

A Year Abroad in Hokkaido on the HUSTEP programme

When I first started studying at Warwick, I never even considered the possibility of learning Japanese, let alone study for a whole year in Japan. However, now I've spent a year there, I can positively say that the series of decisions leading up to it have been amongst the best decisions I've ever made. Hokkaido is the northern-most island of Japan, and has very beautiful scenery. Although the university itself is in Sapporo, Japan's 5th largest city, there are plenty of opportunities to go and visit various places within Hokkaido, as well as further afield on the other islands of Japan. If you're reading this, I'll assume you have an interest in studying in Hokkaido or Japan, so I will try to go through a few things which I think will be helpful to know when applying and preparing to go, as well as a few tips for once you're there.

Applying to the HUSTEP programme

The process of applying was fairly straightforward, and to begin with, is the same for all programmes at Japanese universities. First I had to apply through the Maths department before the end of the first term, and then had a small interview with the Exchange Co-ordinator asking my reasons for wanting to go, etc. after which the department sent nominations to the International Office.

After this, I had an interview with the International Office around February, after which I was nominated for a place at Hokkaido University. There are places in several Japanese universities so if you don't get your first choice, you may be offered a place at a different university if there are still places available.

Once it's been confirmed that Warwick will be nominating you for a university, you'll need to send in a few more forms. For Hokkaido, they were just general administrative forms, including a medical form for which I required a chest X-ray. The process of sending in the forms is straightforward and relatively easy due to help from both Hokkaido University, and the International department at Warwick.

Once everything is sent in, you will (most likely) be accepted onto the programme, and can start preparing to go!

Preparations

Guidance is given by both universities as you prepare to go. Once you have sent in all the documents and have been accepted, Hokkaido University will send your certificate of enrolment which, if you're in the UK, you will need to take to the Japanese embassy in London to apply for a visa. I found this to be a relatively easy and speedy process.

Regarding flights to and from Hokkaido, I'd recommend applying for an International Student card through STA travel, so you can get discounted flights. The cheapest one I found at the time was the Cathay Pacific Flight to Hong Kong, then from Hong Kong to New Chitose Airport (the main airport close to Sapporo).

Since Hokkaido is the northern-most island, it gets very cold during winter (sometimes as low as -20°C) and there is thick snow cover for several months, so you'll need to pack warm clothing, especially layers including thermal base layers. Another thing I'd recommend to take is a good set of walking boots and removable spikes/chains for your shoes (I bought Yaktrax) for use on ice and compacted snow. There weren't actually many people who prepared for this when I went, and I was often asked where I purchased mine.

Regarding how much money to take with you when you go, I was told by Hokkaido University to take \$1000 equivalent in yen. This is because you'll need it for a few bits of administration once you arrive, such as the deposit for your accommodation and also the first month or two of rent. Even with the JASSO scholarship (more on that further down), you won't receive the first instalment until more than a month after you arrive. They might suggest a higher amount now since rents have increased.

In order to sort out my accommodation, I was sent a Google form and a few accommodation choices, where I input my order of preference (different accommodation for males and females). The dorm I stayed in was called 'Kita 8 East International House' (male only dorm), which was fairly basic but comfortable. Its best selling point is its convenience in terms of location, being a 10 minute walk from the campus, and a 10 minute walk from the station which is a hub of activity in terms of shopping, eating and more. There's no wi-fi in the rooms at this accommodation, but there's an Ethernet cable and port, so you can connect your computer, and create a wi-fi hotspot instead. The main downside to this accommodation option is that there's only one large kitchen on the ground floor, shared between 8 residential floors each with 32 people living on them. Because of this, you may end up eating out a lot (which is a lot more affordable to do than in the UK). Unfortunately, I can't comment on the other halls of residence.

Another thing that you'll do before heading off is signing up for Japanese classes (if you want to take them, but you'll find that most people will). You'll receive an e-mail explaining what to do for this, but in short, you can just apply for beginner's classes if you have no experience in learning Japanese, or if you do, you can take a placement test to decide which class you'll be in. Fortunately, the books they use to study Japanese at Hokkaido University are the same ones used at Warwick, so the classes match up very well in terms of level (e.g Japanese Level 3 at Warwick, has basically the same content as Introductory Level 3 at Hokkaido).

Settling In

I was personally quite surprised at how well and quickly I settled into life in Hokkaido, though I had already been studying Japanese for 2 years, and knew the basics of what to expect when living in Japan, but I do appreciate that others may not find it so easy. The good thing is that Hokkaido University is very good at helping you settle in, and makes things easy for you. A day or two after you arrive, you'll be assigned a helper who will take you around Sapporo to do all the administrative tasks. This includes opening a bank account, going to the ward office to register that you've moved in and setting up your national health insurance, and also going to the university campus to finalise the administration there.

You may also want to set up a phone contract when you arrive, but I managed the whole year without a phone and got by with just the wi-fi on campus, and in the station, etc. for messaging using WhatsApp and Messenger

In terms of the language barrier, I don't think there should be too much trouble with getting to grips with daily life. There will be a trip to a supermarket organised by one of the international student circles on campus to help you understand what to look for when buying things and the HUSTEP classes are generally all taught in English. If you've had no experience of learning Japanese before, there will also be a lot of other HUSTEP students who will be learning for the first time so you definitely won't be alone in that.

For buying all the essentials you need, a good place to have a look would be the garage sale held at the International Office in one of the first few weeks of the semester. They'll be selling all sorts of second-hand items left by previous students, in particular, bedding and crockery and other things you might need throughout your year, sold at very low prices. For the rest of what you want, but don't manage to get in this sale, I'd recommend going to a 100 yen shop (see 4th paragraph in Daily Life for more).

You will also have the option to buy a second hand bicycle for a decent price at the start of the semester. This is not something that I did, but there were a lot of people who did. In particular, those who lived a lot further away from campus found it extremely useful.

Classes

There are two types of classes you can take: Japanese language classes and HUSTEP classes, Japanese language classes are given at Introductory levels 1-4, Intermediate levels 1-3, and Advanced level. The introductory classes are worth 1 credit each, and last for half a semester, and the intermediate and advanced classes are worth 2 credits and last for a whole semester. The majority of HUSTEP classes are 2 credits and last a semester, but there are a few 1 credit classes lasting for a half a semester.

Japanese language classes are also split up within the levels. Introductory classes have grammar classes (3 times a week), communication classes (2 times a week) and kanji classes (2 times a week). You don't need to take all of these, but if you want to learn Japanese, you should at least take the grammar classes. Intermediate classes have interaction, comprehension and expression classes (each 2 times a week). I believe that Advanced classes are also split up similarly. HUSTEP classes usually each have 1 lesson a week, but there are a few which have 2. Each lesson is an hour and a half long.

There are two separate requirements for classes: For the student visa to be valid, you need to take at least 10 hours of classes a week, i.e. at least 7 lessons in total. However, you also need to take at least 8 credits worth of HUSTEP courses per semester, to meet the requirements set for the HUSTEP one-year programme (Japanese classes do not count as HUSTEP classes). In total, if you take all the Japanese classes you can at your level, and at least the minimum requirement for HUSTEP classes, you'll end up taking about 16-20 hours a week of classes.

There aren't many classes available with regards to Maths at Hokkaido University, so if you're looking to further your mathematical studies on your year abroad, it would be better to look at a different university. However, that being said, I did take a few of the Maths classes available at Hokkaido (some Linear Algebra and Calculus classes), and found that they were useful for reviewing topics I had done previously in first and second years to keep them fresh in my mind (one of the teachers also happened to be a Warwick graduate which was an interesting surprise!).

There is a very wide variety of other classes which makes for a great opportunity to study new areas. For example, I ended up taking a few linguistics classes and a Japanese history class, all of which were incredibly interesting.

Daily Life

For me, in many ways, daily life in Japan didn't actually feel too different from the UK because I was still at a university and taking classes in English. However, I'll talk about a few differences here and there to take note of.

In Japan, most transactions are done in cash, and you'll often find that shops and restaurants don't even accept cards at all. So it's best to always keep a fair amount of cash on you. Note that the crime rate in Japan is very low, so it's generally quite safe to carry cash.

There are a few useful shops around that are worth pointing out. Convenience stores are all over Japan, with many different chains (such as 7-eleven, Lawson, Familymart, and Seicomart). It's easy to buy ready-to-eat foods, such as onigiri (rice balls), sandwiches, etc. and are generally useful if you're looking for a quick and easy lunch or if you've come back after a long day of classes and aren't feeling up to cooking a meal for yourself or eating out (you'll need to go to a supermarket if you're looking for actual ingredients to cook stuff). It's also possible to pay for various things at convenience stores such as concert tickets, film tickets, plane tickets, etc. which is very useful if you're not able to use internet banking while in Japan.

Another staple is a 100 yen shop such as Daiso. These have lots of useful items available, all for the price of 108 yen (after the 8% tax is added). I would recommend shopping here to buy kitchenware such as plates, bowls, cutlery, drinks glasses and mugs, etc. You won't be able to buy pans and other cooking equipment like that in them, but you'll be able to find those in a homeware store. I also used 100 yen stores to buy files and folders.

While on the subject of buying essentials to use throughout the year, a rice cooker may also be a decent investment to make. You can cook about 3-4 meals worth of rice in one go and store the rest for another day. They can be a bit pricey, but this can be subsidised by buying one together with other people who are also interested. Since everyone will only use it once or twice a week, there probably won't be too many clashes with other people who want to use it at the same time.

For socialising and entertainment, there are a few popular options in Sapporo, Karaoke is a favourite pastime for both the Japanese and exchange students, it's great fun just to go with a few friends in the afternoon or evening (but it's a lot cheaper in the afternoon). Both English and Japanese songs are available to sing, so pick whichever you like!

Susukino, the entertainment district in Sapporo, is also a popular destination for HUSTEP students who enjoy partying and clubbing. I can't offer much insight into that however since I never went... There were some semi-frequent parties held for international students at one of the places in Susukino (e.g. Halloween party, Christmas party, etc.) which I understand were a lot of fun so keep a look out for those if you get onto the programme.

If you're looking to eat out in Sapporo (which is fairly affordable), the station may be a good place to start looking, provided you can navigate your way around. The station has a lot of places to shop and eat, but it will take some time to learn your way around since it's so big.

Finance

Being a large city in Japan and a popular place for tourists, Sapporo isn't exactly the cheapest of places to live, but if you're able to receive the JASSO scholarship, it's possible to get by quite comfortably. The JASSO scholarship is a scholarship granted by the Japanese government to foreign exchange students studying in Japan. If you're a recipient, you'll receive 80000 yen (about £560 at the current rate) per month to go towards living expenses, which will be transferred directly into your bank account once you open it. The scholarship money is received on the 25th of every month (starting from October), for a total of 11 months (total of 880000 yen). You will need to sign your name on a sheet of paper at the International Office on the first or second day of every month in order to be eligible to receive the scholarship for that month, so make sure to remember to do that!

You will have a few regular payments that your scholarship will go towards, including accommodation and health insurance. For me, accommodation was about 30000 yen per month, which went up or down depending on utilities used (more in winter due to using the heating more). However, different accommodations will have different pricing, and I know that all of the rents have increased since, so the pricing may be closer to 40000 yen per month now. To make things easy, you can set up electronic payment of your accommodation bills which will take the rent money directly from your bank account at the right time, provided you have enough money in your account.

Health insurance costs about 2000 yen per month for people with no income, and will be set up on your first day with help from your assigned helper. Like the rent payment, this can also be set up to be done automatically, which I would recommend.

When you pay the first instalment of your rent (before setting up the electronic payment) you will also need to pay a deposit of 30000 yen along with it. On top of this, you won't actually receive the first instalment of your scholarship until more than a month after you arrive, so it's recommended to bring enough money with you when you go to Japan, probably around 100000-120000 yen will do.

Travel and Tourism

One of your concerns about studying in Hokkaido may be that because it's the northern-most island, it's pretty isolated from the rest of the touristy areas in Japan such as Tokyo and Kyoto. I did have the same concern before going but after spending a year there, I realised that the isolation is not such a bad thing. During term time, there isn't much opportunity to travel anyway since you'll be studying and at most will only be able to go somewhere for a weekend. Travelling within Hokkaido over weekends tended to be quite popular with the HUSTEP students when I went, since it has a lot of scenic areas. There are plenty of opportunities to travel elsewhere in Japan during the various breaks throughout the year.

Something I would recommend to look out for throughout the year are the various trips held by HUISA (Hokkaido University International Student Association). They organise day trips going to several places within Hokkaido aimed at international students. Some of the places I went to include an Ainu village (the indigenous people of Japan) and Hell Valley (a crater with boiling sulfuric hot springs). They organise the bus trip and entry and everything else, so all you need to do is pay to cover your part the cost, then just go to the designated place to get on the bus at the right time. It's also a great way to meet other international students and make friends.

One of the most famous festivals in Japan is the Sapporo Snow Festival, held annually in February and attracting millions of tourists each year. It's a great advantage to be living in Sapporo, being able to enjoy visiting this event at your leisure, without the added expense of travel and accommodation, which typically get very expensive because of the event. The Sapporo Snow Festival boasts many snow and ice sculptures, including giant ones that are several metres tall and wide. In total there are hundreds of sculptures across three venues of the festival, it's definitely a must-see.

There are three main opportunities to travel outside of Hokkaido throughout the year. The winter break, is a short one-week break in the middle of the first semester, from about Christmas until a few days after New Year, and is a perfect opportunity to escape the cold winter of Hokkaido and go somewhere warmer for a week. I used this time to visit a friend in Nagoya, a city famous for its castle. There is a very cheap Jetstar Japan flight between Sapporo and Nagoya which can be as cheap as 10000 yen (£70) for a round trip if you go on the right days, a flight which I used again during the spring break.

The spring break is the main time to go travelling. It's a 2 month break between February and April and is a great time to travel to more places within Japan or even other countries in South-East Asia. During this time, I made use of the cheap Sapporo-Nagoya flight and then a 15000 yen 5-day (not necessarily consecutive days) bus pass usable within a wide area of Japan. From Nagoya, I used the bus pass to visit Osaka, Hiroshima, Kyoto and Tokyo, then back to Nagoya for the flight back to Sapporo. I found this all to be a very good deal, and would recommend it to anyone staying in Sapporo for a year. During the spring break, I also spent time travelling round the southern island of Kyushu with my parents who came to visit me in Japan for two weeks. This is another amazing island which is just as scenic as Hokkaido, but a lot warmer at this time of year.

The last opportunity to travel is in the summer after the year abroad ends. Perhaps if there's anywhere you still want to go in your last few weeks in Japan, this would be a good time to go.

Wrapping Up

This ends my report on my stay in Hokkaido. I hope it has been useful for anyone considering a year abroad in Hokkaido. I cannot recommend the HUSTEP programme enough; it has been an unforgettable experience for me. If you have any questions about the programme or want to talk to me about life in Japan, feel free to drop me an e-mail: P.Jones.1@warwick.ac.uk