During the Spring semester of 2012 I was enrolled in the intensive language tract program at Kwansei Gakuin University in Japan, which was outside their normal fields of study.

When I first prepared for applying to the school, I had to fill out a large number of papers and write introductions about myself in English and Japanese as it was for my language assessment, but the legwork of applying could have been made much easier I am told, had I used a company that helps with filling out forms for student visas abroad, but those can cost up $1000 + for their services. Upon arrival in Japan, they were undergoing a new system of foreigner registration so I’m not sure of the details, but it was still necessary to go to the city office during orientation to get a card which you carry with you for identification. After leaving the country, make sure you relinquish this card.

As I stayed at a dorm with other Japanese students based on my language ability, I don’t know the lifestyles of the other international students who lived in the international dorm or the host families that they signed up for themselves, however there were three men’s dorms and only one girl’s dorm. The application for the men’s dorms may ask you how social you are, and your placement is decided on that: the more social you say you are, the more events your dorm may have and these may be mandatory alongside your studies. The lifestyle there is also based on Confucian ethics of respect to elders, so the students who are in their fourth year are treated as if they are superiors in the military. One word of caution: there is hazing for first year students in the Spring semester.

Arriving into the country, I wish I had reserved a hotel instead of relying on a friend to provide
accommodation for a few days because my flight through Shanghai was delayed; they also lost my luggage temporarily coming back so don’t be cheap on the flight, take a direct flight if possible. I also recommend not going to the school on your own but rather taking the bus from the hotel.

The first few days of orientation consisted of getting a phone, national insurance, being assigned two language partners, safety drills and being given an outline of expected culture shock symptoms. Personally, I had inflamed tonsils two days before departure and got checked by my doctor in Canada, which resulted in my insurance to consider it an “ongoing condition”. They refused to pay for my $300 hospital bill because of that one detail. As I was not staying longer than four months, I did not qualify for the national insurance, but other insurance programs offered at the school cost about $100-200 for the four months.

For finances, I had $6000 for the entire semester. It seemed I spent $40 dollars a day for the first month on little necessities for living adjustments, and after settling in and finding cheap food, I still spent about $20 a day on a good day.

The only debit machine I ever needed was the one located by the food court outside, as my card was international and some banks even wouldn’t accept my card. 7-11 may accept foreign debit cards for withdraws, but it is recommended that you have enough cash on hand every day as banks are closed on Saturdays or Sundays, I forget which.

Taking the train/bus anywhere not on the designated route for students to get from their house to the school cost at least 210 yen each time, so walking up the hill is encouraged. Tickets for the train can be confusing too so a “Lagara” pass for the Kansai area filled with 1000 /2000 or however much you want is a faster way to not worry about direct change.
Living in the Japanese dorms is different from home stay or international dorms. My experience was being on the second floor of a four floor building. I had a desk, closet, bowl for the shower, chair, an ironing board and iron in the lobby, and free access to the washing machine. There was no rug on my floor, no free international power plug adaptor given, drying was done on a clothesline, and detergent can be shared, but it is best to buy your own. The dorm mother was very friendly and provided me with her own rice cooker, slippers, and fan to use but I bought a rug at “Nitori” – a housing goods store near the JR Nishinomiya station which you get to by taking the bus going the opposite direction of the Hankyu Kotoen station (the station everyone will use before going up the hill to school). One month I forgot to buy food tickets and they didn’t make an exception for me, so prepare for food.

For the actual classes, prior to being assigned a class we took a language proficiency tests. For the people that show the highest level of Japanese comprehension, they may be given the option to take a test to qualify for regular courses among Japanese students. The elective courses are free to choose but your placement depends on your proficiency and chosen level of intensity for language courses.

Intensive level classes meet around 4 times a week. Kanji classes were the most stable, having a test each day of the last week and a sheet of paper for homework after class. The most overlooked class was Monday grammar class, but the essays we wrote in this class helped the most with realizing our own mistakes when forming sentences and should be given more attention than the flow of classes suggests. Keigo (polite Japanese) and news related vocabulary were perhaps the hardest classes out of all because of the many rules involved and a tendency to never need to use
Japanese of that level for students. Electives were not impossibly hard, but phonology had only homework and one final worth 60%.

All during the semester, Kwansei staff members were there to help students with any academic or housing issues and any important notices were sent to our cell phones after being shown how to receive emails from them. They take care of most of the international student’s problems.

One of the things I noticed during my stay was the tendency for international students to only mingle with other international students in the “International Lounge” right across from the lounge with all Japanese students. I felt it was hard to break into a group of Japanese people and make friends unless you had an “in” somehow; either your Japanese partner or through a club/circle activity group.

The weather in Japan can change dramatically and you should have a small, portable umbrella for the spring semester. It will also get unbelievably hot and humid so a hand fan is the best tool for cooling yourself off. I don’t know how the winter in Kansai is, but two things will make your life miserable in Japan: the small kitchen/food/buildings and the heat. Only if you’ve experienced desert heat will you be mentally prepared for summer in Japan.

Coming back to Canada, I experienced a large feeling of re-entry culture shock. I had gotten used to the stressful everyday life and lack of space and resources, and I felt I had an appreciation of such that people in Canada didn’t. Canada doesn’t have Confucianism when dealing with strangers, so there is no defaulting on being polite until age, status and a pecking order is determined as in Japan. I felt safer and that people were generally nicer in Japan, whereas I felt
that Canada was dangerous, slow, lax, and people had bad attitudes but it was much easier to live in. I quickly learned that not everybody has an ear to hear the bad side of their country, and as such I felt much like the returning veteran that can’t fit back in. Having a social circle to come back to is important.

If I can give any advice about going to Japan, it would be enjoy it before you have to work in it. There is the fun side, but it is stressful to live in for a long time and when working there it is the most stressful environment feasible to work in. The seniority system doesn’t give much protection to those in lower ranks, but it is slowly improving. Regular life too can be much like the business world here, and you are always being watched by someone. Remember that every one of your actions have an impact that will be remembered for a very long time.