

## **One semester in Japan**

Home University: Heidelberg University  
MSc. Computer Science

Host University: Kyoto University  
Graduate School of Informatics  
(General Exchange Student)

Winter-Semester 2016-2017

## Synopsis

The reality exceeded my expectations on a study abroad tremendously. "If I'm lucky, the courses I take will be at least interesting, even though they may not pertain to my research, and I will find some international as well as Japanese friends", I thought before my departure. Retrospectively, I not only had extremely well-taught and relevant lectures, I also could advance my Japanese language ability so far that I was able to make friends in the calligraphy club and take lessons in tea ceremony.

## Preparations

All formalities, at Heidelberg as well as at Kyoto University, were extremely well organized, in my experience. Naturally there are many forms to fill out for a study abroad during the application process. But in comparison to the great experience that it means, that work is minor. Each form and requirement has its purpose and writing the motivation letters as well as preparing for the application interview is a good check of endurance for the students themselves. I learned that the University's offices are extremely helpful with all procedures regarding the travel and stay, for example in providing all forms for the visa application or getting a dormitory room and bank account. If the checklists and deadlines are observed carefully, everything runs very smoothly.

The detailed plan of the study program, however, is something that the students have to do by themselves. The individual situations are so diverse that no office can provide all the information necessary to make the most of it for each student. In my preparations I worked a lot with the syllabuses provided by Kyoto University online. That enabled me to inquire beforehand at my faculty's examination office if I would be able to transfer the credits from the courses I planned to take. In addition, I could find information online about the contents and textbooks used in the Japanese language courses, so that I was able to prepare accordingly for the placement test.

## Studying at Kyoto University as a General Exchange Student

As a graduate student, I came to study at Kyoto University as a General Exchange Student. That means that I was accepted by the Graduate School of Informatics, where I took several courses in my major and was also assigned to a lab, where I attended the weekly lab meetings. In addition, I completed an intense 3-days-a-week Japanese language course.

### a) Japanese Classes

In the Japanese language class I finished the textbook *Minna no nihongo 2* within one semester, at the end of which I was able to do daily conversation and have Japanese email contact with friends as well as professors, and give a short speech in Japanese.

### b) English Lectures

The lecture classes that I took for my major helped me advance in theoretical and practical knowledge about different topics. It was very good to experience another type of teaching to broaden my horizon on how different universities handle the students' courses, on an organizational as well as on content-based level. The reports, assignments and test questions were very application-oriented which, especially for computer science, is the best way of learning.

### c) Lab Meeting

In the lab meetings I got to experience the way a Japanese research group works. I not only heard talks about the topics that the members do research on, but also gave a talk on my own research and am very glad for the valuable comments I received from the professors.

Regarding organized leisure activities, the monthly events hosted by the international student lounge Kizuna are very advisable. I also participated at the cultural exchange camp, which was a weekend trip where international and Japanese students as well as professors met for sightseeing and discussions.

## Staying in Kyoto

I wanted to use the chance of being at the same place for a longer period of time to take part in regular activities that are not available for tourists. That is why I keep traveling to other places in Japan for future visits when I can use the JR-Pass with a tourist visa, and used this exchange semester for experiencing Kyoto and the Kansai area with its change of seasons. I joined the calligraphy club of the University, took Chado (tea ceremony) lessons and went to events such as the Kyoto University Symphonic Orchestra's concerts. Especially getting insight into students' club life also taught me a lot about Japanese group's organizational skills. From folding pamphlets at the club meeting to the great care taken for retrieving and evaluating feedback from exhibition visitors, I was really impressed by the way everybody worked together.

## Conclusion

As a last comment, I would like to suggest to future exchange students to read books written by natives of their host country about their own experiences living abroad. While taking a stroll through the foreign books section of the Kyoto University library, I stumbled upon books such as "From the country of Kimonos", "American diaries from a Japanese Girl" and "Daughter of the Samurai", all written by Japanese who have lived abroad in the USA for a while and then decided to put their new perspective gained on their own country into writing. Their descriptions were very valuable for me, because the authors know precisely which aspects of Japanese life differ from other countries and explain exactly those curiosities that I was wondering about, helping me to correctly identify and appreciate the customs.

## Handy Hints for Future Students

- For traveling schedules: <http://www.hyperdia.com/>
- Use the university travelling center for booking tickets with student discount
- Free drinks for students near the university: <http://shirucafe.com/>
- Sign up for the newsletters by the international lounge Kizuna and the general Kyoto City International Foundation (kcif, [http://www.kcif.or.jp/kcif\\_webservice/pages/](http://www.kcif.or.jp/kcif_webservice/pages/)) in order to receive invitations to free events, such as concerts or workshops.
- Get a Japanese Sim card and / or cell phone. Saving money on communication by trying to get around with only Wifi will restrict your ability to easily make local friends.
- Take part in as many events as possible, it will lead you to places you would probably not get to by yourself.
- Join a club or circle, you can get contact information at the respective office, or ask around at Kizuna tea time if someone knows someone...