1. Preparation for the Exchange Application

The application for Kwansei Gakuin University (KGU) was quite lengthy, and typical of Japanese organizations required paper copies, therefore in addition to scans submitted through their website, I was required to submit the ten plus page application via International Services for Students (ISS) to be couriered to KGU. Students were given approximately one week to complete the application, of which these components took the most time and/or effort:

• 8 3x4cm Japanese passport style photos,
• Letter to Host Family/Dorm (Written in Japanese),
• JASSO Scholarship Application (Written in Japanese if studied language prior),
• Certificate of Health (Typical checkup including blood, urine, and TB tests),
• Statement of Finance (Signed by a bank financial officer stating you, or a person you are dependent on, have the necessary funds to support living in Japan)

Visa

For all Japanese resident visas a Certificate of Eligibility is required, this is acquired on your behalf by KGU as the host university, much of the application documents you will submit are requirements for the Certificate of Eligibility, and as it can take up to 3 months following the application submission to acquire, important to follow instructions precisely.

Once your Certificate of Eligibility is acquired, KGU will forward it to ISS where you may pick it up. This is the only requirement for acquiring your student visa, which can take up to one week from the Consulate-General of Japan in downtown Vancouver.

Packing

Packing for Japan is quite simple as the majority of the items you rely on in Canada are available in Japan. There are two large exceptions that many students fail to be aware of that is, off the shelf medications and deodorant.

Many off the shelf medications in Canada in Japan such as anti-histamines like Clartin for hay-fever are only available in prescription form and at much lower dosages; you will be
enrolled in the national health insurance program which covers 70% of visits and prescriptions, however this can be a bit bothersome. Japan has a heavy hay-fever season around February, a result of post-war policies that implemented cedar and cypress forestation.

Additionally, simple anti-inflammatory medications such as Ibuprofen, which for example is marketed in Japan for women pains, are available on the shelf but in even in extra strength are dosages often 1/4 of the same in Canada, in addition those dosages are often over 2 tablets, which essentially means the possibility of taking 8 tablets at one time. It is therefore recommended such things are brought with you.

Those unfamiliar with Asia should know deodorants (which are aluminum based in the west) are unavailable in Japan, this forces many students to scramble to Amazon paying inflated prices to maintain simple hygiene.

**Finances**

Japan is almost entirely a cash based society, particularly in services such as restaurants and transportation. ATM’s for example either are shuttered physically after business hours or charge greater fees for after hour or holiday transactions, while train ticketing machines only often only accept cash.

Although larger big-box retailers such as Loft or Tokyu Hands accept credit cards, the process can take much longer as it’s not a typical payment method. Debit cards with MasterCard Cirrus or Visa PLUS are able to withdrawal Japanese yen at Japan Post, 7/11 stores, and other locations, however fees are large and therefore not recommended.

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2. **During the Exchange**

**Introduction**

I attended Kwansei Gakuin University (KGU) from September 2015 to July 2016, this included the two Japanese semesters and a Winter Intensive semester fitted in between the two; albeit reversed, as although the majority of exchange students begin in the Fall, the school year for Japanese students starts with the Spring semester.

The Winter Intensive semester is primarily aimed at those in the intensive Japanese language track known at the time as the *Japanese Language Studies Module*, this was one
of two tracks in the *Japan and East Asia Studies Program*. The Winter Intensive Semester was the time, myself and many of classmates improved our language abilities most.

As of Fall 2016, JEASP has will have been replaced with the *Contemporary Japan Program*, which from my brief overview of the brochure addresses the majority of the issues I had with how non-language courses would affect my studies, the CJP’s intensive *Japanese Language Track* allows students to purely focus on language studies offering upwards of 10+ credits in language; a change I believe to be highly beneficial to future students looking to acquire a high proficiency in the language.

**Arrival and Orientation**

The main international airport in the Kansai region (Osaka, Kobe, Kyoto) is Kansai International Airport KIX, not to be confused with Itami International Airport ITM, which now largely handles domestic flights into Osaka. Students were met by representative volunteers of KGU at both airports, and while the majority flew into KIX, they were required to take what I believe is a 1hr30min shuttle bus to ITM.

The first day of arrival was a Friday which meant an overnight stay with the majority of students (approximately 160 in Fall 2015) at a business hotel adjacent to ITM, which while doesn’t serve many incoming exchange students flights, is approximately 30 minutes’ drive from KGU. Students were given their orientation documents including a temporary transit pass that will be used over the following week of orientation and course registration.

The hotel stay is not necessary and frankly costly considering my experience with that very business hotel chain, I suppose the inflated cost for the hotel was to cover the overhead for transportation of over one hundred students and their luggage to the University. Students that opted-out were be required to make their way to KGU that same morning where they will be moved into dorm or meet their homestay families, KGU is an approximately 20min brisk walk up a steep and winding hill from Kotoen Station which is on the Hankyu Imazu branch line, as such a taxi will be required if with luggage. Therefore, the overnight hotel stay is something, all considered, I recommend.

Orientation week consisted of the following items and activities among other things.

- The Japanese language assessment.
- First meetings with *Nihongo Partners*, these are student volunteers assigned to meet once per week at the very least to augment language learning. Up until Spring
2016, these volunteers also were required to assist with city hall resident registration, including enrollment in the compulsory national health insurance.

- This program has since been augmented and incoming students are now assigned in addition a GS Network partner, whom are more familiar with the more administrative duties such as city hall resident tasks, and also possess a higher level of English language ability, which while KGU is notable for its foreign language studies, the majority of Nihongo Partners did not possess.
- Japan has very stringent rules regarding resident registration and health insurance, often only available in Japanese, so these partners are crucial.

- Bank registration, KGU opens an account during orientation week with Senshu-Ikeda, the Osaka area’s largest regional bank, this allows students to accept scholarship funds in addition to any refunds that may be dispersed at the end of their exchange, among general banking activities.
- Course Planning and Registration, Japanese universities are highly traditional and use paper forms to withdrawal and add courses. With the exception of course outlines which available online.

**Accommodation and Living**

KGU is notable in this category because as an institution they heavily promote, in addition to administrate their own homestay program. This is important because of accountability, it is the universities reputation on the line; and while my homestay experience was beyond excellent, providing all the independence of living alone, yet with great meals and support in language and day-to-day activities, not all experiences are bound to be. All sorts of cultural barriers and issues can develop and having the university, as opposed to an agency, to insure a desired mediation can occur is of great value.

Personally I would think many students to be missing out on a large cultural component of learning the language if they were to opt to not stay in homestay. Additionally because KGU staff are so intricately involved in administrating the program, if needed students can change accommodation to dorm or other options if living with a family does not fit their lifestyle.

KGU has a variety of dorms that are all off the primary Uegahara campus, from 5 minute walks (Dormitory 3 & Seifuyro) to 60 minutes away on the train (Hyogo International House, near Kobe’s downtown, Sannomiya). Each dorm has different management styles and atmospheres to accommodate different types of students, from gendered to traditional dorms to full-style apartments.
Nishinomiya is an wonderful city to live in, approximately the same size of Vancouver proper, yet a mid-high income suburb between Kobe and Osaka. Despite being known for being a high wealthy city, Nishinomiya, because of KGU’s main Uegahara campus and smaller colleges and university satellite campuses that have clustered there, has many of the typical low cost student restaurants and services great for students such as Karaoke Boxes or Izakayas. In addition, Nishinomiya is home to the oldest and most storied Japanese baseball team in the major league which represent Osaka, the Hanshin Tigers. Baseball may not be the most exciting sport back home, but in Japan it is the national sport and the games are fast, intense, and exciting.

The Hankyu Nishinomiya-Kitaguchi Station the largest hub station between Osaka and Kobe, and only 10 minutes’ train away from KGU’s Kotoen station via the Imazu branch line of Hankyu Railways. The Nishinomiya-Kitaguchi Station area has a bustling, but typical Japanese nightlife with all the amenities of a medium sized city in Japan on the Northern exit, while at the south exit one of the largest, and certainly most modern malls in Kansai fitting of anywhere in North America called Hankyu Gardens.

Nishinomiya is connected well by three different train companies (Hankyu, JR, and Hanshin) between the two cities. 20 minutes in either direction and you are in the central entertainment and business districts of both Osaka and Kobe. Nishinomiya for many is the heart of residential Kansai.

Academics

As the Japan and East Asia Studies Program is being replaced in the upcoming semester I will not elaborate on details. The language program at KGU is highly developed and in the intensive language track utilizes the very prevalent textbook series of Minna-no-Nihongo from Pre-1 to Level 2 levels, with more native Japanese texts in the upper levels. Despite there were over 160 exchange students in the Fall 2015 semester, and that with each year this grows, class sizes remained small with typically 8 students to a teacher. As the program is expanding to offer more class time and credits I can only imagine the experience and skill to be gained will be greater in the future. I found the language teachers to be highly accommodating and each bringing their own unique skill sets to the table.

Each semester of the Intensive language program, the Japanese Language Studies Module was divided into three courses, Grammar and Vocabulary, Conversation and
Writing, and Kanji Characters. Given during my time at KGU the intensive program track only allotted one Kanji class per week, I would recommend the newer language students in the upcoming semesters, should they have it available to them, take on a second Kanji characters class. In The lower levels you will be learning 30-40 new Kanji per week, some not so intuitive or natural, but befitting of a Japanese student at that level in the language. The more class time the better to maintain a grasp for lower level students.

As for non-language courses, I wouldn't recommend them, this is not exclusive to KGU, but all traditional Japanese universities. KGU is one of fourteen private institutions in Japan's "Super Global Universities" program, anywhere you travel in Japan if you have something to identify you are a KGU student or you will be able strike up a conversation.

That being said, as Japanese students take 6-12 (2 credit) courses per semester, regardless of language of instruction, the depth of content is just not at an upper division level as expected from a western education perspective. This is not a slight against Japanese education, more-so the reality remains that specialization is not a priority at the undergraduate level, more-so a well networked, productive and focused student is expected, someone who will enter a workforce, in which the company of employment is expected to train and specialize said new hires.

Regardless of instruction quality, which is backed by highly specialized professors, elective courses often become a hindrance at end of terms due to irregular course load typical of Japanese education (80% grade papers or exams). Often myself and others were unfortunately forced to choose between mastering our language abilities at end of term or completing projects and exams crucial to completing said courses.

3. Final Words

Japan is not for everyone, it is a place that even many young Japanese find great frustration in; simple administrative tasks are often multiple forms of paperwork, and often the way something is, it's the way something is. If one takes this into mind, and is able to internalize it, then I believe their time in Japan will be greatly eased.

That said, KGU is a university with a lengthy 125-year history with an outstanding school spirit and atmosphere that few universities can match. While not perfect, KGU's
comprehensive support of exchange students from study to day-to-day life is a stand out attribute.

While I wasn’t able to touch particularly well due to length considerations on greater life in Japan, I must comment that the location of KGU is rather perfect, with the large majority of cultural touch stones of traditional and modern Japan in and around the Kansai region.

Over two holidays I was able to travel along the Pacific Ocean side of Japan, from Sapporo to Kagoshima in Kyushu; made possible by student discounts such as *Seishun Kippu 18*, a 5 non-consecutive days pass on local JR trains for ~$11,000JPY which over four days of travel took me from Sapporo to Osaka and over 2,200 kilometers.

Language acquisition is not something simply tasked in a classroom, so I implore anyone on exchange to experience culture and language as it is meant to be, through the environment; be that in school circles, living with a host-family, at the supermarket, and/or traveling, I can say for certain that studying at Kwansei Gakuin University fosters such opportunities.