

Report of my study at Osaka University 2010-2011

1. Introduction

In this report I will write about my experience during my period studying at Osaka University (and the preparation in advance). I studied at Osaka University from end September 2010 until begin August 2011. Originally I planned to stay in Japan for one semester (September 2010 - February 2011), but because of multiple factors (timewise it fitted well into my study program, extending was easy, interesting (law) courses in the spring semester, could already speak Japanese quite well and wanted to make use of it more, it gave me time to travel and do a homestay) I decided to extend my stay and I'm still very happy that I was able to do so as it further deepened and broadened my experience. I learned a lot during my stay in Japan, and in this report I will have to restrict myself to the most important points and things that are not clear from the information given by the universities. In general you will be informed about the things you need to know and in my experience most of the things will work itself out, so try not to worry too much. I'll be glad to help if you need any or have any questions.

In this report I will begin with a chapter about the period before coming to Osaka and things you need to do in advance. The next chapter will be about coming to Osaka and things you need to take care of the first few weeks. The following chapter will be about studying and living in Osaka. I will finish by making a few concluding remarks.

2. Before coming to Osaka

Language

Let me begin with the Japanese language. I studied Japanese by myself quite hard for almost one and a half year before coming to Osaka. As a result I was able to speak and read Japanese somewhat from the start and this certainly made my stay in Osaka more interesting, easier and gave me more freedom and opportunities. I can imagine however that most people cannot find the time to study enough Japanese to get to a sufficient level, as Japanese is not an easy language to learn. From what I have heard from other students, the English level of most Japanese people is quite poor, but since Japanese are always very helpful this is most of the time not problematic. However if you don't know any Japanese beforehand, prepare yourself for becoming basically illiterate, as a lot of signs are written using Japanese characters. Not to worry though: important signs, such as in train stations, are (almost) always also written in English. In big cities like Osaka getting around with English is not a big problem I think.

Overview of the procedure before coming to Japan

After you get selected in Groningen to go to Osaka, you have to apply to Osaka University. In my year they first started to do part of the application through the internet. There was a strict deadline for the application online around the end of March (for the fall semester), so pay attention to that. I received my acceptance letter from Osaka University only in the beginning of June and at that time they send you some forms that you need to return. In August I was informed about my dormitory and I could apply for my visa mid-end August, which was ready quickly.

Scholarships

The Marco Polo scholarship is a scholarship that every student from Groningen going to Osaka will receive (as far as I know). GUF also gives out scholarships (300 euro) and if you are an excellent student you can apply for a grant of 1000 euro.

In Osaka you can apply for a JASSO scholarship. During my application I did not know if I was eligible for this and I decided not to pursue this option, but I would recommend other students to look into this scholarship. It is 80000 yen a month (around 800 euro). You have to live into designated apartments which are apartments that you share with one other OUSSEP student. From what I have heard the rent is quite high, around 40000 yen, but this still leaves plenty to do other things with. In comparison, the dorms you get designated to (more on that later) if you are not JASSO have a rent around 15000 yen. Also from what I have seen you do not have to come from a poor country (or be poor) to be eligible for JASSO; there were plenty of students with a JASSO scholarship from European countries. If you consider going to Osaka, the JASSO scholarship is I think definitely worthwhile to investigate further.

Other things before going to Osaka

- I wish I had booked a plane ticket with a changeable return date. Because of my extension I had to book a new ticket and booking tickets from Japan can be a *lot* more expensive than booking from the Netherlands. Perhaps you decide to travel a bit after university ends, you never know.
- Power sockets have a different shape and the voltage is also lower. You can buy a simple travel adapter in an electronics store to 'change the shape'. Most of your Dutch electronics (chargers, laptops) will also work using a lower voltage. Most of the time this is written on a label on the adapter. Unless absolutely necessary I would not recommend buying a power transformer, instead buying the electronics you need in Japan itself.
- 'Regular' (or 'old') Dutch mobile phones do not work in Japan. I think that 3G phones and smartphones do work in Japan, but you should check that. The thing is that if you want to log into your student financial aid page (DUO/IB Groep), using DigiD, you need a working mobile phone (perhaps there are also other websites connected to your Dutch mobile phone), so I would recommend leaving your regular mobile phone in the Netherlands with parents or friends if you know it is not going to work in Japan. Speaking of DUO, don't forget to convert your student-OV into compensation when studying abroad (around 80 euro a month).
- I think you get an email about joining the Host Family Program a few months before coming to Osaka. I would recommend applying for this. I was unfortunate to have a host family which was not so nice, but all the stories I have heard from other students were very enthusiastic. A host family will give you the opportunity to meet some 'normal' Japanese people and most of the time they will take you along to go sightseeing or do other activities.
- Get some Japanese yen before coming to Osaka. In most places in Japan you can only pay with cash. Debit cards you can almost never use to pay and credit cards only in certain places. Furthermore you cannot take out money in all ATM's with a regular Dutch debit card. My card only worked at ATM's of the Japanese post office/post bank, but I have an account with a quite small Dutch bank (Triodos). Perhaps your card works in more ATM's, but nonetheless I would recommend getting some Japanese yen to get from the airport to your dorm and in case of an emergency upon arrival.

3. Coming to Osaka

Overview of the procedure coming to Osaka

When you come to Osaka, there are some formalities to be taken care of. You have to apply for your Alien Registration Card, apply for the National Health Insurance and open a bank account. Probably there are also things you have to do relating to your dorm. These things are a hassle, but no real problems. In fact, I heard from several students who were lazy with doing these formalities that no big problems arose. Nonetheless I would recommend doing these formalities when you are required to.

The first week there is also an introduction of the campuses and of things you need to know.

Guidance

As an OUSSEP student you are taken care off quite well. There are always two OUSSEP coordinators that you can contact in case of a question. Also there are centres on all campuses especially for international students where you can ask questions. In these places you can also eat your lunch and mingle with other Japanese and foreign students. If you do an independent study, you get assigned a tutor (a regular Japanese student) automatically that can help you as well. If you do not do an independent study, you can apply for a tutor. I applied for a tutor in this way, but we met only once because it turned out I did not really need him.

Dormitory

There are a few dormitories for international students. If you are a boy (and not JASSO), you will most likely go to the boys dorm, 20 minutes by bike from Suita Campus. I also lived in this dorm. This dorm is old, dirty, but cheap. You have a small room with a bed, table, two closets, a refrigerator and an air conditioner/heater. This heater was not very good by the way. You might not expect it but Osaka can get quite cold in the winter, especially with the lousy heating. Of course it gets pretty hot in the summer as well. You share a sink and a shower with one other person and you share a kitchen and the toilets with the whole floor. The dorm is located in a residential area, which means that supermarkets and places to eat are nearby.

If you are a girl (and not JASSO), you will most likely go to the girls dorm on Toyonaka Campus. I heard that you have your own kitchen and bathroom. It is conveniently close to Toyonaka Campus, but the nearest supermarket is quite far. If these dorms are full, there are also some other international dormitories around 15 minutes biking from Suita Campus, where normally mostly regular exchange students live. Also, if you are in the Frontier Lab program you will live in the JICA dorm I think. There are train stations close to every dorm (5 to 10 minutes by bike).

Other things when coming to Osaka

- In the first few weeks there is a health check. You have to prepare a urine sample at home before coming (great fun...) and fill out a form about things like your eating and exercising habits. The

health check itself is quick. They measure things like your blood pressure and your weight and I think they also make an X-ray.

- Like the Netherlands, you can get a mobile phone with prepaid or a contract. If you are only staying half a year I think it is not worth it to get a contract because of the high cancellation fee, but I would consider it if you use your mobile phone often. Most of the international students had Softbank as their phone provider. The cheapest prepaid card you can get there is 3000 yen for two months and you can mail limitlessly for 300 yen a month (you have to turn this on). You get your own mobile mail-address, which you can use similarly to a normal mail-address. One thing about Japanese mobile phones however is that typing is terribly slow, because the phones (at least the cheap one I had) are not really made to type Roman alphabet efficiently.
- A bike is pretty much indispensable, especially if you don't live in the girls dorm right next to the campus. Biking is very common in Japan. Traffic patterns are a bit different: people generally bike on the sidewalk and traffic lights work in a very particular way (although it becomes very convenient when you get used to it). Especially if you are tall, I would recommend not being too cheap when buying a bike. I bought a bike that was quite cheap, but also quite small (honestly a bit too small). With all the hills that you have to climb in Japan, it is much better for your knees to have a bigger bike. I'm not sure though if you can find a bigger bike in Japan, but I would try to find it. When buying someone else's bike, pay attention that you also get his 'ownership card' or something like that. In theory, the police could ask you for this card when you are riding your bike and if you don't have it you could be arrested. In reality I have never been asked for this card and I have never heard of someone being asked for it. If you don't ride a bike that looks like it is stolen or otherwise get in contact with the police, I think you probably will not need it.
- If you want to study Japanese (or get in closer contact with regular Japanese students), try if you can get a language exchange partner. Unfortunately Dutch is not a major in Osaka University, but I think that the English ability of most Dutch students is good enough to do an exchange English-Japanese (I did this myself). If your native tongue is other than Dutch, then you are lucky and you can probably find enough Japanese students more than willing to do a language exchange.

4. Studying and living in Osaka

Finances

There are all kinds of non-periodic costs when you are coming to Osaka of which a few I mentioned above, such as your plane ticket (probably around 1000 euros), bike (cheapest one around 80 euros) and a mobile phone (cheapest one around 70 euros). When it comes to daily living expenses, Japan is not a cheap country. Food (especially fruit and vegetables) and drinks tend to be quite expensive. A rough estimate of my total monthly expenses is around 500 euro, which includes my (cheap) rent of only 110 euro. Of course this can get higher or lower depending on if you travel or go drinking often. Especially clubbing is not cheap in Japan.

Food

Coming to Japan the biggest culture shock for me was probably when I first walked in the supermarket. Despite my Japanese ability, there were a lot of things I could not read, due to specialized terms and special kanji (Chinese characters). Basically I did not know what half of the food even was or what you could do with it. Of course you get used to it eventually and once you get settled you can try some of the weird stuff you see. The biggest warning about food in Japan is the bread. To be blunt, the bread in Japan sucks. It is very expensive and just plain bad. I would recommend buying a (cheap) rice cooker when you get to Japan. Rice cookers are not normally used in the Netherlands, but they are very convenient. For instance you can set a timer for when it should be done, which enables you to set the timer just after you wake up, so you can eat rice for breakfast. I bought a 5000 yen rice cooker, and I also used it for brown rice (genmai), which I like better than white rice. If you are buying white rice, you might want to buy musenmai, that is rice you do not have to wash beforehand.

The food in the campus cafeterias is also ok. In general I think that it is easier to get some decent food in Japan than in the Netherlands (apart from bread). You can buy a bentou (lunch box) for a few hundred yen in a konbini (a sort of smallish type of supermarket, there is one called Lawson across from the boys dorm), or if you are just a little hungry you can buy an onigiri. Also there are a lot of so called 'gyuudon' fast-food places. Gyuudon is simply rice, with some onions and beef on top (there is one called Sukiya close to the boys dorm where I ate often).

Study Program

In Osaka University I studied a study program called OUSSEP (Osaka University Short-Term Student Exchange Program). You can do both half year and full year OUSSEP, which made my extension relatively easy. I think about 70 percent of the OUSSEP students do a full year OUSSEP. There were roughly 60 OUSSEP students, which makes it easy to get to know most of the people and also makes for a kind of group OUSSEP feeling. I believe that all students that do their exchange via the Law Faculty in Groningen study OUSSEP. Other programs are available however. Frontier Lab is mostly for natural science students doing research. Maple is I think mostly for students majoring in Japanese, but if your Japanese is already very good and you want to improve your Japanese language ability, you

could try informing about this program. There are also regular exchange students who take regular courses. It seems to me that they have more freedom in the topics they choose, but the overall organization for these students is a bit poorer.

OUSSEP students basically pick from the so-called International Exchange Subjects (IES) given in a semester and you can choose one regular course if you like. You are required by the OUSSEP coordinators to do a total of 15 Japanese points. This means 1 Japanese course (4 points) and 6 IES (1 IES = 2 points). I'm not sure what happens if you take less. Also I heard that you have to take some minimum amount of credits (around 10 I think) to comply with the requirements for your visa, but I don't know the specifics. The IES are taught in English, but regular Japanese students can also participate, which gives you a good opportunity to try talking to some. The IES are most of the time at an introductory level, because students from all majors can participate in OUSSEP, but there is a large variation in level depending on the teacher. Some of the courses have non-Japanese teachers, who tend to have better English ability as a result of which the speed and the difficulty of these courses tend to be higher as well. On the other hand there were some Japanese teachers who could barely speak English and would basically read their hand-out out loud. Nonetheless it was quite interesting for me to get a bit of an idea of multiple different fields. In the spring semester some interesting law courses were given, while in the fall semester there were almost none (bioethics had some law). The given courses change each year so I would recommend checking the syllabus on the OUSSEP website. All courses except Japanese have one class per week. There were never any books you needed to purchase except for some Japanese classes. Readings were distributed in class or electronically.

Below is a list of the courses I followed with a brief description and/or evaluation:

1st semester (fall semester)

1. Approaches to Understanding Cultures

Introduction into culture with later on an emphasis on culture relating to education and minorities. Readings were interesting, class not so much. Sometimes there were some interesting class discussions. Two small essays and a small presentation.

2. Media and Communications in Japan

Bad teacher, not so interesting class. I learned something about the subject through the provided readings, but those were also not so good. Exam and presentation. For the exam we got the (essay) questions beforehand and we could prepare (and print!) our answer, which we then had to transcribe by hand on official answer sheets during the exam. Weird.

3. Literature and Language of Japan and China

There was a new teacher each week. English level of the teachers was very poor and I was not that interested in the subject either. Two papers that have to be based on a subject discussed in class. You could choose your subject somewhat freely, which allowed me to investigate some interesting topics and make the class a bit better.

4. Japan and the Afro-Asian Countries

Also a new teacher each week. Interesting because there was a teacher from a different Asian country each week, but the level of the teachers also varied widely. The class is also the only one in

the fall semester taught in Minoh Campus. The atmosphere there is quite nice I think. There is one final paper on one of the topics.

5. Bioethics and Health Law: Legal Issues concerning Biotechnology, Medicine and Health Care System

One of the more interesting classes in the fall semester, especially for Law students. Various topics in bioethics are introduced and discussed in the whole class and in small groups. This gives an interesting opportunity to hear opinions of other students on delicate issues such as euthanasia and organ transplantation. Readings were not so good. There is one final paper on one of the topics.

6. Gender Theory

A very interesting class. The teacher is British and very well-informed. The speed of the course is quite high. Both the level of the class and of the readings was very good. There are a few small quizzes throughout the semester and one final paper on one of the topics.

7. Japanese JA300 level

I started with JA300 level. I was a bit disappointed in the level and the style of teaching. The class was a bit too easy for me, but this allowed me to do some other Japanese subjects. All JA classes are three times a week. Quizzes and presentations.

8. JBS300 Comprehensive Japanese (optional language class – not for credits)

I actually liked this Japanese class better than the JA300. There is a book, which gives you more of a grip and a feel that you are learning something. Quizzes throughout the semester.

9. JGS300 Lectures on Japanese Grammar (optional language class – not for credits)

This class is probably for some more advanced Japanese students. Each week one or a few (higher level) grammar points are discussed. One final quiz.

2nd semester (spring semester)

1. Philosophical Thinking and Japanese Traditions

This class was comparable to Literature and Language of Japan and China in the spring semester. New teacher each week, poor English. I liked the topic better, so it was somewhat more interesting. Two small papers on two subjects discussed in class.

2. Topics in Japanese Law

This was a good class. The teacher was Australian and in the first part he gave a quite thorough introduction of Japanese Law and current issues, with plenty of room for discussion. You had to hand in a research paper a few weeks before the end of the semester and in the last week there were presentations by everyone on their research paper.

3. Japan's Relations with Asian Countries after the Second World War

The teacher was a bit boring. There was room to discuss in class, but the questions to be discussed were not very thought-provoking. Nonetheless the readings were quite decent and all in all I did learn something about the subject. One exam at the end, which was similar to the one in Media

and Communications in Japan in the fall semester, so transcribing your answer again. Weird again.

4. Human Motivation and Behavior in Social Context

I liked this class. The teacher talked a bit slow sometimes, but she was very nice. There was also room for discussion, which was interesting and the readings were also interesting. There were a few small quizzes throughout the semester and one big quiz and a paper at the end.

5. Introduction to Japanese Legal /Political System and Culture

This class was taught by the same teacher that taught Bioethics in the last semester. Topics of the class were quite interesting (for instance: death penalty, wrongful conviction, changing surname after marriage), which made for interesting discussions sometimes. One final paper at the end on one topic discussed in class

6. Topics in Comparative Law

This was probably the most demanding class, but interesting. The professor was an established Korean professor (that studied for 10 years in Germany) who was on a sort of sabbatical. Our class was quite small and the atmosphere was relaxed, so there was room for discussion. Also our professor took our class to dinner a few times. There was one big paper in the middle of the semester, a presentation on your paper and a final exam.

7. Japanese JA400 level

I liked this level a lot better than JA300. The teachers were better and a book was used. Quizzes and presentations.

All in all I think that the spring semester has more interesting subjects, especially for Law students. All the law courses in the spring semester were good and they provided me with a solid (non-technical) introduction in Japanese law.

Travelling and sightseeing

There are a number of things to see in and around Osaka. Famous things in Osaka are the Kaiyuukan (the aquarium), Osaka Castle and USJ (Universal Studios Japan), to name a few. Around Shinsaibashi and the Dotonbori are a lot of places to eat and to drink. Walking around Namba is also a very Japanese experience, with robot-shops and cheap electronics.

Around Osaka, there are a number of cities: Kobe, Kyoto and Nara. There is a nice harbour in Kobe and you can find a lot of temples in Kyoto and Nara.

There are two trips organized within OUSSEP, one in each semester. Both trips are a weekend bus trip with one overnight stay for which you do not have to pay anything besides some food for yourself. In the fall semester the trip is to Hiroshima, to visit the atomic bomb museum and park and Miyajima, a temple island near Hiroshima. In the museum there was also a speech by an atomic bomb survivor, which was very impressive. In the spring semester the trip is to Koyasan, a temple mountain south of Osaka, where you also stay overnight at a monastery and eat traditional monastery food.

My extension allowed me to do some travelling in the spring vacation. During vacation time in Japan a ticket called Seishun-18 is available. With this cheap ticket (it costs around 12000 yen) you can use all regular JR-trains (not the Shinkansen or express trains) unlimited for 5 days (and those days do not have to be in a row). I applied for a two week homestay in Kagoshima, in the south of Kyushu, the most southern island. This was a very interesting experience that I can definitely recommend especially if you can already speak Japanese a bit or if you are serious about learning Japanese fast. There are also shorter home-stays available. Check the notice boards at the international offices periodically to see if there is one coming up. After my homestay I travelled back from Kyushu using the Seishun-18. You get what you pay for: there were multiple days where I was in the train for around eight hours. If you don't like sitting in trains or you are planning to visit a wider area, other JR passes are probably a better idea. Starting in Kagoshima I visited Kirishima, Beppu, Aso-san and Nagasaki. I stayed mostly at youth hostels, which were quite cheap and also quite clean most of the time. I heard that guest houses are even cheaper, but if you are in bad luck they can be dirty. Nonetheless Japan is an easy country to travel in: most places are clean, using the train is easy and there is always somebody to help.

Other things when studying and living in Osaka

- One thing that is really annoying in Japan is that you have to pay to park your bike in the neighbourhood of train stations. Placing your bike on a random spot on the street is illegal and your bike might get towed. My bike got towed once and I had to pick it up somewhere and pay 3000 yen. Not so much fun. Parking your bike is not that expensive generally, but if you don't like to pay, I would recommend parking it in front of a shop near the station. Preferably a supermarket or a konbini that is still open when you get back. The worst that can happen if you place it there is that your bike will get moved somewhere else, but you probably won't get a ticket.

Another annoying thing is that trains are not operating between 24:00 and 6:00. This means that when you go for a drink in the centre of the city, you are either going to have a very short or a very long night. Biking is not really an option since all dorms are too far from the centre of Osaka.

Just to mention some counterweight: toilets are free everywhere in Japan and in most eating facilities you get a free drink like water or tea with your meal that you can get refilled for free as well. Furthermore apart from the suspension of operation during the night, Japanese public transport is quick, punctual and easy.

5. Concluding remarks

I am very grateful that I could study a year in Osaka. It was an experience that enlarged my world, challenging sometimes, but overall one in which I developed and matured a whole lot. The OUSSEP program is not of a very high academic level, but even the small introductions on certain topics got me thinking, and I was lucky that the law courses in the spring semester were all pretty good. Of course, studying is really only a small part of the experience of studying abroad. Studying in Japan means being in a completely different culture with different people and a different worldview. Confronting for example is the stares that you get sometimes, myself being a tall white guy and not used to being noticed for my skin colour. In addition, studying in Japan means that you get to meet foreign students from all over the world and in this way you also learn a lot about neighbouring countries, such as China and Korea, and the relationships they have with each other and commonalities as well as the differences between the cultures.

I hope my report has been useful and/or interesting to read and I wish every student going to Osaka good luck and a lot of fun.