

My Year Abroad at the University of Tokyo

Introduction

Studying abroad was never an intention of mine going into Warwick – in fact, I only started thinking about it when I noticed that the email about the possibility of it included Japanese universities. Prior to Warwick, I had self-studied Japanese for about 8 months (mainly Kanji, which has been super useful for vocabulary and general comprehension), and then at Warwick took the Japanese Level 2 & 3 classes. That is to say that when I left for Japan, I already had a fairly solid foundation of the language and would definitely recommend learning some before leaving as it will definitely enhance your experience – however, this is by no means a necessity. Many (or even most) of the exchange students on my program had little to no Japanese experience, and they still had an amazing year.

My year was spent at the University of Tokyo (UTokyo) as part of their USTEP program. For me, the main aims of my year abroad were to engage with the Japanese culture I found so interesting, and to improve my Japanese language skills. I can safely say both these aims were comfortably achieved and would greatly recommend studying abroad for anyone with similar (or different) interests in it. This report will go over a few details related to my time in Tokyo that I think people applying for UTokyo may find interesting or useful.

Living (Accommodation, Money, Food)

I was assigned to Komaba International Lodge (my first choice), which I believe is by far the best university accommodation provided by UTokyo, judging from others' experiences. It is an 8-minute walk from Komaba campus, where all of my classes were held; has ideal facilities (en suite bathroom, kitchen); and is right by Komaba-todaimae station, two stops from the Shibuya area. Although it is more expensive than the other options, at ¥54,400/~£400 per month, when factoring in travel from other accommodations I believe it comes out at around the same price, without the hour long commute from Mitaka dorms (which is the worst when you have classes at 8:30). Another accommodation possibility is living in a share house, which may give you more exposure to Japanese speakers, at the cost of likely being further from campus and slightly isolated from other exchange students. Although you can rent bedding from the dorm, I would absolutely recommend buying your own as it is quite expensive to rent. I simply ordered mine off Amazon for ~¥3000/£20 (a full futon set) and brought my own sheets and duvet/pillow covers from home.



My room in Komaba International Lodge

In the immediate area there are a few food places, but I mostly defaulted to going to the nearby 7-Eleven convenience store – open 24/7 and plenty of genuinely good food options. The university cafeteria is also really good quality and value, and the university co-op has options such as *bento* (Japanese lunch box meals) and *onigiri*. If you want to venture out a little more you can walk or take a train to Shibuya or Shimokitazawa, both just two stops away, where there is a much wider range



Exchange students at Torikizoku

of options available. A few places I would recommend in Shibuya are Uobei Sushi (conveyor belt, cheap but pretty touristy), 365 Izakaya (a gyoza bar), and Torikizoku (a chicken skewer chain that you can find almost anywhere, with a pub-like atmosphere). I think I cooked for myself less than a dozen times, as eating out is cheaper than the UK and cooking is more expensive, so the far lessened price disparity

In terms of money, I never got a part-time job as I could cover everything with my savings and the amazing JASSO scholarship given by the Japanese government of ¥80,000/~£650 per month. I know some people who taught English in their free time, but I would absolutely recommend applying for JASSO – I knew some people who missed the application deadline and having to make up the ~£6000 from their own pockets was super rough. Remember that JASSO won't come until the end of the first month, so be sure to bring enough money with you to get you through until then.

Lectures

All of my lectures were on Komaba campus, right by my accommodation, which was super convenient, although the campus itself looks somewhat run down in places. All classes are 1hr45mins long, with the earliest being at 8:30am, and you are required to take at least 6 classes a week. The majority of my classes were on Japanese language, for which they can teach from absolute beginner level to business level Japanese. They have a core module called 'Integrated Japanese' which is 3 classes a week, and a number of more specialised 'Applied Japanese' modules that you can take depending on your Japanese level, which is assessed at the beginning of the year. Having completed Warwick's level 3 course, I was placed into UTokyo's level 4 class, but another Warwick student from the same class was placed in level 3, so I believe the placement test is quite largely dependent on your kanji knowledge – indeed, the content of the integrated classes seemed very similar between levels 3-5, with kanji and vocab being the main difference. They also have a wide variety of lectures in English, with topics ranging from 'Bioethics' to 'Japanese Media' to 'International Conflicts'. Integrated Japanese was definitely the most useful module but required a lot more work than any of the other modules, especially the ones taught in English. Nonetheless, if you want to improve your Japanese then I would definitely recommend taking it, as I saw very clear improvement over the year thanks to it. In terms of workplaces, the library has a fair number of desks you can work at, but I personally preferred the Globalisation Office, as it has large tables you can work at in a group with people (if you can get a seat) and a sociable yet quiet atmosphere.



Komaba Campus during Sakura season

It is possible for USTEP students to take modules on the main Hongo campus, but given the distance from the accommodations (~1hr from Komaba, 2hrs from Mitaka), unless there is a specific module you want to take all I would recommend taking all classes on Komaba for the convenience and savings on travel. Additionally, you can only take classes in Japanese if you have passed the JLPT N1 exam. Because of this, I ended up taking no maths modules for the entire year, although I believe

there may have been some available for me on Hongo campus. I believe this made the year a lot less stressful for me and meant I could focus a lot more on Japanese, but I would definitely recommend taking along some lecture notes and looking them over every now and then to make sure you don't forget everything.

Extracurricular

The Japanese equivalent of societies are distinctly split into Clubs and Circles. Clubs are the more serious societies, with compulsory practice sessions multiple times a week, whereas circles are more socially based. For example, in the second term I joined the Flute Circle (フルート同好会), which met every Wednesday (although attendance was by no means mandatory), as well as society meals. The meal I attended was at Nabe-zou, which is a Japanese hotpot restaurant, and we had all



A view from near Kawaguchi Lake

you can eat for a discounted price. Societies will all have their own different entrance fees – the Flute Circle's was ¥3000 (a discounted price as I was a 'first year'), but I think this is quite low relative to others. We also had a *Gasshuku* (合宿), which can roughly be translated as a training camp, which was a weekend away at a villa near Mt. Fuji, with a bunch of planned activities and a mini concert, where everyone performed a piece in groups that they had been learning for the weekend. Highlights included a visit to Kawaguchi Lake and the amazing view of Mt Fuji, Kawaguchiko Music Forest Museum, and the delicious

home-made Japanese food served at the villa. The *gasshuku* was quite expensive at ¥13000/£100, but I think it was definitely worth it for the unique Japanese experience, especially given how packed the schedule was. I also briefly joined the Tetris Circle, formally known as the Tetris Research Group (東京大学テトリス研究会), which had no entrance fee and regularly organised trips to arcades to use the Tetris machines there.

On the other side, I had a friend who joined the Badminton Club, which seemed extremely intensive. Every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday they had compulsory 4-hour practice, as well as weekend tournaments every month or so that members had to attend, even if they weren't participating to cheer on their clubmates. Personally, the time commitment was far too much for me to want to participate, but they said they wanted to do it to get the proper Japanese club experience, as that kind of intensity isn't something found in the UK societies.

If you can't speak Japanese then the societies available to you become more limited, however there are definitely still options, as a lot of Japanese people (especially UTokyo students) will appreciate the opportunity to practise their English. However, if you are at or near conversational level in Japanese then joining a society can be a really effective way to force yourself into speaking situations and improve your conversation skills, while having an enjoyable experience all the while.

Being in Tokyo, there are plenty of social opportunities for you outside of university. For example, language exchange meetups are a great way to meet both Japanese people and foreigners looking to learn Japanese. I only went to one of these, but on that single occasion I met multiple Japanese people that I became good friends with. I also regularly attended video game tournaments,

which was a good way for me to meet and easily bond with Japanese and foreign people, so I would recommend looking into that if it's something you're interested in.

When with friends, one of the most common things we would do is go to Karaoke booths, which are everywhere in Japan. Shibuya has loads (I recommend Rainbow Karaoke), but are more expensive than other areas, so if you're at the lodge I would recommend Mokomoko in Shimokitazawa, which is a really nice place with an all-you-can-use chocolate fountain (although no alcohol allowed). All Karaoke places have both Japanese and English songs, so even if you don't know any Japanese you can still go and partake – indeed, most of my Karaoke sessions consisted almost entirely of English songs. If you're into drinking, Strong Zero's are Japan's cheapest and fastest way of getting drunk, available at all convenience stores, and Shibuya has a quite a few clubs you can go to (although I'm told the experience and price is worse than in the UK).



Karaoke (前前前世, from 君の名は)

Travels

During the term you may find your schedule is quite packed with classes and homework, but there are definitely still opportunities to explore. There are endless amounts of things to do in Tokyo, and you can spend a day getting lost in any of its areas. There are plenty of potential day or weekend trips from Tokyo, some of favourites being hiking up Mt. Takao, and a day trip to Nikko (although staying the night is recommended). Japan also has a number of national holidays, including the weeklong Golden Week in May, so there are chances throughout the term.



Hokkaido Snow Festival

with intricate ice sculptures and slides built out of snow (and the temperature went as low as -12°C).

However, in between the two terms there is a 2.5-month holiday (their summer holiday equivalent) which gives the perfect opportunity to explore Japan, or even nearby countries. Over this period, I visited the southern Kansai region (Hiroshima, Kyoto, Osaka etc), the northern Hokkaido and Tohoku regions (Sapporo, Hakodate, Aomori, Sendai), and even took a short trip to Seoul, Korea. You continue to receive JASSO payments for this entire time, and there are so many amazing places in Japan you can visit. I went to Hokkaido during the annual snow festival, where there were theme park-like areas set up

Downsides

Culture shock and homesickness are very real things that, especially in a country as far away and as culturally unique as Japan, can be very taxing during one's year abroad. Personally, I don't think I felt either of these things especially strongly, but by the end I was definitely getting irritated at some of the smaller things in Japan (mainly the summer heat). Nonetheless, you can prepare for and work through these things to maximise your experience.

The other downside is the lack of exposure to Japanese people. Living in international dorms and having classes only with other exchange students, there are a limited number of opportunities to practise Japanese unless you go out of your way. Fortunately, this can be largely avoided if you're proactive enough to do things such as join societies or go to language exchange meetups.

Miscellaneous Advice

I think most things are quite natural or obvious, but there are a few things that are either essential or not necessarily clear from the get-go. First of all, make sure you don't miss your monthly signing for your JASSO payment, or you won't get it for the month. I recommend going on the first possible day, so if you forget that day it doesn't matter. There was one time when I barely remembered it as a passing thought on the last possible day, which would have been disastrous if I had missed it. With Integrated Japanese, you get a long list of vocab every chapter, and I would recommend doing a bit of work towards learning them steadily over the time you're doing the chapter in class, rather than trying to cram when the end-of-chapter quiz approaches, as a bit of work each day goes extremely far. I would recommend getting your phone sorted out beforehand – I used SakuraMobile and got a data-only SIM card, which was waiting for me at the airport when I arrived. It was super easy to set up and I had no problems for the entire year, and when I applied (in April) they had a spring campaign ongoing for ¥10000/~£70 off. When you get there, Don Quixote (*donki*) is a huge discount store where you can get all the essentials and more. There's one in Shibuya and can also be found in most areas. Daiso, a ¥100 store, is another good place to look for these – there's one in Shibuya and two (!) in Shimokitazawa.

Less important things but things I wish I had done, include getting the loyalty/gift cards/apps for places you expect to visit again. Loads of places in Japan have them, including convenience stores and chains like McDonalds, and over time the saving can really add up. Also, if you make a Line Pay account, you can link it to your JASSO bank account and get a debit card to go with it, which is really convenient as you are only given a cash card from JASSO. While a lot of places in Japan still only accept cash (for some unknown reasons), it can be used at a lot of places including convenience stores, and you can often win cash back or just free money sometimes. Additionally, I would recommend investing in a good camera. Even if it's a few hundred pounds more, it can make a massive difference in quality, so if you're planning to take lots of photos then definitely look it.



Shinsekai, in Osaka

Closing Words

I hope this report helps people gain an insight into what a year at Tokyo might look like, and some of the things one might expect. I truly believe this was the best year of my life, and I wouldn't trade the experiences and relationships I gained from it for the world. If you're considering Japan or any study abroad program, I would highly recommend applying for this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.