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Exchange period: September 2015 to August 2016

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I was on exchange at Hitotsubashi University in Japan for one year, from September 2015 to August 2016. It was truly a wonderful, life-changing experience, and I regret only that it could not have lasted longer.

Studying abroad changed my perspective on both my host country’s culture and my own. I think most Westerners’ idea of Japan might be largely shaped by popular media. Many of us have grown up watching anime and reading manga, playing Japanese video games, and perhaps also listening to Japanese music at some point. This exchange forged a new, broader, and more nuanced image of Japan in my mind: a country with a vibrant, multifaceted, never-sleeping capital; a complex (and often surprising, to the average Westerner) social structure; a unique, exceptional blend of tradition and innovation; a busy student life that usually combines classes, bukatsu (extra-curricular club activities), baito (a part-time job), and nomikai (parties); a distinct business culture; long work hours; and delicious food.

Unfortunately, when I arrived in Japan my Japanese wasn’t good enough for me to understand regular classes taught in Japanese, and as such I mostly took courses from the Hitotsubashi University Global Education Program (HGP), which offers courses taught in English. These courses cover many academic fields: business, economy, law, international relations, social sciences, etc. Personally, however, my favorite courses were those that gave me some insight into Japan and Japanese culture. For me, these included courses on cultural communication and business culture, along with a series of workshops. The two courses on Japanese affairs provided me with a theoretical framework through which to analyze my experiences in Japan, and they gave me a deeper understanding and appreciation for the differences I noticed between how things are done in Japan and in my own country. It’s always fun for me to realize that I am experiencing in real life something I studied in class! As for the workshop series, it was a wonderful opportunity to experience Japan through field trips and various cultural activities that would be difficult to participate in without a strong knowledge of Japanese: trying on a kimono, attending a tea ceremony, tasting sake (a Japanese alcoholic beverage), going to an onsen (Japanese hot spring) ... truly unforgettable memories!



The HGP also offers Japanese language courses up to the intermediate level (advanced courses are available too at Hitotsubashi, just not under the HGP umbrella). I found them very useful, and when paired with regularly using Japanese in everyday life, I discovered that I improved my language skills very quickly. The classes are relatively challenging and require diligent work, but that is standard for learning any language. They still leave you with plenty of free time to visit and have fun during your exchange!

Looking back, I can say confidently that I achieved my study-abroad goals. I've improved my Japanese, successfully adapted my habits to fit a new lifestyle abroad, experienced Japanese culture from the inside, made new friends, and tried out and become comfortable with many things that were previously outside my comfort zone. Living abroad is an absolutely thrilling experience, and Hitotsubashi was a tremendously welcoming university. I am so fortunate to have been able to have this experience. I rate it a 10 out of 10 and would love to do it again!