

I will preface this report with two things. Firstly by saying that the programme which I was on (AIKOM) now ceases to exist and future exchanges will probably be on the USTEP programme. This most likely means that if you do decide to take part in an exchange to the University of Tokyo your experiences will vary, but I hope that this report will serve as a good baseline on what to expect. Secondly some information about myself to help put this report into perspective. I am of Chinese origin and moved to the UK when I was 11. I went to Japan after the second year of my 3-year course. I studied Japanese both by myself and at Warwick so I got 82% in Japanese 2 in year 1, 90% in Japanese 4 in year 2 and passed the JLPT N2 in the summer of my second year. I'm somewhat introverted and usually say very little.

## Academics

The University of Tokyo is regarded very highly both domestically and in Asia and as a result they are able to invite many great professors from out of the university to do interesting courses.

The professor for my Japanese language class once said that life is like multiplication – instead of striving to become the best 1% in one thing, it is much easier to become the top 10% in two things, which puts you in the top 1% overall, and it would work out the same way. I think that this year abroad opportunity should be used for exactly that – to try something new and do well in something that isn't maths. I will be honest and say that although maths modules are offered here, they aren't easily accessible to exchange students so if that was your main goal of coming here, re-evaluate your options now.

It is a requirement for exchange students to acquire 12 credits per semester (most classes give you 2 credits upon completion) and the JLPT N1 is technically required in order to take lectures given in Japanese<sup>1</sup>. Normally 2 credits means one 105 minutes per week for the semester but there are also intensive classes that run for short periods of time (e.g. 1 week) that allow you to get some credits out of the way and take some load off the semester in a short period of time.



Zao Fox Village, Miyagi

The courses available in English are relatively limited and generally have a humanities theme spanning areas like international relations, history, etc. This means that you may end up having to take classes not out of interest but purely because you need the credits. The good thing is that you don't really need any prior knowledge for most of the classes and should do just fine if you put the work in.

A wide range of Japanese classes are offered by the university and the quality can depend heavily on the teacher. You take a test at the beginning of the year to put you into one of six levels based on your Japanese ability and then you would take classes corresponding to your level. There are two types of courses. The integrated courses which are your 4/6 credits, standard, getting through a textbook kind



PPAP Trump, Hokkaido Snow Festival

<sup>1</sup> Simply walking into the class and not taking it for credit is absolutely fine though.

of classes and I would strongly recommend everyone to take these unless if you really know what you're doing. The applied modules are 2 credits each, have a bit more variety and usually focus on a single topic. For example I took a class where we did presentations on news articles we find by ourselves, one where we read through a novel together and one that teaches us business Japanese through which we had the opportunity to interview actual employees.

### Extra-curricular activities

Most of the extra-curricular activities will be provided by things called circles which is a rough equivalent to our societies. There's basically a circle for everything, from sports to traditional cultural things like tea ceremony to... the 'oranges appreciating club'. They hand out free oranges on campus sometimes. I highly recommend joining one or even a few of these if you have the time and the ability to communicate in Japanese since it's a great way, and probably one of the only organic ways for an exchange student, to meet people with similar interests.

There's two school festivals in the year when all the classes put up stalls to sell food and most circles show off their activities and people from outside the university come too. Although most foods are expensive the atmosphere was great. Taking part in running a stall was also a good experience, from preparations leading up to the event to the cleaning up afterwards, it was exhausting but rewarding.

Then there's something called Gasshuku (camp?). I have no idea what this is called in English or if the concept even exists but it's basically when a group of people stay over at a rather remote place for a few nights to focus on practising something and to have fun. For us this would mean travelling with the circle to do whatever the activity of the circle is for a few days and when we weren't, we were running around creaming people in the face and throwing water balloons around. It's a great way to get to know people better since you're with them 24/7 and it was a lot of fun.



Me rehearsing for the May Festival at my tea ceremony circle



Kusatsu hotspring, Gunma

### Money

Cost of living is basically the same as it is in the UK except fruits and vegetables are prohibitively expensive. Rent is also very cheap which I discuss further in the Accommodation section below.

JASSO does give us 80,000 JPY per month which covered pretty much everything for me during term time. The JASSO scholarship comes really late each month and this is especially important for when you first arrive, so make sure you bring enough cash with you to last at least a month.

You also have to sign for the scholarship each month and if you miss the signing dates there's a chance they might refuse to give you the money for that month.

There are a lot of complaints about how you can only pay for things with cash in Japan and although somewhat true I found that it had little impact on my daily life. All the supermarkets and department stores which I've been to took cards just fine. The IC cards (Suica or Pasma in Tokyo) can be used like a contactless in a lot of places like convenient stores or even some vending machines.

### **Part-time Job**

I never got one myself so I will attempt to outline the basics. Nearly all local students do it to cover their expenses and to expand their social network apparently. I opted not to get one but it sounds like an interesting experience nonetheless. There's a lot of vacancies everywhere ranging from teaching English to working at convenient stores so it shouldn't be too hard to find something you like. If you find yourself having trouble with money or too much time on your hands, this might be a good option.



Trains. With stoves.  
Stove trains., Aomori

### **Accommodation**

We were placed in the Mitaka dorm. It was a very interesting experience. I'll list the positives and negatives separately so first for the positives.

- It's very cheap – after accounting for utilities it comes out to be around 15,000 JPY per month. This is about the same as about half a week's worth of rent at Bluebell.
- It's an international students' dorm, meaning that there are a lot of foreign students and local students who chose to live there to meet foreign students. Even if you can't speak any Japanese you are very likely to be able to make some friends. There's events like parties and movie nights.
- There's a common hall where there's a lot of open space for activities like badminton and table tennis and there's even a small pool table. Pianos, mangas, air-conditioned, Wi-Fi. This is also where they store your parcels if you aren't in when they try to deliver it – much better than walking to westwood.

Now onto the negatives.

- It's in the middle of nowhere. You can connect all the stations around the dorm with lines to form a circle and at the centre of that circle lies our Mitaka dorm. It takes me about an hour to get to the Komaba campus and first period starts at 8:30 so it can be a struggle to get in on time.
- There's all sorts of bugs. I stayed in building F which has a mini jungle next to it which lead to all sorts of bugs getting into my room. You can open the window one day and a cockroach just falls into the room from somewhere. Or you might open the window one day and find a lizard chilling in the frame. Or maybe you don't even need to do anything and ants will come

in through the ventilator(I was on the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor.....). At least the jumping spiders were somewhat cute and I like mantises so those weren't a problem for me.

- The dorm doesn't actually supply you with things like fridges and microwaves. When people leave the dorm they leave their fridges and other electrical appliances in the common hall so new students can pick them up and use them. The problem is that there might not be any left for you when you get there.

## Travelling

Being in Tokyo means you are at the centre of basically everything so it's very easy and cheap to get around to places. Having long semesters with few breaks and long holidays means that it's probably more practical to do long trips during the holidays rather than short trips during the semester. Lugging around a suitcase and staying at guest houses for weeks at a time was probably one of the best experiences of my life. There aren't many places at which you can just sit around and talk to strangers like you can do at a guest house – and I've met many friendly people by doing this, some even paid for my food after we went out to eat together.



The clear water of Aka Island, Okinawa

There are coin lockers, lockers that you pay for with coins, at all the stations I've been to so that you don't have to carry everything all the time.

If you can't speak Japanese you might find it slightly harder to get around, but all the places which I have been to have been nothing but nice and accommodating to people who couldn't speak Japanese.



Odori-don, freshly prepared squid that 'dances' when you pour soy sauce over it, Hokkaido

## Food

Japanese food is generally delicious and eating out is relatively cheap with a lot of options, many of which are open 24 hours. Even without going to restaurants, there are convenient stores within a 5-minutes walk from any point in Tokyo and every single one of them sells food. One could easily go the whole year without cooking a single meal by themselves. The canteen on campus is decent but at lunch time it gets extremely crowded so eating with friends may be difficult.

## Downsides?

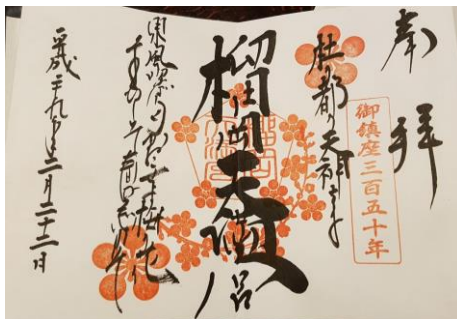
Throughout the whole year I couldn't help but feel very sheltered and unaware of a lot of the opportunities available to us. If you aren't adventurous and out to discover things to do by yourself you may find yourself extremely bored.

There's valuable Japanese lessons offered by the university but most people just speak Chinese or English in the classrooms. There's events that help local and exchange students meet, but the language barrier means that eventually exchange students just clump together in small groups. I doubt that most exchange students are aware that there exist two student common buildings on Komaba campus and most people don't even join a circle. I knew someone who sat in the dorm all day watching TV dramas because they didn't have anything else to do. These were some of my own sentiments.

Objectively Japan is physically far from home and completely different culturally. A lot of people missed home but couldn't go back due to the time and/or money required and while it may seem very exciting first, it can quickly get exhausting for a lot of people. I already had the experience of going abroad for extended periods of time so I managed to cope just fine. If you haven't properly thought about what it is that you want to do in Japan, I would honestly advise you to do so, because it could be very difficult to get through the year without a goal to strive towards – and even then, it might all be completely different from your expectations once you get here.



Abandoned shrine covered in moss, Kyoto



Go-shuin, a commemorative piece of writing that you can request at shrines, Miyagi

## Closing Remarks

This was a very hastily written report and in hindsight I probably shouldn't have saved all those negatives right until the end. I wasn't quite ready to tackle my final year so I took a year out to give myself room to grow as a person. I can confidently say that although the year was nowhere near perfect, what I have gained through this year abroad are countless valuable experiences which would not have been available had I just spend the year at Warwick. I hope that you are able to make a more informed decision after reading this report and feel free to contact me any time if you have questions.