Introduction

I participated in the exchange program to Waseda University from September 2019 to February 2020 in their Center for Japanese Language (CJL) faculty. Here are some of my tips and information for prospective exchange students for Waseda University.
Before the Exchange

Visas / Documentation

Upon acceptance into Waseda, they will mail you a welcome package that will contain orientation information and most importantly, the Certificate of Admission. This will be around 2-3 months before departing for Japan.

Before heading to the Japanese consulate, you will need your passport, Certification of Eligibility, Certification of Admission, portrait of yourself for visas and a completed visa application form. The student visa will take 1 week for processing. In terms of cost, mine was free of charge, but bring cash just in case as it might be around 35 CAD.

Finances

Since half-year exchange students are not required to open a bank account in Japan, make sure to consult your bank about increasing ATM withdrawal limits as withdrawing from ATMs would be the primary method of getting cash since Japan is still a cash-based society. ATMs can be found in Family Mart, Lawson and 7-11 stores.

To minimize foreign transaction fees while in Japan, I recommend bringing as much Japanese yen as possible prior to arriving or withdrawing larger amounts each transaction.

Full year exchange students are required to open a bank account in Japan. Orientations will be held regarding opening Japanese bank accounts.

Accommodation

Waseda will send out a questionnaire to fill out if you are planning to live in their dormitories, around 2 months before the semester begins. You can also look around and find an apartment affiliated with Waseda at any time, at your own discretion.

When receiving the questionnaire to live at the dormitories, I highly recommend filling out the questionnaire as soon as it opens as it is highly competitive. The faster you fill out the application, the more chances you will receive the desired room. Since it takes time for the results of the questionnaire to be announced, I also highly recommend looking at other properties affiliated with Waseda or Airbnb’s in the meantime, in case you do not get into the dormitories.

What to pack

Pack light! For fall semester students, bring both your summer and winter clothing! In Tokyo, temperatures from September to October can still be around 25 degrees or warmer. It then starts to cool afterwards to temperatures similar to Vancouver in the winter. Also be aware that typhoon season lasts until the end of October so keep that umbrella handy!

It is not necessary to bring toiletries and other supplies as you can buy them for cheap at the nearest convenience store, whether its Family Mart, Lawson or 7-11. Just your clothes, electronics and documents will be sufficient!
During the Exchange

Arrival

After arriving in Tokyo, I highly recommend purchasing a Suica or Pasmo card at the train station. These are just like the Compass cards for the Tokyo metro system. You can also use Suica/Pasmo to pay for things at the convenience stores for a slightly discounted price.

As for SIM cards, I have arranged a monthly data plan with a service provider before arriving in Tokyo and picked up their SIM card at the airport. You can also purchase SIM cards at the orientations held at the university.

If you wish to work part time in Japan, you can fill out a form at the customs counter at the airport that will allow you to work at part time jobs.

 Orientations

I highly recommend attending all orientations as they will cover course registration information, opening bank accounts, paperwork procedures for the city hall, what to do during an earthquake, information about club days, activities, campus and university life.

The full orientation schedule will be mailed as part of the welcome package Waseda sends to you.

The first few weeks in Tokyo will involve having to fill out a lot of paperwork including the application for health insurance and registration of your address at your local city hall. Enrollment in the Japanese health insurance is mandatory by law, even if you have private travel insurance beforehand, and will cover 70% of your medical costs.

At these orientations, you can purchase SIM cards for data and calling as they will set up booths for purchasing if you haven’t done so after arriving.

 Academics

The course registration process is similar to SFU. You will be given an enrollment date to register for your courses. After the semester begins, you can drop, swap, or add courses up until the second week. Depending on what faculty you are enrolled into, there will be a minimum number of credits you have to be enrolled in. For example, in CJL, 13 credits is the minimum.

For students wanting to take Japanese language courses from CJL, JCAT (Japanese Computerized Adaptive Test) is required before enrolment so that students know what level of Japanese they belong to. You can register for the JCAT 1-2 weeks before the semester begins once you receive your computing ID from Waseda.

Waseda has a class schedule based on time periods. Each class is 90 minutes long. Period 1 starts from 9:00AM to 10:30AM, period 2 from 10:40AM to 12:10PM and so on. The full timetable can be found on Waseda’s website.

The Japanese language courses offered by CJL has many quizzes and assignments. However, these were very light assignments and were not difficult. Students will be immersed into the Japanese culture and further learn to read, write, listen, and speak Japanese. All language courses are conducted in Japanese.
Campus Life

Waseda has a lot of social circles for international students, including language exchanges, specific activities, sports and other meetup groups where you can meet local students and mingle with other international students! If you want to meet other international students, I recommend checking out Waseda’s International Cultural Center (ICC).

Compared to SFU, the main Waseda campus is quite small and compact. There are other satellite campuses in Toyama and Tokorozawa.
Life in Tokyo

Tokyo is a bustling metropolis with lots to do and see!

For foodies, Tokyo has many restaurants to hop around. My recommendations for ramen include Ichiran and Ippudo. There are also conveyor belt sushi restaurants if you are craving for quick, affordable sushi. Other must-try foods include tonkatsu (pork cutlet sets), yakiniku (grilled meat), kaisendon (sashimi rice bowls), yakisoba (stir-fried soba noodles), gyudon (beef bowls), okonomiyaki (Japanese style cabbage pancakes) and Japanese curry. This list is not exhaustive and excludes the hidden gems which I will not be sharing here. I will leave the hidden gems for prospective students to discover.

For places to sightsee around Tokyo, I recommend the following:

Shibuya:
- Shibuya crossing
- Shibuya Sky

Shinjuku:
- Tokyo Metropolitan Government Building
- Memory Lane

Odaiba:
- TeamLab Borderless / Planets
- Rainbow Bridge

Disney Sea

Ghibli Museum

Ueno:
- Ueno Park
- Ameyokocho

Yoyogi:
- Yoyogi Park
- Meiji Jingu Shrine

Harajuku:
- Christmas illumination (December)
- Various shops and cafes

Asakusa:
- Asakusa Temple
- Tokyo Skytree

Meguro:
- Starbucks reserve roastery

Roppongi Hills:
- Christmas illumination (December)
- Tokyo Tower

Yokohama

Kamakura:
- Enoshima
Reflection of Exchange

Going on exchange is the best thing I have done in university as it nourished my interpersonal growth, gave me a chance to live in another country, experience different cultures and lifestyles. It also gave me the opportunity to create international connections as I got to meet people and make friends from all over the world. Living in another country also allows you to use the host country as a pivot point to go travelling to other countries nearby too!

I would definitely recommend going on exchange to everyone as it is a once in a lifetime opportunity that will provide all new experiences and huge interpersonal growth.

Cliffsides in Okinawa
Sapporo, Hokkaido, Japan