

# My Year Abroad at the University of Tokyo

## Introduction

I spent my year abroad at the University of Tokyo under the USTEP programme during the 2023/2024 academic year. Being an international student from Malaysia at the University of Warwick, living in Japan was like being away from home away from home. Despite the various challenges and difficulties, my year in Japan was highly fulfilling in various aspects. I would highly recommend the year abroad programme for anyone who has an interest in experiencing a different country and culture, as well as interacting with a diverse range of people. It is through this report that I hope to share my experiences and hopefully provide some advice for anyone who might be looking to study and spend a year abroad in a different country, and more specifically, in Japan.

## Academics

Being an exchange student, I had the option of taking courses either at the Hongo Campus (located near Ueno) or at the Komaba Campus (located near Shibuya). The courses



*Main Gate at the Komaba Campus*

offered at each campus differ but both do offer Japanese language courses. With my accommodation located nearer to the Hongo Campus, I took most of my courses, including Japanese language courses, at the Hongo campus but did take two to three courses at the Komaba Campus. With the commute between the two campuses being around an hour, I tried to schedule my timetable so that I wouldn't have to travel to both campuses on the same day wherever possible. As for the courses I took, around half of them were Japanese language courses with the other half being a mixture of mathematics, computer science, and social sciences. As I had only achieved N2 in the JLPT prior to applying for UTokyo, I was not able to register for courses taught in Japanese as an N1 in the JLPT was required, resulting in a lack of choice for mathematics modules. While not being very detrimental, it would definitely have been more academically fulfilling if I were able to take more mathematics modules, so I would definitely recommend keeping this in mind for anyone who is interested in applying for a year abroad in Japan.



*Hongo Campus*

With regards to Japanese language courses, classes and levels will be assigned based on a preliminary test that will be carried out before the start of each semester so don't be

too worried even if you have close to no knowledge of the language. It is possible to take Japanese language courses at both campuses simultaneously, which is exactly what I did and would recommend, because while the Hongo Campus courses focus more on the fundamentals, the Komaba Campus offers courses that cover niche components of the language.

## Accommodation

Having initially applied for university accommodation at Komaba Lodge Main and Annex, I wasn't able to secure a room due to the overwhelming number of applications. As a result, I searched for and contacted real estate agents and managed to find a room at an external private student accommodation located near the Hongo Campus. However, right after agreeing to the contract for the external accommodation, I received a notification from UTokyo that a room had become available for me due to a cancellation but as I had already signed a contract elsewhere, I was unable to take this offer up. Therefore, for anyone applying to UTokyo and on the off chance isn't able to secure university accommodation at first, I would recommend waiting a while even after being rejected before signing any contracts for other accommodations. My rent ended up being around ¥70,000 per month which is on the high side, but was very accessible and within walking distance of essentials like supermarkets and banks.



*Outside my accommodation*

## Lifestyle

Life in Japan is, convenient, for lack of a better word. Food is available everywhere and there is an abundance of stores that run 24 hours a day, including convenience stores. An average meal costs around ¥1,500 with meals from convenience stores being as low as around ¥500. Getting around will take some getting used to, but is super convenient and accessible. I would definitely recommend taking advantage of the student discount



*Suica and Pasmo cards*

(requires a form from the university given during the orientation) and purchasing a commuter pass to make travelling between home and school cheaper. During my year there, I purchased one three-month commuter pass for each semester as I foresaw that I wouldn't be travelling between home and school much during the holidays. However, if you find that you'll be travelling to campus a lot even during the holidays, it would probably be better to purchase the six-month, or even year-long commuter pass right off the bat. I would definitely recommend getting an IC card (prepaid transportation cards e.g. Suica, Pasmo) as this will make travelling around a lot easier as it can be used not only for trains but for buses

as well. I would also recommend Suica or Pasma in particular as these can be used almost country-wide.

## Money

While unfortunately I was not selected for the JASSO scholarship (which would have granted me ¥80,000 per month), I was able to receive Turing funding which, averaged over the months, resulted in a similar ¥80,000 per month with which I was just able to cover my rent every month. While I did not work part-time during my time at Japan, for anyone wishing to work part-time, I would recommend getting the appropriate permissions by simply filling in a form when you enter Japan for the first time as applying for those permissions after entering Japan is a much bigger hassle which involves visiting the ward office and so on. I also did set up a bank account with JP Post Bank (otherwise known as Yucho Bank) for the reason of storing cash and being able to send and receive bank remittances. For anyone who is also hoping to set up a bank account, be aware that foreigners who have lived in Japan for less than six months are not able to apply for a debit or credit card. As a result, I used cash for most of my transactions in Japan, but there is always the option of using your debit or credit card from your own country. IC cards are also widely accepted so it is fairly convenient to load your IC card with cash and use this instead.

## Extra-curricular

In Japan, societies are split into what are called “clubs” and “circles”. The main differences between them are that clubs are more intensive, meet around four to five times a week,



*UTeS' external clubroom*

and often have limited places. Circles are the more casual of the two and attendance at circle activities is usually not mandatory. In the spring term, I joined the University of Tokyo eSports Circle (UTeS), a circle where we casually play online games together and gather once a month at the clubroom. The members also often organise hangouts and meet-ups, which arguably ended up being the highlights of my year abroad. The members also consisted of not only UTokyo students

but also students from other universities and alumni alike. All in all, I would say joining a club or circle is the best way, especially if you speak Japanese, to really learn about the culture, practice the language and most importantly interact with the local students. Do note, however, that joining clubs and circles often involve paying a member fee. For example, the member fee for the circle that I was part of was ¥1,000 for half the year, but the fees for each club and circle do differ widely.

Drinking parties (known as nomikai in Japanese) are vital when it comes to Japanese culture, especially among university students. But if you're not a fan of drinking like me, don't worry as there are plenty of low-alcohol and of course non-alcoholic options that will still allow you to be part of the fun. When it comes to hanging out with friends, you could go to karaokes, game arcades, board game cafes, animal cafes, manga cafes, the options are endless. Missing the last train (perhaps intentionally) and having to spend the night out at a karaoke with friends are among one of my best memories from my year abroad.



*Interesting drinks*

As part of the Multicultural Exchange Project module (one of the modules offered at the Hongo Campus), I was able to visit an elementary school and give a presentation on Malaysian and British culture to the students there. If it wasn't for this, I would probably have had no other chance to visit a local school so I would definitely recommend this module for anyone who is interested in learning about what a day in the life of a Japanese student is like. This module was also a great way to interact with other international students and learn about their own respective cultures.



*Introducing Malaysian food to others*

## Travels



*Glamping site view*

The best time to travel would be during the one-week long break at the end of December, the two-month long spring vacation from February to March, and at the start of summer vacation before leaving Japan. During the spring vacation, I visited various places among which my favourites were Mount Fuji, Hitachi Seaside Park and Ashikaga Flower Park. At the beginning of summer vacation, I went glamping for the first time with a group of friends, and also did a road trip to Kamogawa during which we visited Kamogawa Sea World. There is also a plethora of places that are a perfect for a day trip from Tokyo, including Mount Takao, Nikko and Hakone, so I recommend visiting these places during the weekend. There is a student discount available for UTokyo students when travelling above 100 kilometres by Shinkansen (Japanese for bullet train) so I would definitely recommend checking this out when planning your trip.

## Closing Remarks

I hope this report provides some insight as to what my year abroad was like, and what it might be like for you if you choose to spend your year abroad in Japan. It would be no understatement to say that it was truly one of the best years of my life and no amount of words could possibly sum up the experiences and memories I have of my year abroad.

For anyone who is interested in taking a year abroad, especially in Japan, feel free to reach out to me and I would be happy to share more of my time there.