



My Exchange Evaluation

Basic Information

Host University	Kyoto University (京都大学)
Semester & Year of Exchange	Semester 1, 2025
Otago degree(s)	Bachelor of Arts (BA)
Major(s)	Social Anthropology, Sociology (Minor)

Academics/ course load

Which papers did you take whilst on exchange?

Course title	Language of instruction	Otago equivalent
Environmental Anthropology	English	ANTH300 (2 credits each, needed 4 to equal 36 points)
Topics in Cultural Anthropology	English	
Cultural Anthropology	English	ARTS100 (2 credits each, needed 12 to equal 54 points)
Linguistic Anthropology	English	
Japanese History	English	
Current Issues in Japan	English	
Elementary Japanese I (Conversation)	Japanese / English	
Elementary Japanese I (Listening)	Japanese / English	

Total Otago credits gained: 54 points 72 points 108 points 90 points

Any comments about these papers?

Generally alright across the board. My personal favourite classes were my Japanese language classes, since the group size was the smallest and the lesson structure was most interactive!

How did the academic experience/ workload/ style of teaching differ from Otago?

Kyoto University's courses for exchange students is mainly limited to entry-level, introductory papers, so the actual depth of content usually was not that deep. Most of the courses I took were also meant to be accessible to Japanese students, so language-wise there was a lot of assistance from lecturers. The online system most lecturers used (PandA) wasn't too dissimilar from Blackboard, but I heard that they might be doing an overhaul soon! Lectures are really *lectures* in the sense that lecturers speak for the full 90 minutes with (generally) very little interaction with students. There also aren't any small-group formal discussions like tutorials which, for the anthropology papers at least, I found to be a less engaging then the style of teaching at Otago. However, friends in other majors had different experience, so I think it differs from course to course!

Accommodation

What accommodation did you stay in? What were the pros and cons of your accommodation?

I stayed Mizuki Dormitory international housing, which was technically not under the university but most of the residents were students either at my host university or another university nearby. The cons were paying ¥100 for every shower and a general lack of ventilation in my room (though this is pretty common in Japanese buildings). Any other con, like dirty common spaces, were frankly more of an issue with the existing residents (including myself occasionally) than with the staff or building itself. Pros were great distance from the South campus (5 minute walk!) and from facilities like convenience stores and supermarkets as well as public transport. It was also far enough from the city whereby it was generally nice and quiet but also close enough that events were easy to get to. I was also super fortunate to stay with really great people from diverse backgrounds, and we went on a lot of adventures together!

Money matters

Please detail your basic costs, e.g. accommodation, flights, visa, food, insurance

Rent = ¥36,600 / SG\$350 monthly – does not include electricity (pay per use), cost of pay-per-use showers (¥100) and laundry (¥200) [I think my total for the latter was about ¥3,500 per month]

Flights ≈ ¥80,000 / SG\$800 – going in April was definitely much more expensive than leaving in September [I also booked my flights separately instead of as a round trip]

Visa (from Singapore) = just under SG\$30 – at least 10x less than my New Zealand visa

Food/Groceries ≈ ¥5,000 / SG\$50 a week – I have religion-related dietary restrictions, so I think it's definitely possible to spend less especially if you're keen on trying local foods

Insurance = NZD396 (StudentSafe) + just under ¥8,000 / SG\$80 (National Health Insurance in Japan) + ¥4,000 [refundable] + ¥8,500 (university co-cop scheme with special clause for people living alone [latter only applies for people staying in non-university-owned international housing])

What means did you use to access your finances? What would you recommend? (Credit card, Cash passport, foreign bank account, etc.)

My bank account has a multi-currency option, so I could exchange most of my money online and access it via my multi-currency card. I also used Revolut for day-to-day expenses since I could exchange currency online and also it helped me monitor my spending better. Japan still relies a lot on cash (for example, I could only pay for rent and insurance at the convenience store, and to do so I could only pay in cash), so definitely bring more than you expect but also be ready to withdraw money several times while here. Anyone staying for more than 6 months should probably just open a bank account. No matter what, just keep a close eye on your physical cash reserves!

Visas & Insurance

Did you have to apply for a visa? What was the process?

I had to apply for a visa, and compared to the fully online process for my New Zealand visa I had to physically go down to my embassy and hand in physical documentation. It was a little tedious but overall quite fast and smooth, especially since most of the documents required were just things like transcripts and passport copies.

Did your host university have a mandatory insurance?

Yes, under a co-op scheme whereby every student pays ¥4,000. I also had to pay for an extra clause that was applicable only to people in certain housing. Japan also has a nationwide compulsory insurance programme.

Extra-curricular/Social Activities

What organised activities were available to students? What extra-curricular activities would you recommend to future exchange students?

There are many clubs (also called 'circles') at Kyoto University! I personally didn't sign up for any since I wanted to spend my time travelling freely, but I heard good things about the walking club (they go walking around Kyoto exploring landmarks), karate club, and a club that does volunteering at a small countryside town. Exchange students should just keep their language proficiency in mind, since occasionally circle members may not speak much English and exchange students may also not speak much Japanese.

What was the university/ city like?

Kyoto is gorgeous, if a little overcrowded with tourists. April is definitely the worst, but throughout my six months certain parts of the city like Gion were perpetually full of tourists. I think it's still easy to find peaceful or more local-oriented spots, so it's nothing too terrible, and Kyoto is still a lot less chaotic than more metropolitan cities like Tokyo or even Osaka. Kyoto University is pleasant, with pretty spacious classrooms and a lot of spaces for students to sit and study. Students are also pretty free to engage with the university's programmes as much or as little as they want, so while it might feel a bit more detached than somewhere like Otago it doesn't feel very stressful or pressuring to study there as an exchange student.

Any recommendations for things to do, places to visit, places to eat etc.?

In Kyoto – Amanohashidate! It's a coastal area to the north of Kyoto and has gorgeous views of the coast. Public transport makes places as far as Tokyo quite accessible (if a bit pricey), and domestic flights are also options to go places like Okinawa and Hokkaido. My personal advice is to go to places you rarely hear talked about outside of Japan – one of my favourite trips my friends and I went on was a roadtrip to Tottori prefecture, where we had a lot of fun scaling the sand dunes and visiting a national pear museum. I also went to places like Ikoma (Nara prefecture) and Wakayama via public transport. The possibilities are basically endless, so based on your interests look up places you think are cool!

Any tips for future students?

People in Japan will definitely clock you as a foreigner, and more often than not (especially in over-touristed areas like Kyoto) they will have a negative initial impression of you, especially if you're hanging out in a big group with other foreigners. Because of this, it's really important to be respectful of and as adherent as possible to norms and behaviours expected of you, even if you might not personally agree with them. More than trying to put forth a positive image of your country or your people/culture, it's important to not disturb the peace that locals really value in Kyoto. At some point, you will probably see actual tourists who you think are acting poorly, and you will probably react the same way long-term residents in Kyoto do to their behaviour!

Overall Experience

Please write one paragraph (or more) about your exchange experience. Please include some photos!

Going on exchange was such an enriching and refreshing experience. For me, what I wanted to get out of my exchange was to be really immersed in a culture that's markedly different from anything I had experienced before (eg with a distinct language barrier, with deeply rooted sociocultural specificities) in both Singapore and Aotearoa New Zealand. Kyoto is such a wonderful place for that, because of how much old culture is blended with modern convenience and lifestyle. Japan as a whole is such a vibrant place, and even if certain (negative or positive) preconceptions about the place and people are true they manifest in ways that are so interesting to be part of. I think keeping an open mind, especially if you're staying for more than one semester, is really key to enjoying yourself – please don't expect the place to accommodate you if you aren't willing to accommodate what the place expects of you! Don't worry too much about things like language because, even though it's great to learn in advance, the real joys of *living* in Japan just have to be experienced firsthand. Even if you're like me and not looking to live long-term in Japan, you'll definitely enjoy it, learn some really interesting things, and meet really cool people (either those also on exchange or locals). Just soak it up and enjoy the moment – it'll be over before you know it!

