useful, the teachers were all very nice and clearly a lot of thought had been put into what was covered in each course. My only complaint was that they did take a lot of time; this is particularly true of the first 3 levels, where you have to attend class every day. In the levels above you have the choice to only attend some of them so this was better.

Of course whoever is reading this may be incredibly fluent in Japanese, in which case you may ignore the rest of this paragraph, but they may also be concerned, as I was before I came, about how easy it is to get around Japan with no or very limited Japanese. I arrived in Japan with what I would characterise as very limited Japanese and many of my friends arrived speaking no Japanese whatsoever. Thankfully, I found Japan relatively easy to get around with only English. Certainly almost all signs related to navigation, e.g. at train stations, have English translations, and pretty much everything you'll be given by the university comes in English. The only big thing that comes exclusively in Japanese are the official forms from the city council related to things like your official registration of your residence etc'. Thankfully, there'll be about 200 of you filling in these forms when you arrive, so it's easy enough to find someone who knows what to do, and the NUPACE staff will guide you beforehand in how to do the necessary procedures. In general I found the NUPACE office very helpful whenever I received some random letter from the council full of Japanese I didn't understand.

Settling In

Before going to Japan, I had never consecutively spent more than two weeks in another country, and Coventry is a mere 4 hour drive from my hometown, so the question of how I'd settle in for year in a country the other side of the world where I knew no-one was one I was a bit concerned about. Thankfully, when I arrived there were about 200 people with the exact same problem. The fact that pretty much all international students know almost no-one does mean that everyone is eager to make friends, and I found that the way the NUPACE programme was set up quite conducive to doing so. There were many opportunities to meet my fellow students, and as discussed before the fact that we had 2 weeks after arrival before we had to worry about academic issues was very helpful. I should also note that the NUPACE office were very helpful for whenever I had any questions about what to do.

Of course, that's not to say I found the whole settling in experience problem free. Even though one may quickly make many friends, one should not underestimate the lack of contact with anyone you've known for more than a couple of weeks. While of course this is a not really something one can avoid, it's worth being aware of beforehand I think.

Travelling

One of the main attractions of studying abroad is travelling round the country you are studying in. In this regard, I found Japan to be a very convenient country to travel around as a student. The public transport network in Japan is to be frank a marvel, trains and buses in particular are surprisingly extensive, incredibly punctual and reliable (especially to someone like me who is used to *shudder*

Southern Rail) and not all that expensive. I spent in total about 2 months travelling solo around Japan just using public transport and found it perfectly serviceable.

With regards to travelling, Nagoya is also particularly well located. Being almost bang in the middle of Japan and with a major train station and airport, nowhere in Japan is particularly far away, and in particular the cultural and culinary hubs of Kyoto and Osaka are a mere hour or two away by train or bus. There are also many interesting day trips from Nagoya, such as Ise Shrine, officially the most important shrine in Japan, or the Kiso valley, a tree filled gorge absolutely worth visiting in autumn.

As for travelling outside of Japan, I can't say it did this at all myself, but many of my friends went to places like China or Korea (one even went to Mongolia!), and seemed to be able to do so without too much trouble.

Anyhow, this brings us to the end of my report. While I'm sure there are many things I've forgotten to write about here, I hope it has been useful. If you have any questions at all regarding studying in Japan, feel free to send me an email at j.boyle.1@warwick.ac.uk.