

## **Student Report – Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University (APU), Japan**

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### ***Pre-departure***

My pre-departure was quite stressful as I did not receive my package from APU until January (the exchange year starts end of March until early February) and was then given less than 2 weeks to get all the paperwork back to them. Thankfully APU did allow for an extension of one week for payment. During this time the CSU exchange office in Bathurst helped tremendously via phone or email. My advice is to converse with one exchange officer at your home and host university the whole way through.

### ***Travel and insurance***

As I was working full time before my departure, I found it easier to go through a travel agent for flights and insurance. APU give you a recommended amount for your travel insurance to cover, this generally equates to unlimited travel insurance. Japanese medical costs are quiet expensive. Everyone must complete a medical examination upon arrival which is provided by APU.

International drivers licence is an option which I didn't consider before I left. I do advise that if you can get one, do so before you leave. However, I was able to get one during my trip which has come in handy numerous times for weekend road trips! Driving in Japan is reasonably easy, they drive on the same side of the road and all cars have a GPS, however it is in Japanese!

Regarding carry-on baggage allowance, double check your bag size and weight as these flights will possibly be full so they tend to be quiet strict with the allowance. I had to repack my carry bag as it was both too heavy and too big!  
Japan

### ***Culture Shock***

I experienced a number of culture shocks when I first arrived in Japan such as:

- Not all Japanese speak English – knowing basic phrases before you arrive here can be extremely helpful
- English is not always on every sign
- Japan is a predominate cash-paying country ie, no eftpos machines or minimal credit card facilities.
- ATM's are not accessible 24hours and are closed on public holidays (such as Golden Week or New Years)
- Try to be patient, things such as opening bank accounts, getting alien registration cards etc will take some time to arrive. All applications are done during O-week and take up to 2 months to be processed.
- Japanese love their paperwork!
- Vending machines are everywhere – you can even get hot coffee from them!!
- You cannot get a mobile phone (kaitei) until you have all the paperwork from APU
- If you can't use chopsticks you will learn very quickly! Forks are not always available
- Bowing is a part of the culture and is a sign of respect. You will be surprised at how quickly you begin to do this automatically
- Many toilets do not have paper towels or dryers. Japanese people tend to carry their own hand towels.
- Be aware of the procedure when having an onsen (wash and clean all soap off before you get into the bath).
- Don't pass meat between chopsticks. Always place the meat on the other person's plate.

## ***Weather***

Japan says it has four distinct seasons. My experience of this is:

March/April - Cold, and very windy up at APU. My best investment before I arrived here was to purchase a wind proof jacket and thermals. It is also cherry blossom season!

June - Beginning of Japan's typhoon season. During a typhoon shops are closed and buses stop. Make sure you are prepared with food before it comes as even APU's cafeteria and co-op will be closed.

Summer (August / September) - Extremely humid and hot in Japan. Purchase a face towel!!

October/November - A really pretty time with all the trees turning vibrant reds, orange and yellow. It starts to become quiet cold at night with days sunny and pleasant.

December to February - Winter. The days and nights can get very cold and it will snow in certain areas, even at APU sometimes. Being on top of a mountain, APU's weather can be very different to Beppu city's weather!

Earthquakes can and do happen. They can range from being unnoticeable to moving objects on tables or in book shelves. If there is an earthquake it is usually followed by numerous aftershocks throughout the day.

## ***Accommodation – AP House***

I have never lived on campus before so this was quite an adjustment for me to live in such a small room. In the private rooms you get your own toilet and basin. Showers and kitchen are shared facilities with your whole floor. There are also shared-type rooms. If you are a light sleeper I highly recommend a private room as share-type rooms have no sound barrier between them! With a share-type room it is slightly a larger room, however you share the toilet, basins, shower and kitchen with half the floor.

After my first semester here, I moved into an apartment down town with friends. There are many mixed comments about AP House. It's a great place to meet people and is close to the university. However, to me it did not feel like I was living in Japan as APU is such an international community. Its location can make you feel secluded from the real world and some of the rules they have can be a bit over the top especially when you're considered an adult in every country now!! It can make you feel like you are being treated like a child. You will also be mixed in with the first years (youngest being 18) who have not yet lived by themselves. Screaming, running down the halls and slamming doors until all hours of the night can happen. The respect for others is just not understood by some. Kitchen duty is done about twice a month and don't be surprised if people assume this to mean that you will clean up their cooking mess! You cannot have visitors stay after 10pm.

## ***Meals***

Meals are not included in the accommodation cost. On campus there is a cafeteria which unfortunately provides mostly fried food, and the variety does not usually change but it is fairly cheap. Be aware of the opening hours over the weekends! The Pacific Café offers a variety of sandwiches and has pretty good coffee too! Plus the ice cream is great in summer!

In front of AP House 1 there is a fruit, vegetable and bakery market on certain days of the week. They have great food and also cheap! Main grocery shopping is done at either the bottom of the hill or in the city centre. You can get cheap bus tickets to the grocery shop at the bottom of the hill (40% discount) for the weekend.

## ***Accessibility***

The university is about 2 minute walk from AP House. It is very easy to navigate around. APU is situated up on top of a mountain which overlooks Beppu city below. Access to the city is by bus which takes about 30 - 40minutes. The last bus down is around 10.30pm and the last bus back to AP House is at 10.30pm. If you plan to have a big night, taxi will be the only way back up. It's all about how well you can negotiate; don't pay any more than 3000yen (about \$30)!

## ***Course Information***

APU has a huge range of subjects, known as courses. Their semesters are broken up into two quarters (7 weeks each). When looking at the subjects first look at what credits you need at home, then look at the teachers. The English ability differs widely amongst teachers and students. Therefore course content and standards for some courses are not very high; unfortunately some can even be compared to being at high school level.

Being exchange students you can usually pick any course you want depending on availability. For both semester enrolments I have had problems with courses clashing with Japanese or each other, so my only advice here is to be prepared to be flexible with what courses you can transfer back home. Courses offered generally change every year. This is where good communication between you and your course co-ordinator at CSU is vital. I was lucky I had a number of free electives I could use if things didn't fall into place.

My study advice is to not forget to enjoy your time here. Yes we are here to study, but you can learn more about the culture and people when you experience it! Taking long weekends to travel with friends is highly recommended. Being a native speaker is usually an advantage when it comes to grades. However, be aware that there is also a huge reliance on attendance in many courses. This can range from 10% to 50% of your final mark!

## ***Clubs and circles***

APU has a variety of different circles which you can join. If there isn't one to your liking, create one yourself! APU also has a number of festivals throughout the year, such as International Weeks, Flee Markets, AP House World Festival etc, which I encourage you to watch if you can't participate. They can be very entertaining and a great way to learn about different cultures!!

## ***Problems experienced***

My time here has certainly not been without any dramas when it comes to APU's policies and processes. Here are some of the problems I've faced whilst here:

- It took just over 2 months for my Japanese scholarship to be processed into my bank account. Our APU student ID card took some time to be activated, until then there is a lockout at 12midnight (unless you're able to get someone to open the door for you!)
- If you lose your Gym card they will not let you into the Gym until it is reissued, which can take some time.
- Administration may say problems can't be fixed, but they can if you speak to the right person
- Lack of English assistances for financial enquiries. When I moved out of AP House I was to get a refund for my 2<sup>nd</sup> semester. This was to take 2 months to process, instead it took 4 months! If you cannot speak Japanese fluently my advice is to get someone who can and who is willing to translate exactly what you say.

- Received no communication about re-enrolment dates for my second semester.
- Being told to keep coming back because there needs to be a meeting before decisions are made.

APU's policies and procedures are the hardest thing you will have to get used to. They are very different to CSU. I found that having friends who were or had experienced these problems helped me a lot. When I felt like I was hitting a brick wall, then I would ask a friend who spoke Japanese fluently to translate for me.

### ***How much will it cost?***

The first month will be the most expensive. It may take some time to get used to the money. For 10000Yen (\$100) you can buy a Co-op membership card and you'll get a free inkan, which is what you need to open a bank account and to get a mobile phone. You will get this money back when you leave APU.

It's advisable to buy bus tickets especially if you're going into town a lot. You will also need to buy kitchen utensils. Buy this at the 100Yen shop. Just make sure you get the IH pots/pans. For rice cookers some of us brought them together and hot water kettles may be provided in the kitchen.

Cooking with friends can be cheaper, healthier and fun! Spirit bottles are really cheap here!! Also Japan has "nomihodai's" which is Japanese for "all-you-can-drink". You can find these at Nabe Café and Sports bar. It can range from 1500 to 3000Yen (\$15-30) for 2-3hrs. There are plenty of restaurants in Beppu. My favourite places are the Izakaiya's, which are the Japanese style pubs.

### ***Uni breaks***

See as much of Japan as you can, although this will depend on your budget. Travel in Japan can be quite expensive, but it is still feasible. Keep an eye out for travel specials. Between quarters you will get about 5days, however most exchange people usually take about 10days off and travel either within Japan (Kyoto, Fukuoka, Tokyo, Okinawa) or overseas (South Korea, Philippines, Hong Kong etc). If you plan to go overseas, don't forget to get re-entry visas for Japan, this can be done in Oita. China requires a visa and the nearest embassy is in Fukuoka.

If you're here for 1 year, there is a 2month break over summer (August and September). I travelled through Japan in August then went to China in September. Over the weekends, we did road trips around Kyushu Island (Nagasaki, Miyasaki, and Kumamoto etc). The Co-op can help you book bus/train tickets or rental cars. Hostel world is also a great website for accommodation bookings. Feel free to contact me for a list of accommodation places I've stayed at whilst in Japan or China.

Another tip is to keep an eye out for festivals such as Hanabi (fireworks festival) and Sumo tournaments.

### ***Friends like family***

It is always hard to leave family and friends at home. This was my first time to live overseas and the longest time without seeing my family, so I was a bit worried as to how I would cope. Once here though, it has been fantastic and I can contribute this to all my friends who have become my family here. A home away from home! O-week is with all exchange people so it's easy to quickly make friends from many different countries. Everyone is here in this new environment together, but the language abilities and experiences are all at different levels. The friends you meet on exchange will stay with you for life!! Bonding is definitely quicker as you all live together on campus. Karaoke is also a great ice breaker!!

Homestay is another great way to become a part of a family here and it is also a great chance to experience and learn about the culture. As I am here for 2 semesters I was able to build stronger relationships with my Homestay family who allowed me to visit as many times as I could. I have participated in birthday parties, Halloween, day trips and will also join them for their Christmas parties.

### ***Final Word***

This year has been absolutely amazing. I have not only learnt a lot about Japan, but also about myself. I have been pushed beyond my comfort zone a number of times. Things that are so quick at home which you do not even think about like grocery shopping, catching the bus, paying bills and posting all took a lot of time, energy and sometimes were quite stressful to complete. However over time it did get easier.

I really encourage everyone to go on exchange whether it is to Japan or anywhere else. Going on exchange has enabled me to extend my network to all over the globe and to realise the different opportunities available to me that I would never have thought about.

I am happy to answer any questions you may have about going on exchange.