

女子美術大学

Student exchange at Joshibi University of Art and Design

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Metropolia

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Exchange studying in Japan

When I first arrived to Narita International Airport in April 2009 I felt like I was beginning a whole new life. Even though this wasn't my first trip to Japan, I was going to start a life in a very special culture and first time all alone without family or old friends, so it was exciting and really demanding at the same time.

Study exchange had been my dream for a long time ever since elementary school, and I had been interested in Japan already in Junior High, so there was really never doubt in my mind about going abroad. I wanted to learn to speak Japanese properly and see the culture behind the scenes, so to speak. So, when I heard that my University has study exchange contract with Joshibi University of Art and Design in Japan, I didn't need to think twice where to apply.

At first I had to decide how long time I'll be staying in Japan. After a good thought, I decided to go for a whole year. The reasoning behind my decision was that I wanted to learn to speak Japanese properly, but also enjoy all the seasons and everything what comes with them in Japan. I had been to Japan once before during summer time, so I was looking forward to seeing also the other seasons with their own characteristic events. I also wanted to have a chance to travel a bit around the country during the short summer break I was going to have, if I stayed a whole study year.

Before the study exchange year

Visa procedure

There are quite a few things for an exchange student to do before the actual studying period abroad. As for Japan, if one's staying more than 3 months, one is required to get a visa. It's best to start the process for acquiring the Japanese visa as early as possible, because it can take quite a while, even few months. At first one needs the 'Certificate of eligibility' which is a paper to confirm your status as an exchange student. With that paper and your passport you can get the actual visa from the Embassy of Japan in Finland, located in Helsinki.

Vaccinations

There's always lots of talk about vaccinations when traveling to the Eastern Asia. I myself chose not to get any vaccinations, as I was not belonging to any kind of risk group. As for Japan, the vaccination isn't usually needed if you live in a big city and do office work or spend most of your time in school or such a place.



However, it's always vice to consult the vaccination department at your local health care centre, since we all are different after all.

Money

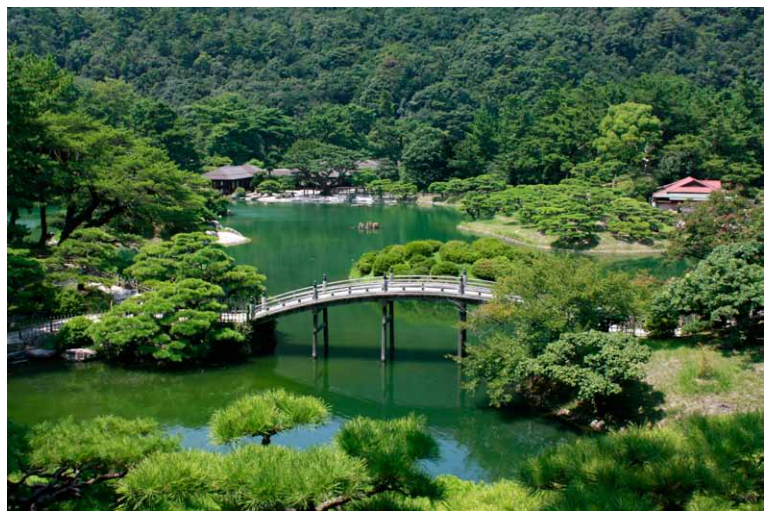
As for the money, the easiest way is to carry a credit card or Visa Electron card with you. With such a card you can do withdrawals at any Post office cash automate, or Seven Eleven convenience store automates which are located everywhere in Japan and are open 24/7. Of course, doing withdrawals in foreign country is always a bit expensive, so you might want to get some Japanese yen in cash with you from Finland. I do not recommend travel checks, because first, Japan is not a dangerous country to carry your money around, so there's really no need for secure checks, and second, the opening hours of the banks are a bit difficult especially during the weekends or school days for changing your checks into cash. If you're staying longer time, get a Japanese bank account. Bank accounts are issued only for those with Japanese resident status, so if you're not having a visa, you cannot obtain a bank account. For choosing a right bank for your needs, you should be aware of money transit payments of your Finnish bank.

Scholarships and grants

It's a good idea to apply for several grants and scholarships, as studying in Japan can be really expensive. Every exchange student at Metropolia is given a grant which covers usually the flights to the destination. Also JASSO (Japan student services organization) is a source of scholarships for exchange students, but because only one scholarship is issued per one Japanese University, it's not a sure way of financing your studies abroad at all. A student loan isn't a bad option, as I can guarantee that nothing is more boring than staying at your apartment due to money issues, when your friends invite you to join them on a trip to a neighbor city or an amusement park, for example. I think A year abroad is definitely something worth investing in.

Joshi

The University where I studied is all women's univeristy, so even though studying in general isn't so different from Finland, the atmosphere at the school may be a bit girly at times and more united, than in an average University in Finland. The people are really taking care of each others, as classmates are a very, very tight group. Therefore it's best to start your study exchange in spring, if possible, because that is



the time, when Japanese start a new year at school. By doing so, you won't be the only new one in the class, as the groups are changes every year due to the course selections students make every year.

Joshiibi has two campuses. The one in Suginami, Tokyo, for the Junior College students, and the one in Sagami-hara, Kanagawa, which is the main campus for University students and Graduate students. All the Metropolia exchange students study at Sagami-hara campus, which is located about 20 minutes' bus ride from Sagami-Ono station, the nearest train station with access to Tokyo and other big cities.

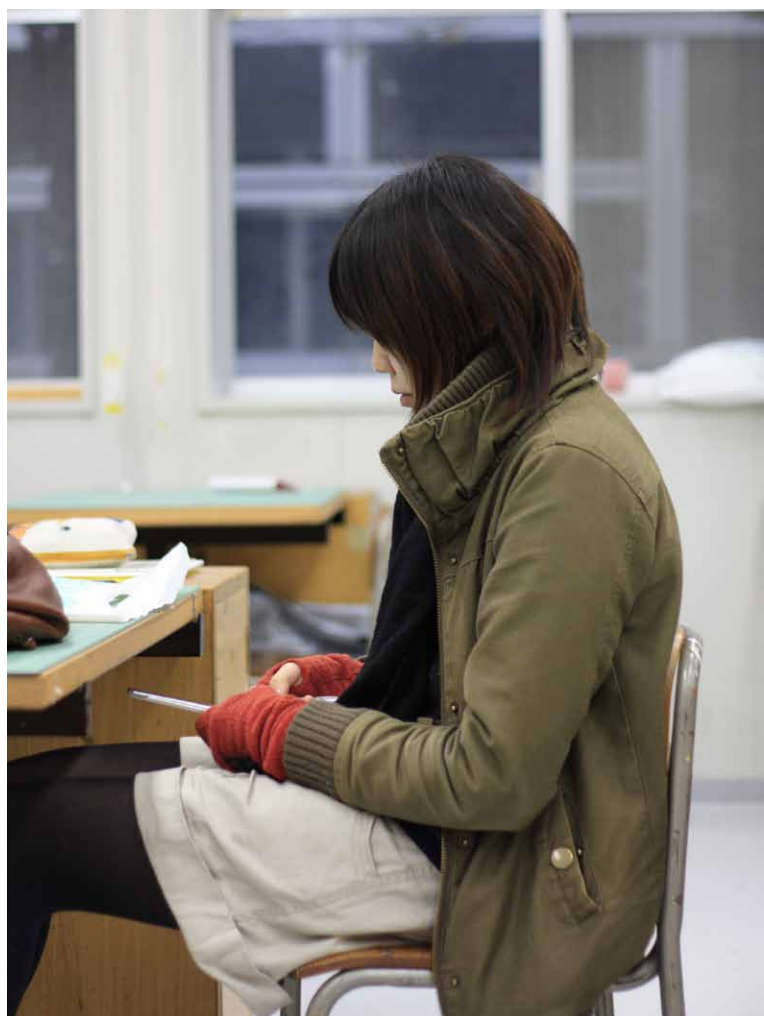
Campus facilities

The campus of Joshibi consists of several buildings. Different Departments are usually located in different buildings but students have access to all of the buildings. The campus has good facilities with a nice and quite cheap cafeteria, a big library and a small shop with art supply, lunch boxes and snacks.

Cafeteria offers many different kinds of meals every day, but just for a notice, the vegetarian meals aren't very common in Japan, and therefore there's no line for vegetarians in school cafeteria either. Ofcourse, there's still always something for non-meat-eaters to enjoy. The lunch options vary between Asian and European kitchen – every day there's a choice of pasta, carry rice, hayashi rice, noodle soups, onigiris (a rice ball with filling), some sushi variations, deep fried food, donburi (rice served with some toppings) and a lunch set menu changing daily. There's also a low calorie option for those who prefer light meal or are on a diet, as so many Japanese girls seem to be.

The library of Joshibi is expectionally good source for research and entertainment. There are very good collections of Design and Art related books, even many very rare ones, but also fictional literature. Unfortunately most of the materiel is only in Japanese. Exchange students might find the DVD collection of library of use. There are numerous new movies to enjoy – however, they cannot be rented out of the library, but must be watched in the library building's entertainment area with quite a few TV booths. Library also has computers for all students to use – when the main computer rooms in the different buildings are often reserved for lessons and lectures.

The shop of Joshibi is something all Metropolia's design students are sure to be envious of. There's selection of quality art materiel which are needed at the lessons, so if you happen to forget your pens or brushes home, you can always buy stuff from the shop.



The prices are quite reasonable, but if you are a real penny pincher, you might want to check the art store of Sekaido near Sagami-Oono station, which offers student discounts for Sekaido student card holders.

The lessons

All the lessons at Joshibi are taught in Japanese, so it's best to have some knowledge of the language, or at least lots of interest and patience in learning the language. I recommend taking as many Japanese lessons as possible before the study exchange to get the most of studying and the stay in Japan in general.

The student must be fairly independent in studying, because even if all the classmates and teachers are very friendly and helpful, they are not capable of giving very much information in English, since only very few people really speak and understand any other language than Japanese.

Lessons participated by exchange students are usually quite similar to the ones at Metropolia with practical training following a theoretical lecture. Japanese students, of course, have also theoretical courses consisting of lectures and research, varying from art history and language courses to music and so on, but those courses are usually not offered for exchange students because of their content, difficult for non native Japanese speakers to follow.

The lessons are divided in morning lessons (9:20 – 12:30) and afternoon lessons (13:20-16:30). It's possible to take both the morning and afternoon lessons, but I think it's important to keep in mind that the lessons usually always have final report to be written and the couple of presentations given, all usually in Japanese, which can be quite demanding for an exchange student with only average knowledge in Japanese. Therefore preparing for these tasks might take time and effort. There's also a lot of other tasks to fulfill during the course, so taking two courses is, in my opinion, a bit too demanding. I myself took both the morning and afternoon lessons in my first term in spring, but it was way too busy and exhausting, so the latter half of the study year I studied only the afternoon lessons.

Joshibi festival

The Joshibi arts festival held annually in October is a great way to see what other students are doing, as there are several exhibitions, shows and goods sold in the festival. Also the exchange student are allowed to choose few of their works to be displayed in exhibitions. During the festival it's also possible to



make a round in all the Joshibi buildings and meet people from other departments which I found really interesting. It's also possible to sell goods at flea market alone or in a group, but bear in mind that you need to make a reservation from the festival committee during certain time period months before the actual festival. The flea market is very fun way to meet locals and other students, and also for earning a little extra money by selling your hand made goods.

Living in Japan

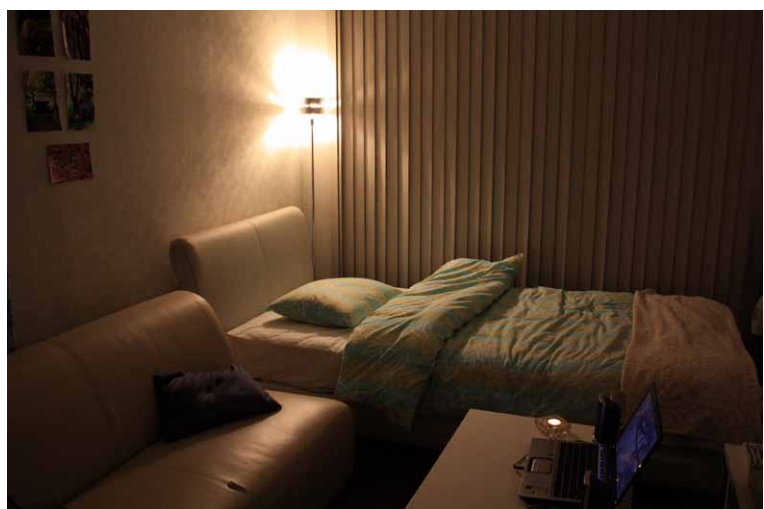
Apartments and the costs

The exchange students are offered accommodation by the University, so you don't need to worry about finding an apartment by yourself. However, if you have very small budget, it's important to keep in mind that the apartment offered by University might not be the cheapest one in the market. Actually living costs can raise to be quite expensive in Tokyo area, and as the apartments offered by the University are furnished and are in very good condition, they're quite expensive, about 500-800 euros per month for a tiny one room apartment of about 20 square meters.

My apartment was 17 square metres in size and had a kitchen with one hob, sink, fridge-freezer, microwave oven and cupboards. The furnished apartment had also a washing machine, a tumble dryer, a bed, tv, dvd-player, wardrobe, a drawer and a small table. Also all the linen, towels and dishes were provided. The rent included also an high speed internet connection, which was great way to keep in touch with the friends and family in Finland.

Sagami-Oono

The apartment was situated in Sagami-Oono, the area around the nearest station from Joshibi. Sagami-Oono is small place compared to the central Tokyo, but perfect in size for some one from Finland. There's a big shopping centre at the station and other shops, karaoke places, a public library of Sagamihara, and a great selection of good and cheap restaurants for one to enjoy. Even greater shopping possibilities are found in Machida, city located only a couple of minutes by train and about 10 minutes by a bicycle from Sagami-Oono. I actually found shopping in Sagami-Oono and Machida more fun than going to for example to packed, very famous Harajuku, as there were enough interesting and cute shops, but also enough space to walk. Sagami-Ono is very convenient also because it takes only about 40 minutes by train to Shinjuku (Tokyo city center), about 30 minutes to Yokohama,



and 40 minutes to cultural heritages of Kamakura, if you want to do some sight seeing in the nearby area.

Food and grocery shopping

Depending on where you're staying, the shopping for groceries varies from going to a small konbini (convenient store open every day 24/7) to visiting a big supermarket near shopping centres or big stations. Big supermarkets are of course the cheapest option, even though they're never as big as for example City Markets or Prismas in Finland. All the shops always have point back system, which is quite similar with the Plussa -system of Kesko chain in Finland. Regardless that I had many point cards for the shops I used most, I also enjoyed picking fresh vegetables from a small kiosk run by local farmers on my way home from school. Something you might never experience in Helsinki area.

100 yen shop is also a nice option for both the groceries and any goods one needs at home. In these shops everything costs 100 yen plus tax, all together 105 yen, unless stated otherwise. It's a cheap shop, but the quality isn't too bad considering the price. You can find almost anything from 100 yen shops and they can be found in every city. One of the bests is located in Machida and it has several stores to enjoy.

Bicycle

I recommend renting or buying a bicycle, especially if you're staying around Sagami-Oono. It's a great way to save money, as a bus to school is quite expensive with 500 yen return-ticket. The bus takes also about same amount of time as bicycle, so I used it only when it rained very heavily during the typhoon season in the summer.

Bicycle is an easy way to explore your surroundings and get to know your new home town. Renting or buying an used bicycle isn't even expensive - the prices for renting the bicycle start from only 500 yens per month or if you want to buy a bicycle, it's only about 5000 to 10000 yen. Just bear in mind that if you want to rent a bicycle, you usually need to have a Japanese bank account.

Traveling

It's of course important to concentrate on studying, but one should not forget to also enjoy the possibility of traveling around Japan while one's there. If you're staying under 3 months, you should take use of Japan rail pass which offers you use of all the trains including super fast bullet trains for the selected time period. This rail pass, however, is not allowed to be used by



residents of Japan, so if you have Japanese visa, you cannot use it and might want to consider the other cheap ways of traveling around Japan. There are cheap plane and train tickets, especially during the school holidays.

Even though Kyoto, Hiroshima, Nikkou and Kamakura are the musts, don't forget that Tokyo itself is full of interesting sights for one to explore. I enjoyed especially the parks of Tokyo such as Yoyogi, Ueno and Koishikawa korakuen, the island of Odaiba, the coast city of Enoshima, and Shimokitazawa and Shibuya for evening activities and live houses.

People

Japanese people are always very friendly and helpful, but it's difficult to forget that you're a foreigner. There are very few foreigners in Japan, so being the only blonde or the only one with green eyes might be quite shocking at first – every one is staring at you, and it might also be irritating that even if you're staying a whole year in the country and have a residence status, you're always taken for a tourist at first because of your looks. Even if you speak Japanese, people don't expect you to, and are afraid they need to use English, so sometimes that can make it difficult for them to come to talk with you, even if they wanted to. That's why it's often important for You to take the first step and start the conversation, if you want to get to know someone. However, at the school people usually are very interested in rare exchange students, so I found it quite easy to make friends especially at the University.

The advantages of a year abroad

For me, study exchange abroad was an experience that I will never regret. Of course it was money spending, but I could never have learned the things I learned in Japan. I did not only learn the language and new things about my own study field, but I also realized that I learned a lot about myself. It sounds quite a cliché, but one must really experience it all themselves to know how big of an affect a year spent abroad can have on one's own self image, self confidence and abilities all in all. After all the challenges I confronted abroad I feel, that somehow, even in difficult times, I'm always going to survive. After a year in Japan almost nothing seems impossible.

This experience has also got me new and exciting job opportunities both in Finland and abroad, so no, it really wasn't just fun year abroad – it was a year that has brought me a lot closer to my dreams.



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Check also!

*For those, who wish to read more about my year in Japan,
feel free to visit my blog, written in Finnish.
<http://riisanonippon.blogspot.com>*

*My photographs from the whole year can be looked at:
<http://picasaweb.google.com/RiisaJapanissa>*

*For additional questions: [mail\[at\]riisa.net](mailto:mail[at]riisa.net)
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