

Report semester abroad in Japan WS22/23

In the winter semester 2022/2023 I spent a semester abroad at the Osaka University in Japan. I chose Osaka University because of the OUSSEP program which offers a wide range of courses and gives you the opportunity to also take courses in areas outside your own study program. By studying abroad, I was able to gain unique insights into life in Japan - the Japanese way of working and living, the unique traditional festivals and the remarkable food culture.

Prior preparations and arrival

After I had applied for the exchange place at the International Office in December 2021 and received an acceptance letter about two months later, I had to apply again directly to the partner university via an online portal of Osaka University. In the next few months, many documents had to be gathered or filled out, be it for the application for a scholarship, the visa process or the application for a place in a dormitory. Applying for the scholarship at the International Office was very uncomplicated; however, everything related to Osaka University was a bit nerve-wracking at times. Looking back, I see it as a small glimpse of the Japanese bureaucracy that I repeatedly had to face, and that can easily beat the German bureaucracy. Especially the visa process was very lengthy and in the end, I only had my final entry permit a few days before departure. Some other exchange students were a little less lucky and could only join us later when the semester had already started. However, the university in Osaka was prepared for this and offered the courses in hybrid format at the beginning until all exchange students arrived. After that, all courses were held in presence.

Accommodation

It was possible to apply in advance for a place in the dormitory *Global Village* for a 9-, 7- or 5-bed dormitory unit. I lived in a 7-room unit with 6 other students from Canada, Taiwan, Japan, South Korea and Kazakhstan. The access to the three different campus areas and Osaka downtown was very good from the dorm. Everything could be reached within 30-50 minutes by foot or train. Students who did not get a place in the dormitory were able to find accommodations on their own with the support of the university.

Studying

At the end of September, there were several orientations and a guidance on how to register for courses. There are specific courses by the OUSSEP program, all of which are in English. In addition, it was possible to enroll in other courses offered by the university in English or Japanese. In total, you had to collect at least 14 ECTS to successfully complete the OUSSEP program, which would be 25.2 credits in the European system. I had consulted with the program coordinator of my master's program beforehand to find out which courses I could get credited for my degree. In total, I was able to get three of my six courses credited.

The OUSSEP program also includes a field trip. As in previous years, we went to Hiroshima and heard a testimony from an atomic bomb survivor. The trip was definitely a highlight of the exchange semester. Another special feature of the OUSSEP program is that in addition to the university courses, small internships are offered. For those, you had to apply a few months before the semester started. When I was doing my semester abroad, they cooperated with an international preschool for the first time and offered an internship for five exchange students. I was one of the lucky students who got a spot. During the semester I went to one of the branches of the school, for

which I got 4 ECTS at the end. Even if I didn't learn anything academically related, the internship was a very enjoyable change from my everyday studies and gave me a good insight into a Japanese and international working environment. Another way to get a little variety from everyday life at the university was to join one of the many sports and cultural clubs offered by the university. There are also organizations at each of the three campus areas that are specifically aimed at international students and regularly organized small events such as game nights. I also participated in a project where I helped a Japanese student once a week for 1-2 hours to prepare for the IELTS English test. Osaka University also offers other exchange programs besides the OUSSEP program. However, some exchange students who participated in those were not completely satisfied with their experience. For example, those who participated in the FrontierLab program or took an Independent Study course as part of the OUSSEP program were very surprised by the - from a German perspective - rather chaotic and arbitrary way of working in Japan, which is nevertheless very demanding at the same time. Many were in the lab from morning to night without clear objectives or good supervision. Of course, that's just the perspective of the few exchange students I've talked to about it. Others may have had better experiences in these programs.

My experiences

Personally, I did not have a bad experience during my time here. Apart from the already mentioned confusing and exhausting bureaucracy and paperwork of the country, I would say that the only thing that made my stay difficult was the language barrier. Even though English has become more and more common, one should not underestimate how important and helpful it is to know at least a few words of Japanese. In preparation for my semester abroad, I had started learning Japanese a year - two semesters - beforehand with the help of the language courses at the ZFA. In retrospect, I could have started even earlier, because the language is a real challenge with its three alphabets, completely different grammar and various forms of politeness. The OUSSEP program also offered language courses for different levels of Japanese, but I was unable to take them due to my internship, as the course times would have overlapped. I often wished I could talk more with the locals about the country and understand more about the rituals or festivals.

Nevertheless, the semester abroad was an incredibly great experience that I would not want to have missed. The whole culture and history of the country are just fascinating. The people here are so helpful and considerate and have a completely different relationship to their culture and nature than I am used to from home. I have seen many beautiful places and made wonderful memories. During the exchange, I not only learned something about another culture, but also reflected on my own culture and began to see it with different eyes.

My conclusion: I can recommend it to everyone to do a semester abroad!

