

## **Report of my exchange semester at Keio University, Tokyo**

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### **Preparation**

Around two months after the acceptance by the international office of the Goethe University, it is time for the separate application process at Keio University directly. While this is more or less a mere formality, the list of required documents is quite extensive and it takes some time to collect all of them, especially the Certificate of Health. As a master student, like myself, you will have to hand in an additional study proposal with the length of about 2000 words, describing the motivation behind your (preliminary) course choice. Be aware, that you are by no means obliged to actually attend these particular courses in the end, which is why I would strongly recommend checking out all of the offered courses on site before making a final decision. Luckily, the university's website is easy to navigate and provides all of the necessary information in English. Besides that, our contact at Keio (Hiroko TAKAYASU) was really helpful and fast to response to any question around the approaching semester abroad.

### **The First Days**

Upon arrival at one of the two airports in Tokyo, you will be met with the arguably biggest - and to some rather surprising – obstacle of life in Japan: The language barrier. While Japan is without a doubt one of the world's most modern countries in so many ways, the general population's knowledge of the English language is oftentimes limited. Having said that, Japanese people are certainly living up to their reputation of being super polite, and with a bit of gesturing as well as Google Translate you will be able to find your way around. Still, I recommend trying to memorize (or writing down) some useful phrases and important addresses in Japanese prior to your arrival.

If you decide to stay at one of the Keio dormitories, the more convenient airport is Haneda, as it is far closer. I stayed at the Shimoda Student Village, which is known as one of the more liberal dormitories and a 10-minute walk away from the Hiyoshi Station in Yokohama. From there, it takes about 45 to 60 minutes to get to the Mita Campus, where the majority of courses of the Faculty and Graduate School of Economics take place. Every room at Shimoda has its own bathroom, a fridge with a freezer and the standard furniture whereas the kitchen is shared with

other residents from the same floor. While there are some dishes and pots for all students to share, they tend to disappear randomly, which is why most of the students get their own equipment if they plan to cook at home on a regular basis. Apart from the rather long commute, which applies to all the dormitories, I can only say good things about my dorm. The dorm itself is clean and the resident managers are welcoming and organize the occasional get-together. However, if you are planning a longer stay in Tokyo or just not cut out for the dorm life, shared houses are a good alternative. "Sakura House", a common address for such houses, provides rooms in various price segments all over the city and is very foreigner friendly.

Within the first days, it is important to register yourself at the local Ward Office and for the mandatory National Health Insurance. The most stress-free way to do that is by going together with other exchange students as you can help each other out. If you are thinking about applying for a job or want to pay your rent over bank transfer, you will need to open up a Japanese bank account. As I didn't have any reason to do so, I just stuck to credit card and cash which worked out perfectly fine. What one should not skip however, is a Japanese SIM-Card. Whether you are opting for the option with or without a Japanese phone number, depends on your personal needs but I would not pass on the Internet. While it might be possible to find your way around the city and its highly developed, extensive public transport system with the help of just a map, you will save yourself some time with the ability of constantly accessing the Internet, particularly Google Maps and Translate. From personal experience, I would recommend going to the BIC Camera (Annex) in Shibuya to arrange the contract as there is usually at least one employee who will be able to assist you in English.

Depending on the program you are enrolled in (KIP, JLP, or the short-term exchange program at the Faculty of Economics), the orientation schedules will differ a bit, but all the introductory events start about one or two weeks after your arrival. There, we got to know our Campus, basic rules for living in Japan and received a more detailed course information.

### **On Campus**

Keio University, and the Economics Department, offers a substantial number of English-taught classes. Usually, the majority of participants are other exchange students and you won't find a lot of Japanese students in these classes. Next to the "common" economics-focused classes, you have the option to choose interdisciplinary classes provided by the International Office and open to all faculties. Apparently, Keio just expanded their share of exchange students significantly which led to the popular international center courses being largely overcrowded. While there were only a few lucky ones, it is definitely worth a shot to get in as these courses provide more profound insights into the Japanese culture. Another perk are the free of charge offered Japanese learning

materials for foreign students. Japanese language courses on all levels take place at different campuses and time slots but also require a lot of effort as well as commitment, sometimes even more than the regular classes. While the variety of courses are giving an opportunity to explore topics outside of the economic spectrum, it is important to consider to which extent certain courses will be approved by our examination office. The preparation of the learning agreement, necessary for the credit transfer, fairly in advance or at least prior to the final course registration at Keio can help resolving any uncertainties or problems that might occur. Different to our university system, the exams or final reports at the end of the semester only make up about half – or even less – of the final grade. Therefore, most classes require more effort during the semester, e.g. in form of presentations, the hand in of problem sets or active participation. However, the overall workload was, in my opinion, rather pleasant and I certainly didn't miss the usually high pressure attached to the final exams.

Additionally, Keio offers a wide selection of circles and clubs, ranging from K-Pop dance groups to different sports and material arts, through which it is easier to get in contact with more Japanese students. Talking about sports, an event one should not miss, is the Baseball game against Keio's "nemesis", Waseda. Even though I had little interest in Baseball prior to the game, the whole atmosphere, the community spirit and almost ceremonial character made the game in to one of my favorite experiences during the stay.

### **Life in Tokyo**

Since Hiyoshi is a bit further outside of central Tokyo, my expenses for public transport added up quickly as Japan does not offer anything equivalent to our "Semesterticket". If your main campus is Mita, I would highly recommend getting a commuter pass. The pass allows you to use the trains on the specific route from your dorm to the campus, as often as you want for a fixed price and timeframe. This will cut down your costs by a significant amount but since the major sights and neighborhoods are outside of the commuter route, transportation accounted, next to food, for the largest share of my overall expenses. Fresh produce and groceries are generally more expensive in Japan as they are in Germany but there are some discount stores, e.g. OK Sore in Hiyoshi, where you can get them for a reasonable price. However, you will find a lot of rather cheap options for eating out around the main street of Hiyoshi, what the majority of the students opted for in the end.

Even though I had five months to explore Tokyo, I'm certain that I still only saw about 1/3 of the city. As one might imagine, there is an endless number of attractions, cool neighborhoods, bars and restaurants to discover. My favorites included:

- Shimokitazawa, a trendy neighborhood, for the best selection of second-hand-/vintage stores and nice bars
- Yebisu Garden Palace for a free panoramic view of the city (and Fuji-San)
- Senso-ji, Tokyo's oldest and most important temple
- Visiting an Onsen

If you are looking for budget friendly spare time activities, I would check out the website [tokyocheapo.com](http://tokyocheapo.com). They not only provide you with general tips on daytrips and other activities but are also a great source for some more unknown bargains, such as free entry – days at certain museums.

### **Travelling**

Of course, if you are already in Japan, it only makes sense to use your spare time exploring the country and even some of the neighboring countries. Good to know for travelling is, that the certificate machines on campus will issue 20% student discounts for trips with the Shinkansen bullet trains, a train ride one should at least experience once. A cheaper alternative to the Shinkansen are overnight



trains, for example to Osaka or Kyoto. Kyoto is probably the most popular destination and was also amongst my personal favorites. While it can be quite touristy, the traditional buildings, temples and shrines are adding to the more carefree atmosphere of the city and you feel taken aback into ancient Japan. For Matcha lovers, I can highly recommend a daytrip from Kyoto to Uji, the birthplace of the finely ground green tea. There, you will be able to try Japan's favorite tea in every imaginable way, from the traditional Matcha tea and sweets set to Spaghetti Carbonara topped with Matcha.

Overall, I would describe my five months in Japan as a unique experience. Even if I was a bit surprised at first by how present the cultural differences between Japan and Germany still are, it was fascinating to get a better understanding of the Japanese society and its way of life day by day. In the end, I cannot repeat enough how wonderful but also educational my time in Tokyo was and would encourage everyone to consider Tokyo for their semester abroad.