I was an exchange student to Waseda University at Japan from Fall 2016 to Spring 2017. The exchange program of SFU and Waseda was new at the time of my application. Here, I am going to share some of my experience. This article will cover everything from the application to returning from Japan.

The major problem that I faced during my application was the tight deadlines. There was only one week for the student to prepare all the required documents for Waseda university and the Japanese government. My advice for future students is to start the paper work as soon as possible. Majority of the paper work was straightforward, but there are some exceptions. One document that took me a lot of time was the course selection document and to choose your department of study at Waseda University.

There was no Japanese requirement for out-going student to Waseda University. They offer many English taught courses at certain departments. When I was filling my application, I was aiming for these English taught courses due to my limited Japanese skills. However, there were no clear guide line for how to choose the department. These researches took an enormous amount of time and effort. One of the English taught program is the Contemporary Japanese Studies Program under the School of Social Science. This is the program that I enrolled in. School of International Liberal Studies also offers many English-based courses. After deciding the department, you also need to do a course research to find the courses offered at the time of your exchange period. This is not a course selection process, but a way to show you understand what kind of courses the department offers.

The application process is important and complicated. I really appreciated the help from our Exchange Center during this process. After the completion of the applications, there is a long period of waiting time for Fall term exchange students. For Fall term exchange students, Waseda University will reply to you during May (the paper works were due at the end of SFU’s reading break).

The next big thing to decide after the formal offer from Waseda University is residence. There are three options. The most expensive one is to live with a homestay. The difficulty for renting a place is to rent it before departure. The most convenient way is to live in an international student dorm. The experience I want to share is that single rooms in these dorms are limited and is first come first serve. If you want a single room, you need to submit the online questionnaire seconds after it opens.

One last thing I want to share before departure is how to get money to Japan. You can bring all your currency with you on the plane. The limited currency to carry is ten thousand US dollars per person, which is around one million Japanese currency. From my experience, one million yen can last for five months, which is the length for one term exchange. One other way is to open a bank account after you landed in Japan and wire transfer the money. You can use oversea credit card to register a cell phone.

Tokyo is very different than Vancouver, so be prepare for the culture shock. You will see more people in Tokyo in one day than you will see in Vancouver for a month. There are many people but few cars on the road, because the public transportation system is very good and convenient in Tokyo. If you want to save on the transportation cost (trains and buses can be expensive), you can buy a bike to travel around.

The first two weeks in Japan can be busy; more paper work, opening bank account, register cell phone, and getting around. The university will help you with paper works such as health insurance and
residence card, so don't worry if your Japanese is not great. If you want to get to know local Japanese student, I highly recommend joining University circles/club. There are circles that takes exchange and international students around Tokyo for trips and activities. There are two long vacation without school during a semester of exchange. There is a moth of break after you land (school starts at end of September) and there is a two-week winter break at the end of the year. These are your chances to travel far if you are planning to do so.

One thing that I struggled a lot with was opening a bank account. The University will provide an info section for opening bank at the end of September, but I did not bring enough money to last until then. I had to do a lot of homework on these banks. Each bank has different fee regarding for wire transfer, restriction on how you can transfer, and what type of currency you can transfer. For example, I have a friend who wanted to wire transfer New Taiwanese Dollar to Japanese Yen, but had to exchange NTW to EUR then back to JPY due to her bank regulation. My advice is to do your homework to figure out which bank suits you best. Japanese banks have very restricted regulations, and some regulation can very from branch to branch within the same bank. For example, majority of banks require you to open your account at the nearest branch from your residence, some provide English services, some do not allow you to open an account if you can not speak Japanese, and some requires you to bring a seal. Again, my advice is to do your homework.

Course selection at Waseda is like SFU’s system. Like SFU’s system, the first week is a trail week where you can add and drop courses as you wish. My advice is to attend all courses including the ones that you think you might want to join but have not yet sign up for during this trail week. This is because a lot of class material is given at the first week, many class is one lecture per week. Different department have different regulation on what course exchange student can take, so you need to check with your department (each department have an info section where this subject if taught in detail).

Living alone away from family and friends is hard, and all applicants need to be prepared. It is wise to ask advices from other students who went and do homework on the destination that you will be going.
Closest train station around Waseda; takadanobaba station
Dorm