

My Year Abroad at Keio University

Introduction

My name is Alexia Huang and I took my third year abroad to study at Keio University under the KIP program during the 2021/2022 academic year. It was a once-in-a-lifetime experience and I feel like I have really grown as a person thanks to the exchange. As I came across many obstacles, especially at the beginning of my stay in Japan, I hope this report can help you out in some ways and encourage you to look forward to your year abroad.

Online Learning/Classes

Because of Covid, the student visa to Japan was not open and I had to spend the whole of my first semester in the UK. It was quite tough as I had to take most of my lessons in real Japanese time, which means that my lessons were either after midnight or early in the morning. This forced me to choose my courses based on their time slot and availability in online teaching, instead of what I was actually interested in. As a result, my options were largely limited. However, I was able to take Japanese 2 and 3 (7 levels in total at Keio, 1 being the easiest) to see which one was more suitable for me and get used to the teaching/exam style. Just as a reference, I did Japanese 2 in Warwick, I found level 3 to be a more natural progression.

For the second semester, I was lucky enough to physically be in Japan. There are cases where other exchange students still couldn't make it to Japan, so most of the lessons remained in the online format. I only had one lesson in person, even though it was a trek, it was worth going just to meet more fellow exchange students. Again, in the second semester, I decided to take two Japanese courses at the same time, which are Japanese 4 and 5 this time. I personally found it manageable and quite a nice challenge since it encouraged a lot of self-motivated learning outside of the lesson. However, I do have to say that it is important to not take the grades from these Japanese modules too. Some of my friends, including myself, were quite disheartened after learning that the results weren't as high as we expected them to be, but it doesn't mean that we haven't made good progress in learning Japanese and making more use of it in a daily basis.



Keio Hiyoshi Campus

Living

I lived in the Hiyoshi International Dormitory near the Hiyoshi campus. It was my first choice because I could live in a unit with 1 other foreign student and two Japanese students. Surprisingly, I did not make as much connection with my roommates because of our different timetables and the dormitory being only half full due to Covid. Instead, I connected

more with the other exchange students in the same dorm. In fact, a good number of my friends are people from the same dorm as me due to the lack of in-person lessons and the fact that it is much easier for us to meet up and do something together.



Outside lobby at Hiyoshi International Dormitory

Additionally, the public bath(銭湯) in our dorm was one of the best features. There's a hot water bath and shower available for each gender for most part of the day, and it is so nice to have it there after a long day. I would highly recommend picking an accommodation that includes one. Unfortunately, our dormitory also had quite strict rules, especially during Covid. Boys and girls are separated into different floors and they are not allowed to go to the other gender's floor. A lot of us felt like it was a shame that we couldn't cook together, and could only hang out on the

ground floor common area. It is also worth noting that guests are strictly not allowed to stay over, which can be inconvenient when a family or friend is visiting.

Having a share house is also an option if one wants a bit more freedom. The rent for one room is roughly the same or sometimes even cheaper than the dorm (Just below £500), but it can be tough to find housemates before even arriving in Japan. There may also be extra hidden costs, such as giving one month's rent worth of money each to the landlord as a 'gift' and the agency as a 'thank you'.

In terms of finance, I personally created a bank account with Japan Post Bank. It was not a good experience as I only discovered that they do not accept Pound Sterling as a foreign currency after I created the account. This means that I could not directly transfer Pound into my JP bank account and be able to withdraw Japanese yen straightaway. Additionally, the card I received was a cash card, which means that I could not use it for card payments, but only to withdraw cash from ATM machines. Since some scholarships and part-time jobs would require a Japanese bank account, I would recommend getting one, but maybe trying for a different Japanese bank, especially since I don't think JP bank is allowed for the JASSO scholarship. The JASSO scholarship is a very useful scholarship for studying in Japan. I don't know too much about it myself as I didn't manage to have it due to admin reasons, but I would definitely encourage future exchange students to apply for it.

On top of a Japanese bank account, having both Wise and Revolut can be extremely useful. They are online banks that are very easy to operate and exchange for Japanese yen on very low transaction fees. I believe that there are upper limits to how much foreign currency one is allowed to exchange, so I used Wise to pay for my dorm rent and Revolut for daily use. I would recommend getting a card from either of them as soon as possible, perhaps even before arriving in Japan. In a cash-heavy society like Japan, Wise and Revolut are also decent at providing cash withdrawals. I was able to withdraw multiples of 10,000yen with an ATM fee starting from 110yen.

I would recommend getting a sim card before arriving in Japan. The company I went with was called MOBAL and they conveniently allow customers to apply for a sim card outside of Japan and have it picked up at the airport. This way one can start using data immediately, for example, for directions on google maps. It is also worth preparing the document for the part-time job permit beforehand and getting the permit at border control. This would save a lot of time and hassle compared to getting it later on.

Once arriving at the dormitory, you should register at the ward office as soon as you can. The National Health Insurance should come at the same time. I think I had the option to pay monthly or yearly. Any amount that is overpaid for when you're leaving Japan can be refunded to your Japanese bank account. Make sure to withdraw the cash and close the account before leaving the country. I would also recommend bringing the health insurance card with you at all times. For example, I was able to get a discount for the eyesight check-up for buying new contact lenses.

Living in Tokyo, a transportation card such as Suica or Pasma would be more than enough for public transport. It charges the most optimal amount for each trip and saves the time and effort of buying individual tickets every time. I logged my Suica into Apple Wallet so I could top it up using my Revolut card anywhere. A bonus is that they can also be used at a lot of chain stores as well as convenience stores. When I ran out of cash after the first month and didn't have my bank account ready, this really saved my life. A side note on trains in Tokyo is that the last train is usually around midnight to 1:00 and the first train is at 5:00. Additionally, driving is also an option, especially when travelling to more remote places like Okinawa and Hokkaido. I did not drive it personally, but from my friends who did, all they needed to do was to get their driver's license translated which would take 1 to 14 days. Renting cars was decently easy too, one of the main companies was Times car.

Finally, most of the dormitory should have student resident assistance. if you ever need any help, they can always provide decently quick and helpful responses.

Extracurricular

Since I wasn't able to get to know the Japanese people in my dorm, joining the Aikido club was a great alternative. I was practising Aikido in the UK and really wanted to carry it on in Japan. I am really glad I did as I made a lot of good friends and found my Japanese improved so much during the 合宿, which is a summer trip as a club to somewhere outside of Tokyo for more practice.



A photo from Shiba Cafe (because admin is boring)



Miyashita Park: A popular hang-out spot for young people

I was under the impression that I may not be able to make that many friends as I only had one in-person lesson, but having gone to a couple of the dorm's 飲み会 allowed me to get to know everyone and quickly become close. Therefore, I would highly recommend going to some even if you don't drink. Oftentimes, people would go karaoke or clubbing afterwards as well, those are also quite fun as karaoke offer a wide range of songs including non-Japanese ones. I have never been clubbing before I went to Japan, and if you're not a big fan of dancing like me, I would recommend CE LA VI in Shibuya. It is a rooftop restaurant in the daytime and clubbing until 4:00 in the morning means that you will be able to see the sunrise. It is worth noting that for most clubs in Japan, the entrance fee is more expensive for guys and from what I've heard, it is also more expensive in general compared to the UK.

Another interesting way of practising Japanese for me was going to one of the bars in Golden Gai. It is a retro-looking street full of small bars where all kinds of people would gather at night (usually salary men). Since most people there are local and that the bars are quite small, customers and bar owners would often strike up conversations, creating a very relaxed and welcoming atmosphere. It opened my eyes to a whole different side of Japan and even became friends with some of them. I would recommend going with a friend or two who is also willing to speak Japanese and give it a try.

Some of my friends and I wanted to practise playing our musical instruments when we were in Japan. I was recommended a local studio and they would rent out piano practice rooms for 1000yen per hour. It is decently sound-proof and also provides rental services for other instruments too. So, if it is something you're looking for, it is worth having a look around your living area.

Since most of my stay in Japan was during summer, the beach was one of our main destinations for weekend entertainment. There are plenty south of Tokyo, such as 鎌倉, 逗子 and 平塚. They are all pretty decent, with 平塚 especially suitable for beach volleyball as they have ready set-up volleyball courts. Going down south would also get one closer to the Keio SFC campus. We went to one of the summer 七夕 festivals, and the fireworks at the end of the night were the highlight of the day. I would definitely want to try out more local festivals next time I am in Japan.

Lastly, I would highly recommend watching films in Japanese without subtitles in the cinema. I was not the most competent with the Japanese language when I first arrived, but still, I worked up the courage to try it out. Since I went with someone who was fluent in Japanese, they were able to fill me in on the plot that I may not have caught. Towards the end of my stay in Japan, I went to watch a Japanese film again, and it was extremely pleasing to see the progress I made during the whole exchange.



七夕 festival at SFC campus

Travel

Thanks to online learning, I was not restricted to only being in Tokyo in order to take my classes. Therefore, my friends who were on the same program and I made the most use of that advantage and travelled to a lot of places.

The first place we went to was Kyoto and Osaka. We went by 新幹線 because it was more convenient and had better timings than night buses, although it is quite expensive. There were a good number of us, so we decided to rent an Airbnb house, which turned out to be a great decision as we get to spend more time with each other unlike with individual hotel rooms, and the over cost was much lower. The whole trip was quite enjoyable and we were able to both attend all the lessons and have time to explore around.



川床料理: dining on a running river



Saw a turtle at one of the beaches at Okinawa

The next big trip we did was to Okinawa, this was towards the end of the semester in the middle of summer. We went by plane and got a rental car for one of the days. It was my favourite trip out of all of the ones I have done in Japan. The group atmosphere was amazing, the beaches and sea were so beautiful, and the food was different to mainland Japan in a positive way. Having travelled to Okinawa, I thought it wouldn't be

complete unless I visit Hokkaido as well. It was a similar set-up with plane rides there and back, as well as a rental car whilst we were there. As much as Hokkaido is a very fun and cultured place, I do recommend going in the winter instead of summer.

In between the big trips, we did a couple of small weekend ones, one to Hakone during term time and another one to Nikko before Hokkaido. Both were really fun and is perfect to see more of Japan without having to stress too much about planning or being away from Tokyo.

Miscellaneous

Lastly, here are some miscellaneous tips for living in Japan.

- End of the queue may not be the actual end of the queue. Sometimes queues can get quite long that they would block a walkway. In this case, people may leave a gap in the middle or be directed to some other places to continue queueing. Make sure to have a look around before joining a suspiciously short queue.
- Being vegetarian or vegan will be very difficult. Most of the food in Japan contains *だし* which is a stock made from fish flakes and other ingredients.
- Most big parks charge for a ticket, such as 新宿御苑.
- 慶早戦 is a pretty famous baseball match between Keio University (慶應) and Waseda University (早稲田). If you do happen to go to one of the two universities, it is pretty fun to go and experience the atmosphere.
- Japan has a lot of seasonal items, such as flowers, fruits and vegetables. I personally really enjoy this aspect. Even though I just about missed cherry blossom when I arrived in Japan, the 紫陽花 in summer and ripe peaches for sure made up for it.
- If you see something interesting and are tempted to buy it, do it right then and there. Don't be like me and run out of time to do my お土産 shopping at the end. As a side note, I personally really liked Loft as a place to get お土産.



慶早戦

Closing Words



An ad on a train in Tokyo

Thank you for reading the report, I hope it has been helpful in some ways. If you are considering applying for a year abroad, I would absolutely suggest going for it. I wish you the best of luck with your application process and enjoy your time in Japan!