Exchange Report: **Waseda University, Japan**  
Spring 2019 (March 2019 to August 2019)

**Introduction**

If you’re looking to study abroad in Japan, studying at Waseda University is one of the best choices you could possibly make. Located right in the heart of the country’s capital and largest city, there are opportunities and experiences here that you can’t get anywhere else! It is my hope that this report will be useful to future students evaluating their options in regards to exchange—if you’re anything like I was, you’re probably a bit panicked right about now. I’m here to help!

![View of Tokyo from Waseda Bldg. #3](Image)

**Preparation**

The application for Waseda can be quite strenuous, so make sure you stay patient and work together with the ISS regularly in order to get your documents in order. The Study Abroad Plan in particular, which is required as part of the application, can be tricky, as Waseda is very strict on word limits. Try to make this
document as detailed as possible! Waseda also has relatively detailed course syllabi from past semesters which are accessible online (https://www.wsl.waseda.jp/syllabus/JAA101.php?pLng=en), so take advantage of this resource to plan your courses well and make this document shine.

Once you are accepted, you will receive a package of documents from the school containing things like your Certificate of Enrollment, of Acceptance, etc. Make sure you don’t misplace these! Bring them to your nearest Japanese Consulate and they will issue you your student visa, free of charge. It only took around three days for them to complete my own.

In terms of packing, try to pack as light as possible. A good rule of thumb is to take only about the amount of clothes you would use in a week or a week and a half. You will be living in a new place for at least six months from here on in, so you can always do laundry and even buy new ones! The same goes for toiletries and other essentials: these can be bought at the nearest convenience store once you arrive, so don’t waste space bringing massive bottles of shampoo and conditioner. Bringing travel-sized toiletry containers for you to use in the meantime while you set-up in your accommodations, though, would be a good idea.

When choosing flights, pay attention to the different airports. Haneda Airport is located within Tokyo proper, and as such, is going to be closer to school (or any dorm/homestay within the central Tokyo area). However, flights to Haneda are fewer and a bit more costly, especially for direct flights. Narita Airport is located in neighboring Chiba Prefecture, about an hour out from Tokyo by train. Tickets for Narita-bound flights are much cheaper, but you will have to navigate a longer route into the city. I personally chose Haneda Airport because I was able to get a decent deal on flight tickets, but your mileage may vary.
Finally, on the subject of finances: Tokyo does tend to be a bit more expensive than Vancouver, both in terms of food and accommodations. Especially within the Waseda area, there are plenty of cheap eateries marketed primarily at students, but eating out often does tend to add up, especially if you’re eating at fancier places or drinking as well.

Though Japan is certainly still a cash-based society, more and more places within Tokyo now accept international credit (Visa, Mastercard) and some debit cards. There will be some places which only accept cash, though, so be sure to keep some on you at all times. Don’t worry about converting a massive amount of cash before you leave, however! There are international ATMs at almost every convenience store which you can use to withdraw money in yen directly from your credit card or bank card. Though I wasn’t able to use my Visa Debit card at most stores, it was easy to withdraw cash using it.

Cherry blossoms at Yoyogi Park.
During Exchange

Upon arriving at whichever airport you chose, be sure to pick up a *Suica* or *Pasmo* IC card from machines scattered throughout the terminal. These function similarly to Compass cards—simply load cash onto them at terminals and tap to ride trains/busses/etc. They’re very useful, as once you have one, you don’t need to fiddle with coins and small paper tickets to use the trains anymore. Furthermore, these allow to take advantage of commuter passes, which discount the cost of riding along a certain route in exchange for a flat fee. This is useful if you’re taking the same train to the same destination multiple times a week (as students are want to do).

Google Maps is very useful in Japan, and this is why I recommend getting set up with a Mobile SIM card or portable Wi-Fi soon after arriving in Japan. It can generate routes from your current location to a variety of different places, and shows them to you simply in a way that allows you to figure out which lines to use with a minimum of hassle. This will be invaluable when you are leaving the airport especially, as Waseda has discontinued bus services which once picked up international students from the terminal.

There are two orientations that you should attend: one for international students in general, and one for international students in your intended faculty. The first is likely the most important, as it is there that the school will give you a number of documents pertaining to life at the school, things you have to do before the semester starts, and other such things. There are quite a few things you have to do before the semester starts, such as register your address with the city office of your ward and enroll in medical insurance. These can be very intimidating if you lack knowledge of Japanese, so take advantage of group outings offered by the
school—they will pair you with a Japanese speaker that can help you through the process.

Accommodation is a very important part of the exchange experience, so be sure to choose this wisely. Because of Waseda’s lottery-based system and the demand for such programs, those who apply for a homestay program under the school’s umbrella have a high chance of being rejected. If you are rejected from homestay, you can’t then apply for the dorms! This limits you to private housing, which can be expensive: my apartment was ~$1500 CDN/month, compared to ~$750 CDN/month for a homestay or ~$500 CDN/month for a dorm. Private housing can be a good option if you are someone who appreciates having their own space and alone time, but if this is not the case, I highly suggest looking into dorms or private homestay programs. You will gain much more from your exchange experience this way, whether it be stronger bonds with other exchange students or valuable language experience.

The road leading to my apartment, in Takadanobaba.
Classes at Waseda were much easier compared to those at SFU, to the point where some people can take up to ten in a single semester. However, this can vary depending on your faculty. I took courses in political science and economics, as well as some Japanese classes, and they were on average much simpler than similar courses at SFU. Classes are also generally only a single period (1 hr 30 mins) in a week, with a similarly long midterm and final. Most are not graded on a curve. The toughest courses were the comprehensive language courses—primarily because of the breadth of the material—but these were also the most valuable!

In my experience, Japanese people tend to be very reserved and respectful of others, sometimes to a fault. It can be hard for foreigners to gauge what someone is actually thinking, or how they really feel about a given situation. The overall attitude towards expressing one’s feelings seems to be very different compared to what one might be used to, so try to be extra respectful of people’s personal and emotional space. Just because someone is not complaining vocally about your actions or chastising you, doesn’t mean you aren’t doing something wrong! This
being said, Japanese people are extremely kind and often more than willing to share their culture with others. Enjoy yourself, be respectful, and you’ll be fine!

The weather in Japan was one of the biggest shocks for me personally, as I was there during the peak of summer. The temperature reaches just below 40 degrees Celsius in Tokyo, with humidity at or above 80%. As you can imagine, this is a bit of a nightmare! Be sure to bring cool, loose clothes and use sunscreen liberally. Try to minimize your time in the direct sunlight and take it easy when exercising as well!

The best thing about living in Tokyo is that, no matter where you are, you’re just a train ride away from almost everything! There are so many gorgeous spots both within and just outside the city limits that I would recommend to anyone. Chief among these (my personal favourites in bold) would the Shinjuku National Gardens, Meiji Jingu, Yoyogi Park, Asakusa, Ueno Park, and Chichibu in neighboring Saitama.

*Shinjuku National Gardens*
Hitsujiyama Flower Park, Chichibu

Buddha statue in Ashigakubo, outside of Chichibu.
Finally, if you’re looking to get involved on campus and meet new people, Waseda has a number of great clubs and organizations you can join or help out with! My personal favourite of these is the ICC, or **Intercultural Communication Center**—a department of the university dedicated entirely to fostering connections between native and exchange students. The people who work here are super friendly, and put on excellent events. Most importantly, they provide a great opportunity to meet Japanese people and make friends! I really can’t recommend participating in ICC events enough. And when you have a break between classes, just pop in! There’s always someone there who’s willing to talk to you.
If this doesn’t sound like something for you, however, there are so many different clubs (called circles) that you can join based on your interests.

**Reflection**

I think the most important thing one can gain from exchange isn’t the credits or a line on a resume, but a sense of perspective. Only by travelling so far away from your own country and experiencing a totally different culture do you really start to realize how vast the world truly is.

Ultimately, though, that perspective comes with challenges. If you’re an introverted person like myself, living in a foreign country without family or friends and breaking out of your comfort zone to meet new people can be very difficult. The language barrier makes this that much harder: though many people in Tokyo can speak English, there will be times where you struggle to make yourself understood if you can’t communicate in Japanese. Adjusting to the differences in culture can also be difficult, especially at first—experiencing culture shock is
normal, but soon you’ll be so used to it, Canada will seem shocking by comparison!

*Reading owls outside of Ikebukuro Station.*

If I could give everyone going to Japan one piece of advice, it would be this: *learn some Japanese!* Even taking an introductory course or two back home (or self-studying) can make your experience that much more fulfilling. Nobody should ever pass up an opportunity to study abroad in Japan because they don’t know the language, but knowing the language can only ever help. The SFU Japanese department has some of the most talented and dedicated instructors I’ve ever had the pleasure of meeting, and learning from them allowed me to engage with Japan on a level that wouldn’t have been possible otherwise. I encourage everyone to check them out!

Also, *be open to new experiences!* You’re ultimately here to broaden your horizons, so be a bit more adventurous than you normally would be. Say *yes* more often, and explore—whether by yourself or with friends. Put yourself in
uncomfortable situations and see what happens! This is the key to enjoying your exchange.

I hope this report was helpful to you. Best of luck, and happy travels!

Your future after studying abroad!