

Tohoku University One Year Abroad WiSe 24/25 and SoSe 25 Testimonial

1) Preparation and Onboarding

The application process starting in Heidelberg was in my opinion clear and structured, although lengthy. The same can be said for the Tohoku University's side. As the other testimonials describe the actual process behind the application, I want to give more emphasis on some struggles I had. Personally, I had some difficulties with the letters of recommendation by my professors here in Heidelberg, having to remind them a couple of times that the due date is coming up. In the end they submitted it on time and since I had the opportunity to come here, it seems like they also found nice words for me, so I do not want to complain too much ;)

Next, in the application process at Tohoku University, since I am a Master student in Physics, I had to find a suitable academic advisor, in a limited pool for my specialization. The deadline of reporting an academic advisor was also rather quickly approaching and the first professor I contacted never replied to me (culturally Japan is not so different to Germany after all ;)). Although the exchange student division does not want you to contact a professor directly, I did so since my time was running short. Fortunately, I got in touch with a professor who does research in my field and he answered within a couple of hours and let me join his group.

For the rest of the application process I do not have a very clear memory, but the issuance of the COE and applying for a visa was also pretty stressful, since the consulate seems to be very busy and the fact that the COEs get issued so late makes it not so easy to plan in advance about the arrival in Sendai. It all worked out for me, maybe I am lucky as well that I have a residency in Hesse, so I could make an appointment in the Frankfurt consulate.

The onboarding in Sendai was also very structured. I got to Sendai around 8 or 9 pm at the UH Aobayama and although it was said that the latest time of moving in is at 5 pm or something like that, after I contacted the UH employees and reported my arrival time, we still did the "check in" the same day.

Overall, the information and procedures at the Tohoku University and in Japan in general seem pretty strict. Still, in most of these situations the people in charge would make exceptions and find a way to work things out for me and it was all not so strict after all.

2) COLABS Programme

The COLABS programme is a research programme, in which exchange students find an academic supervisor, whose group they join over their stay at Tohoku University. I believe this programme is very nice and it was exactly what I needed academically at this point. At Heidelberg University the only module left in Master's programme was the thesis, so the COLABS programme in accordance with my supervisor in Heidelberg was the perfect set up for completing my Master's degree. The coordinators of this programme were a great help not only in academia but also in the struggles of the plethora of paperwork in Japan. They were always easy to reach and very patient and helpful in their replies.

Also my professor was always helpful in organizational tasks. I was very lucky to find him and his group. They took me in from day one and I made great friends in the group. Once a week we would do some activity together like playing Basketball or Tennis or cards. Academically, compared to Germany I felt very involved in the group. We had a group meeting once a week and for my research project I had a separate meeting with my professor and a PhD student alone once week. I am very grateful that I got to work so closely with my professor. Moreover, we had social events which I happily participated in like a Baseball tournament of the department and different drinking parties. The research itself here was challenging but not too much to ask for, I would say. If you want to write a Master's thesis in theoretical physics I guess you have to expect a little resistance. All this is more of a reason to be grateful for the support I received from my professor and lab mates.

Furthermore, my professor gave me and the PhD student I worked closely with many opportunities to solidify our knowledge and take part in a real research environment. We were able to participate in an international conference in which we gave presentations as well as holding seminars for other labs and for research colleagues. Of course, this was extra work and I could understand if some exchange students preferred a different treatment, but I personally was thankful for being given these chances, as they were great experiences and gave a real picture of science and academia.

Everyone in the department was always nice to me and people would come up to me and be interested in who I was, as they understood I was not just a short-time visitor in the department's building. This is how I met many of the professors and fellow students in this department and built a relationship with some of them.

3) Life as an Exchange Student

Following my description of my lab environment, Sendai, compared to Tokyo and the bigger cities in the Kansai region, experiences not as many tourists and foreigners. This fact boosts the interest in foreigners here. I would describe myself as rather outgoing so I enjoyed talking to locals on random occasions and getting to know the culture in that way. It happened regularly that people wanted to take pictures with me or gave me fist bumps, saying I was cool, more or less seldomly attributed to me being a blonde foreigner, I suppose. Frankly, these moments were funny and absurd. If you stay at a different country for such a long time, you ask yourself if you could picture yourself living in that country, and these moments present a side of my experience of Japan which I am a little ambivalent about. Japanese were always kind to me, it also happened quite some times that randomly people would pay for my expenses at an izakaya or a convenient store, and I never experienced any discrimination, but I have the impression, still for me to become a real part of this culture could be challenging. As a foreigner in Tohoku you will always get a special treatment. A big role plays of course the language. Overall, I think it is a huge advantage to be able to speak Japanese here. Truthfully, the English level even in the university environment is rather limited and at least being able to communicate in everyday situations is very helpful.

4) Life in Japan and in Sendai

Life in Japan overall is very convenient and easy. The infrastructure is close to perfect, making it very easy to commute within Japan. The reputation of Japanese to be kind, respectful and caring is totally true from my perspective. In the whole of Japan and also in my lab, I have the impression that Japanese really value if others respect their way of living and their customs. Personally, I think that Europe should take Japan as a role model in many cultural ways. The feeling of safety here is unprecedented and I have not once seen a Tahon on the streets and rarely anyone behaving out of line. As the culture is rich in traditions and temples there is always a lot of new things to see and do in Japan. It is a country full of amazing temples and shrines, vivid cities and amazing nature.

If you live in Sendai, you will be close to many great hiking routes in the vicinity. If you go a little further you could probably do a great hike every week of your stay, which was one of the reasons for me to come to Sendai. Sendai compared to Tokyo and other big cities in Japan feels more relaxed, a little decelerated and not so touristic. Still you have everything you need and on top easy access to the pacific as well.

One of my concerns coming to Japan and a new environment was if I would be able to find new friends that I would want to hang out with. This concern was resolved within the

first week of my stay. Fortunately, the university organized a couple of events for orientation where I quickly met friends that I would hang out with today. Especially two guys from Finland that also did COLABS and had similar interests as me. Also part of this exchange is making international friends and not only learning about the culture of Japan but also the culture of the many internationals you will meet. Having spent a lot of time with the Finish made me want to visit their country as well, something I was not really thinking about before meeting them. Moreover, there are similar cases like that.

In conclusion, an exchange like this is a cultural experience. The culture of Japan in many aspects is second to none. A change of environment like this will mature you as a person. Also for me it gave me another perspective on life in Germany and what it means to be German. Especially Japan is also academically a good decision. So, I can only recommend everybody to take part in an opportunity like this.