I’m a 4th year International Studies major student that studied at Kwansei Gakuin University (KGU) in Japan during the Fall 2018 semester. KGU was my second choice school because they had an international studies department just like my first choice (but the IS department at my first choice school had been established earlier). However overall I am glad to have gone to my second choice school instead because the Kansai region is much more preferable for me. It is less crowded there than the Tokyo area and people seem more friendlier there in my opinion.

The full application for KGU is quite long and consists of things like the online application form, letter to host family or accommodation coordinator, reasons for study form, self report of medical conditions, certificate of health by doctor, recommendation letters, official grade transcript, photocopy of passport, 4 ID photographs (3cm x 4cm), statement of finance, immigration application form. All of the above must also be sent physically to KGU on A4 size paper and in color. The KGU website has more specific details on what to do for each document. It is also possible to apply for scholarship from KGU, in which case you need to write an essay and attend certain events. I did not apply for scholarship so I can’t say anything detailed.

There is a online course list on the KGU website that also provides a general syllabus on each class so you can see if the class is more test based or essay based. Classes at KGU for exchange students are conducted mostly in English with the exception of language courses. Within the first week of arrival at KGU you will need to take a Japanese language proficiency test to see which level of Japanese you are at. If you would like to take regular Japanese student courses conducted in Japanese you will have to go through an interview and possibly another language test depending on your first language proficiency test. Overall the courses offered to exchange students are easier than SFU courses with classes lasting only 1.5 hours, meeting once a week, and having no tutorials. Language courses and Japanese student courses can me more difficult though.

I went during fall semester so I managed to avoid the peak of the high temperatures in Japan. It still remains fairly hot in September but it starts to cool down in October. It doesn’t get too cold compared to Vancouver during the winter but there are some days where it seems colder than usual. Probably best to bring some winter clothes as well instead of only summer clothes. Daiso in Japan is a 1 dollar store unlike the one in Richmond which is 2 dollars so you can get a lot of the necessities over there instead of bringing it from home. I would try and bring less and have extra room in your suitcase as I personally ended up buying a sizeable amount of things like food and clothes while I was in Japan.

Originally university volunteers would meet at the airport to receive the exchange students throughout the day but September is still part of typhoon season and when I went the airport was flooded so many flights were re-routed and students had to make their way to various bullet train stations from whichever airports they landed. I took the bullet train from Tokyo to Shin Kobe station and it cost over $150 CAD. There are cheaper options but bullet train is the most comfortable and quickest. Japan has a great transportation system that reaches a lot of different areas, but transportation costs can add up quickly especially if you are doing lots of
The dormitories and home stays can be farther away from KGU so you can get a commuter pass which allows unlimited transportation between the station closest to your home and the station closest to your school. The commuter pass is much cheaper than if you were to pay regular fare prices.

Japan is a mostly cash based society so make sure you have cash on you because credit cards and debit cards aren’t accepted in every establishment. Also check carefully with your bank to make sure the card won’t be frozen when used in Japan. Seven elevens have ATMs that accept international cards so it’s simplest to use your credit card or debit card to withdraw money from there. Coincidentally there is a seven eleven right on campus, so you can withdraw even if you’re at school. It’s a good idea to exchange some money before heading to Japan because the Canadian exchange rate is quite low. If you exchange money at the airport or other money exchange places in Japan you will get a lower rate than what you’d be able to get in Canada. Exchanging more CAD to JPY in Canada will give you more money to spend while you’re there but its best to just exchange as much as you’re comfortable with.

As mentioned previously, if there is no typhoon and the airport remains open then the KGU volunteers will meet with you and there will be a bus that takes you to the hotel in which you will be staying at for the first day. There will be a table with university staff at the hotel where you can check in and get your “welcome package” which contains things like schedules and other school pamphlets and info. The hotel rooms will be shared with two other people usually (3 in one room), dinner is not provided but there is a breakfast buffet for the following morning. There is not much to do on the first day but you can get your phone SIM card set up on the first day. The next day is the orientation in which KGU staff will explain about what will happen in the coming days.

September is still typhoon season so there is the possibility that your initial few weeks might be bad weather but typhoons usually don’t get too bad, but there are loudspeakers situated throughout neighborhoods that might seem more like “doomsday sirens” instead. It’s important to not panic and share info with other students to ascertain what the message being played over the loudspeakers are saying. KGU is located in the Hyogo prefecture and is situated next to Osaka and close to Kyoto and Kobe as well. There are many different sightseeing areas that are within traveling distances and domestic flights aren’t super expensive too especially if you fly with low cost carriers. Night buses and bullet trains are also handy for travelling. Osaka is more city like while, Kyoto is more for sightseeing with temples and shrines. Asking local students is probably the best way to find things that might interest you as they will be privy to events like the Kobe beef festival, ramen expo and other interesting activities.

For me, the greatest part of exchange was all the different people I was able to meet. I think it’s a great opportunity to make friends and have fun. I went on exchange expecting to just have very casual friends but I ended up meeting people that I think I can consider friends for life. I learned a lot about Japanese society while I was there, especially about Japanese workplaces and business which was important to me because at some point I wanted to work abroad after graduation and Japan was one of the places I thought about working in. One challenge I faced was that people in the Kansai area also speak Japanese really quickly so if you are not fluent in
Japanese it is hard to understand everything they are saying. One point I have to stress is that you should do your best to avoid taking transportation during rush hour in Japan because the videos you see on Youtube are true and sometimes you literally can’t move. Also as bad as this may sound, I think it’s better to not prioritize school and enjoy the overall exchange experience. School is definitely important, but I think that enjoying your time there is a much better to go out and have fun, only the credits transfer back so even if you have lower grades it won’t affect your GPA. Good luck!