



My Exchange Evaluation

Basic Information

<i>Host University</i>	Hirosaki University
<i>Semester & Year of Exchange</i>	Full year 2017
<i>Otago degree(s)</i>	Diploma of Language, Bachelor of Science
<i>Major(s)</i>	Japanese, Computer Science

Academics/ course load

Which papers did you take whilst on exchange?

Course title	Language of instruction	Otago equivalent	Otago credit value
Upper Intermediate Japanese 1A	Japanese		
Upper Intermediate Japanese 1B	Japanese		
Upper Intermediate Japanese 1C	Japanese		
Upper Intermediate Japanese 1D	Japanese		
Anthropology of Japanese Social Structure	English		
Japanese War Literature	Eng./Jap		
The World of Japanese Picture Books	Eng./Jap		
Internship IA	Japanese		
Internship IG	Japanese		
Modern Japanese Literature and the Formation of Identity	Eng./Jap		
Japanese Women Writers and their literature	Eng./Jap		
Modern Tsugaru Culture	Eng./Jap		
Japanese Food Culture and White Tourism	Eng./Jap		
Upper Intermediate Japanese 2A	Japanese		
Advanced Japanese 2E	Japanese		
Teaching Japanese as a Foreign Language	Japanese		
America/Oceania Regional Studies B	Japanese		

Any comments about these papers?

I was really happy with the classes that I took while I was there. There were plenty of Japanese language classes available at different levels beginner, elementary, intermediate, upper intermediate and advanced classes. I took the Upper intermediate and advanced classes and definitely felt there was a lot to learn. At the upper intermediate level, the Japanese language classes were divided up into four different classes, one for formal writing, one for speech delivery, one for informal conversations and so on. It wasn't specifically required to take all the language classes, so you could take the subjects you were most interested in.

Aside from Japanese language classes there were other classes available. I took classes in Japanese literature, and each semester had a food culture and regional tourism class where you can learn about the food culture of Japan and the impact the Japanese style of eating impacts their lifestyle and history. The regional tourism part of the class has you learning about how regional identity, history and culture are used to promote Hirosaki out to the rest of Japan and the world, and you get the opportunity to go on a large range of field trips to experience many of these things first hand. The summer class had us out planting rice, and in the winter the class went out skiing.

The non-Japanese language classes are taught in English, or in a mix of English and Japanese so any international students could take those papers easily. As the language classes are segregated by language ability, I liked these classes as a chance to meet the people in other language classes. I took most of the literature classes such as Japanese War Literature, Japanese Modern Literature etc. and the books we read were available in both English and Japanese copies, and if there was a movie available for the book we would watch that as well so you didn't have to worry about being unable to read a full book in Japanese. You could get by just with the English or use the English copy to help understand the original.

Internships arranged by the University were available in both semesters. I did two internships in the first semester, one was acting as a tour guide for foreigners during the Cherry Blossom festival and the next was a week-long internship in the Hirosaki City hall. Both internships were fantastic experiences and I would definitely recommend doing an internship while at Hirosaki. The first internship let me visit the park during cherry blossom season nearly every day and I got to talk with people from all over the world while showing them around. The second internship was a great behind-the-scenes look at the City Hall and I was able to learn a lot from my time there.

If your Japanese is good enough there is the option to take regular classes with the Japanese students. I did two of these classes, Teaching Japanese as a foreign Language and Oceania Regional studies because I felt like I wanted to challenge myself a bit and see what it's like to take part in the regular classes, as well as meeting a few new students.

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

I did think the teaching style was quite different to Otago. Each class is only held once per week for a 90-minute class. This is a lot less per class than Otago where you would have 2-4 lectures + labs each week for a paper. This also meant that your workload per class will be lower than Otago, and so depending on how many classes you take you can end up with a lot of homework each week. I think the minimum number of classes was 7, with most people taking 9-10 classes.

The classes were all 90 minutes long and that is a lot longer than Otago's 50-minute lectures. This was quite a struggle to get used to as an hour and a half per class is quite a long time to be sitting there, especially during the hot summer. The classes for Japanese language and international student classes were held in classrooms with desks rather than lecture theatres and in each class, there was a lot more

interaction with the teacher than we would get with just the lectures at Otago.

Accommodation

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

I stayed in the Hirosaki University International House, along with most of the international exchange students. This is located about 20 minutes away by foot or around 10 minutes if you bike there. There is a supermarket and a post office very close by, and it was about 35 minutes away from Hirosaki Station by foot.

The rooms in the International House were nice. They were small but came with almost everything you needed. Each individual room had its own kitchen area, fridge and cooktop/sink. A small bathroom with toilet bath and shower. And a desk/chair, bed and window out to the balcony. Washing machines were on the floor and were 100 yen to use. Dryers were 50 yen to use but only accepted 10-yen coins, so I had to make sure to save 10-yen coins for the dryers.

The room was a perfect size to live in without feeling too cramped. The rent was very cheap compared to Dunedin at only 5900 yen per month which is about \$80 NZD which was great.

One of the cons of living in the International House was how cold it was in the winter. Winter in Hirosaki is very cold, with an average day of -5 degrees for several months or so and a lot of snow outside. The International House gets very cold, so you have to be prepared for large heating bills during the cold months. The rooms come with a gas heater, which I did use quite often. I also had an electrical heater (as I think it turned out cheaper). I also found myself staying at the university late during the winter to take advantage of the free heating there.

Money matters

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

Most of these numbers are an estimate over my year at Hirosaki. Obviously, the bills would vary a lot between the months as it got colder in the winter and the power/gas bill grows massive (up to 7000-8000 yen)

Accommodation was \$80 NZD / 5900 yen a month

Average bills were

- about \$35 NZD / 2500 yen a month for water
- about \$50 NZD / 4000 yen a month for power
- about \$35 NZD / 2500 yen a month for gas

The flight and insurance were very expensive, costing about \$2000-\$2500 NZD total

The visa was about \$50 NZD to apply for. I also had to renew my passport which was about \$150 NZD as well

The food price was quite similar to New Zealand. I found myself spending about \$100 NZD a week on food.

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

I bought some Japanese yen before I went to Japan to use as a backup source, but it turns out it was easy enough to withdraw money from a Japanese ATM using my NZ bank card. There was a ~2.5% conversion fee and \$5 overseas withdrawal fee so I tried to withdraw infrequently. I could use my NZ card most places in Japan, but some places in Japan are cash only such as the post office, bank and smaller shops. I did most of my supermarket shopping with my NZ card.

Visas & Insurance

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

To go to Japan you do have to apply for a Student Visa. This is quite a length process and probably the most exhausting part of the entire exchange process. There are lots of forms to fill out, health checks and so on and then you send it all overseas and have to wait for a very long time to hear back about it. You send a whole bunch of paperwork over to Japan to apply for a Certificate of Eligibility and then when it arrives in New Zealand you take that and apply for a Student Visa at the Embassy of Japan in Wellington. You can mail in the documents by post but I believe you have to pick it up from Wellington in person or arrange for someone else to pick it up in person.

The Certificate of Eligibility came back to New Zealand very late. I believe I received it less than a week before I flew to Japan. I sent off the documents to Wellington on a Friday, picked up the visa next Thursday and flew to Japan on Saturday. That was a very frightening time as there was not much time for the visa processing to be done before I left, and I was unsure if I would get the visa on time for my flight. Especially considering I booked the flight several months in advance to save money it can be quite frightening when the schedule is tight. I had planned my flight to Japan a few days earlier than it had to be, planning to spend a few days sightseeing before heading to the Hirosaki University International House, but there was not much time between receiving the visa and my flight so if I were to go again I would schedule my flight to be quite a bit later. I flew to Japan around the 26th of March and moved into the International house on the 3rd or 4th of April

Did your host university have a mandatory insurance?

In Japan there is a mandatory insurance payment you have to make each month. In total it comes to around \$200 NZD and you receive a bunch of bills for this, one for each month you are there that you can pay all at once or around \$40 NZD a month if you stay for a year, payments starting about two months after you arrive. You pay these in person at a bank or convenience store.

Extra-curricular/Social Activities

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

The university has a lot of clubs/circles available to all students and the exchange students are always encouraged to join and try something new. There is a circle called the CCC or cross-cultural circle or something like that that holds events and get together between different nationalities that many international students take part in. I knew some exchange students who joined the karate club,

photography club, robotics club, *shamisen* (three string traditional guitar) club. I joined the Karuta club which is a traditional poetry game sort of thing. It was a good chance to try to talk to more Japanese students, as most of your classes are only international students it is good to try and find ways to talk more with the Japanese students of the University. Additionally, several classes would have you ask questions or interview Japanese students as homework so joining a club was an easy way to get that done.

Besides clubs, there were extracurricular activities available. Every year there is a collaboration between international students of Hirosaki, Aomori city and Hachinohe where the three groups get together for a two-day camp. We went to Hachinohe on the east coast of Japan for the camp. Sadly, we had very bad weather due to a typhoon coming across Japan, but it was still a very memorable experience I would recommend. Keep your eyes open for any trips available like that. Many people would take a weekend off to go travelling but it's a lot easier (and cheaper) when it is run by the university.

Students that are good English speakers get the opportunity to work part time in the English Lounge at the University. The English Lounge is a place where Japanese students come to speak English at any time with native speakers and you can get a part-time job to be there to help the Japanese Students. This is normal just once a week for two hours, but the extra money is always nice and working in the English lounge earns just about enough to cover the rent at the International House. It was also a great way to meet Japanese students and you can make a lot of friends there. I met several Japanese students that will be coming to New Zealand in the future or have been in the past that way. The English Lounge also has events throughout the year for things like Halloween and Christmas.

What was the university/ city like?

The university was quite different compared to Otago. It has all the usual places, library, cafeteria etc. but it was a lot smaller than the University of Otago campus.

Hirosaki City was great however. It has quite a history behind the city and you can learn a lot about it in the Regional Tourism and Tsugaru Studies classes. The city has about 160,000 people, so it is quite small in terms of Japanese cities. I liked the feel of the city, it was a lot quieter than busy cities like Tokyo and Osaka for sure. The main attraction of the city is the Castle and park at the heart of the town. The city has a lot of history from the samurai clan that founded the city to the early westernization of the city. It is also one of the best places in the country for cherry blossom viewing and during the end of April and the beginning of May an enormous number of visitors come to Hirosaki for the cherry blossoms. There are over 1600 cherry blossom trees in the park of over 50 different species. I would highly recommend the cherry blossom season semester April-August as you really cannot miss seeing the cherry blossoms of Hirosaki

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

In terms of things to do I spent my first whole week sightseeing around the city. It wasn't my first time in Japan, but it was my first time in Tohoku, the North Eastern region and there was plenty to see in Hirosaki. Lots of old buildings, the castle, shrine district and gardens to see. You can find a lot of information about places to visit in Hirosaki online on the Hirosaki tourism website as well as pamphlets at Hirosaki Station. There is also a Sightseeing Centre next to the park and city hall that can help with more places to visit and how to get there.

I did not eat out much in Hirosaki, I did most of my cooking at home. During my time there it was a good experience to try as many new things as possible and I challenged myself to use more Japanese style cooking. Gobo (burdock root) and Daikon were two of my favorites to cook with, daikon being incredible

cheap for the size of the vegetable. A rice cooker was a life saver while I was there, I recommend getting one.

Any tips for future students?

The staff in the international support office are incredibly helpful. Anytime I had a question or got something in the mail that looked like a scary, expensive bill they would always be able to help sort it out. Anytime I had a problem and needed help they were a great place to ask. You also get set up with a Japanese student mentor and an Academic Advisor staff member who can also help you out when you are troubled.

Save money for travelling. If you stay for a full year, the semester break is very long, nearly two months, and that is a great change to travel to somewhere else in Japan. You can get to Tokyo for about 6500 yen/ \$90 NZD on an overnight bus as the cheapest option or you can take the Shinkansen bullet train from Shin-Aomori, but it comes to about 17000 yen or \$250 NZD. Over the long summer holiday I would definitely recommend travelling to the Kansai region to see Kyoto, Osaka, Nara and Kobe. Hirosaki is quite far up north and far away from the rest of Japan but it absolutely worth taking the time to travel around during the long break. If you are only there for one semester you can take time to visit Hokkaido, Aomori and Sendai which are all a lot closer to Hirosaki city. As the rent in the international house is a lot cheaper, put those savings aside to go travelling!

Especially in the case of Hirosaki I absolutely recommend a full year if possible. Japan is really big on the seasons and that is reflected all over the place. It was always fun to look for things like autumn special edition limited iced coffee or winter white chocolate. The city (especially the park), look very different during cherry blossom season as it does during autumn or in a snow-covered winter and it would be a shame to miss any of the seasons. Hirosaki has a big festival every season, Spring is the Cherry Blossom Festival, Summer has the Neputa festival, Autumn has the Autumn scenery festival and Winter has the Snow lantern festival so there is something to be excited for all the time.

Overall Experience

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

I had a great experience in Japan. It truly is a different lifestyle and culture to what I am used to in New Zealand I and learned a lot while I was there, not only about the language but also about the history, culture and lifestyle and I felt like I found another place to call home. Throwing yourself into an environment so different to your own is a great way to challenge yourself and grow as a person, meet new people from all over the world and to see life from a different angle.



Some of the best memories I have of my time overseas are of the people I met there. I made friends with people from all over the world including some from other parts of New Zealand. I was glad to meet some Japanese students who were planning on going overseas themselves and share my experience with them. I certainly look forward to going back to Hirosaki someday in the future.

