

Victoria Abroad Evaluation Form

PLEASE TYPE THIS EVALUATION FORM & EMAIL IT TO VICTORIA ABROAD AS A WORD DOCUMENT

A: Student Information

VUW degree(s)	Bachelor of Arts
Major(s)	Modern Language Studies
Exchange Institution	Akita International University
VUW Tri & Year of Exchange	Tri 2 2015

B: Finances

Please detail your basic costs in New Zealand dollars. This will help future students plan their own budgets. (Enter your number rounded to the nearest dollar.)

Books	Most classes I took didn't require textbooks, there were only 2 and they were about \$40 each
Accommodation	Room + bedding charge is around \$1200 (flat fee) and then you will have to pay a varying amount depending on use of utilities and which dorm you stay in (as in one of them you do not have to pay utilities)
Return Airfare	\$1000
Local Transportation	To the local shops, \$4 there and back; to the city center, around \$10 there and back (bus and train fare)
Meals	Could be up to \$1000 if you opt into the meal plan, otherwise it will depend on how much you eat. Food is very cheap in Japan, when compared to New Zealand.
Visa	No cost
Health & Insurance	
Personal Spending	\$800-\$1000
Communications (phone, etc.)	Bought a sim card for around \$30 with a plan that cost about \$12 a month
Other fees (specify)	
What unexpected costs did you encounter? What items were more or less than expected?	Food is really cheap so it is possible to make a big saving if you are smart about how you spend.

How did your financial expenses compare to what you originally expected to spend?

I spent far less than I imagined, mainly because of the cost of food, and that the isolated location of the campus meant that you had to make a conscious effort to do things like go to the mall or into the city and spend, so this makes you think a lot more about whether you will want to spend money or not.

By what means did you maintain your finances? What would you recommend? (Credit card, foreign bank account, travelers checks, etc)?

The foreign bank account is a good idea. The university will set you up with one if you ask for it, and if you

make a large transfer over to the account, you will have convenient access to money in the local currency, which means you won't have to: 1) worry about the fluctuating exchange rate 2) make a bus trip to the mall every time you need to make a withdrawal (since the university has a money machine that accepts the bank card of the local bank only, you'd have to go to the mall every time you wanted to get cash out, and in a cash-carrying society like Japan, you want to have cash on you at all times and at your convenience).

What financial advice would you give students attending the same university as you?

Unless you decide to head to the city or the mall on a constant basis (the transport cost adds up quite a bit), you'll find that you'll barely spend any extra money because there's only really a convenience store near the campus for you to spend money at so I doubt you will break the bank considering the relatively low cost of food.

What was the average cost of a can of coke or coffee in your host country?

Coke costs about \$1.50 or so for a large can (not the small kind that we are used to). As for coffee, you're looking at a similar price as Wellington, but for something that's not that great quality in comparison.

C: Visas & Insurance **Please note this information is recommended by VUW students & current at the time of their exchange. For all up-to-date visa information you must check with the embassy/consulate of your host university.*

Did you have to apply for a visa? If so, was it difficult? What was the process, how long did it take and how much did it cost?

The visa is incredibly easy to apply for. There is no charge, and the only part of the process that takes a long time is waiting for the certificate of eligibility from the host university, but this is not in your hands, and all the parts that are do not require a great deal of stress and the processing time about two business days once you have all the required material.

Do you have any advice for future students when applying for visas to your host country?

Make sure you apply for that certificate of eligibility very early, I applied for mine at the earliest moment, and yet it still arrived very close to the date that I was going to leave on. Any later and there will be a great deal of difficulty.

Did your host university have a mandatory insurance? Or a particular insurance they recommended? If Yes, what was it and how much did it cost?

Yes, it cost just over \$200, but it is refunded to you if there is no need for it to be used.

What insurance company did you use and would you recommend it to future students?

I used 1Cover for my travel insurance. Had no problems so would recommend.

D: Academics at Host University

Which courses did you take while on exchange? Please rate the difficulty of each course (1-5, 1 = Very Easy & 5 = Extremely Difficult) and leave any comments you may have.

Course Title	Language of Instruction	VUW course equivalent or elective	VUW points/credits value	Rating (1-5)	Comments
VUW Trimester 1/YEAR					
VUW Trimester 2/YEAR 2015					
Intermediate Japanese Language	Japanese	JAPA205	30	3	Extremely good intensive language course. I improved in my language skills immensely because of this.
Comparative Education	English	No equivalent	15	3	One of the more academic and challenging English-language courses since the students are 3-4 th year and have better English skills.
Popular culture in language teaching	English	No equivalent	15	1	Not worth taking as it does not teach enough of what it is supposedly supposed to teach.
English Teaching Methods	English	No equivalent	10	4	Involves being tested on practical teaching skills so can be difficult for the unacquainted.

Course Registration/Enrolment

Please describe the registration process at your host university. What kind of help was available?

Course registration is done online and the actual process is fairly easy but the cutoff dates and such are not

incredibly clearly communicated so you must be proactive. Courses seem to be drawn on a lottery system if they are popular so be wary of this too. Because of this, you should always pick more courses than you will actually take just in case.

How successful were you in registering/enrolling for classes you wanted? What advice would you offer to next year's exchange students about registration at your host university?

I was successful in registering for all my courses, but I believe that this is because I chose more academic subjects, and exchange students tend to pick subjects related to culture, (e.g. flower arrangement, tea ceremony), so that is probably why I got all of my choices. These culture subjects are quite popular among the exchange students so be aware of that when picking them.

Do you have any advice for future students when choosing and applying for courses?

Like I have said, the university does not really clearly communicate cutoff dates, and they are very inflexible when it comes to course registration/dropping. I had the experience of being one day late to drop a course, and they would not make any exceptions so I was stuck with a course that I did not want to do, so please be careful and be on the lookout for communication from the staff about cutoff dates as it is easy for them to go unnoticed.

Academic Experience

How did your academic experience differ from your time spend at Victoria? Did the academic experience meet your expectations?

Since the courses (bar Japanese language) are created for speakers whose second language is English, the difficulty is not quite as high but I would say that the workload is equivalent, if not greater than what would be experienced at Victoria.

How did the style of teaching at your host university compare with that at VUW? How did the workload compare to what you would expect at VUW?

The teaching is done entirely in what is the equivalent of Victoria's tutorial groups (i.e. 12-18 students). Many of the classes I took revolved a lot around discussion and essays, rather than large exams. The workload is therefore made up of a steady stream of essays and other activities.

What would you recommend as an appropriate course load for other VUW students visiting your partner university? What specific courses would you recommend to visiting VUW students? Why?

If you decide to take more academic subjects, only take the equivalent of 60 Victoria points (1 AIU point = 5 Victoria points), especially if you take the Japanese language course, since it is very intensive. However, if you decide to take a few cultural subjects, there should be no problem going over 60 Vic points. Also, don't take another language in addition to Japanese, as you will likely be unable to keep up the workload of two intensive subjects, and languages that aren't Japanese are worth only a third of the credits, so it is nearly an impossible to manage amount of work for little reward in terms of credits.

What advice would you give VUW students about succeeding academically at your host university?

The courses, at least in my experience, tend to revolve around many small tasks that are given often. Therefore, with many subjects doing a similar thing, it is important not to let the work pile up too much. As long as you don't do that, there will be no worries.

What was your impression of the computer facilities, library, and internet access at your host university?

They were excellent. No complaints really, easy to access and use. The university uses the library and the

other facilities as a selling point so they are naturally very good.

If you went to a country where English is not the native language, how did you prepare for this? Were there any intensive language courses provided by the host university?

AIU is a unique case in that it is an English-medium university, so you can get away with not knowing the language at all. However, Japanese courses are available, and while not mandatory, are excellent and well worth taking advantage of. Bear in mind that outside the university there is little support for English speakers as Akita is not a major destination for foreign tourists.

E: Accommodation

What form of accommodation did you stay in?

First-year dorm located on campus.

What were the pros and cons of this form of accommodation?

Pros: utilities were free; insulation was very good so barely had to turn on the heater in winter; closest to the classrooms. Cons: has the second oldest and arguably second worst facilities on campus; can get noisy despite 'quiet time' rules being enforced.

What accommodation would you recommend to future students?

Each of the four options have significant pros, cons, both social and financial, so it is important to choose the option whose pros outweigh the cons in your opinion. I visited friends who were staying in each one of the different kinds of rooms and heard their opinions and I don't think there is one single option that stands head and shoulders above the other.

How early can you move into accommodation?

Only about two days before your orientation starts.

What options were available for meal plans or cooking facilities? How satisfied were you with the food?

All the room types except one have cooking facilities. There is a meal plan, but it's not the greatest and so I chose to cook food with my friends. It's not too much difference in terms of price to cook your own meals and you also get the added benefit of choosing your own meal times.

If you lived in off-campus housing, how easy was it to find? What should future VUW exchange students know about living off-campus?

There is no option of off-campus housing for exchange students.

Do you have any tips of advice for future students when applying for accommodation?

Nothing other than what I have already mentioned.

F: Personal & Cultural Connections

What was it like making friends? How successful were you at making friends with local (i.e., not international) students?

It's easy to make international friends, but not so much Japanese friends, for a variety of reasons. Japanese people are rather shy, and not too willing to talk in English if they think that their skill level is not very good. Also, many are also very busy and work themselves (in my opinion a little too) hard, so don't have so much free time. The best way to make Japanese friends is to join a club or committee. It takes a while, but you will get to know some of the locals. However, Japanese students are also quite aware of the temporary nature of their exchange student friends, so don't be surprised if you make a few local friends, but none of them are too close to you, as was the case with me.

What was it like to adjust to the culture of your exchange country/university?

It is quite different to NZ culture, as where NZ culture is much more easygoing, Japanese culture is not so. It took a little while, but with some time to observe, the differences were easy to handle.

What, if any, cultural differences did you find particularly challenging? How would you recommend students to prepare for these differences?

One of the difficult parts is social communication with other Japanese people. You must be quite direct if you want someone to meet you somewhere or do something with you, as in our culture saying things like "are you free on Thursday" means implicitly that you want to meet with the particular person on a Thursday, but this can fly under the radar for Japanese people.

What parts of the culture did you most appreciate?

I appreciate that Japanese people are quiet, diligent, and serious-minded. I will miss that a lot.

How were you treated by local people? By university staff and faculty? By students?

I think the local community is used to the presence of exchange students by now and so I barely noticed anything. As I mentioned before, local students will befriend you, but probably be reluctant to get too close for obvious reasons, since it would be emotionally quite difficult to get attached to people who are very temporary in their lives.

As far as you could tell, how easy would it be for students with disabilities to study at your partner university? For students who are visible minorities in your host country? For students who are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered?

The host university and the country in general seems to be quite accepting of LGBT people. There were no disabled people at the university so I can't really make a comment.

Did you face any issues regarding discrimination in your host country? What were they, and what advice would you give to future students?

Japan is, to put it bluntly, reasonably xenophobic. Everything is a lot harder to do as a foreigner, like getting a sim card for your phone and the like. However, this xenophobia is more expressed in things like policy, foreigners just have to jump through a lot more hoops to get things done, but otherwise you will not feel like a second-class citizen or anything drastic like that. My advice is just that students should quickly come to terms with the fact that they are an outsider looking in, and as long as they have no illusions otherwise, as well as having courtesy to the culture of the country, they will have no difficulties.

G: Extra-curricular/Social Activities

What organized activities (clubs, sports, etc.) were available to students? What extra-curricular activities would you recommend to future exchange students?

It's a very traditional mix of sports (both Western and Japanese), as well as many, many dance and singing groups. My advice is to follow your interests into any club you find appealing.

What do you recommend other visiting students see or do on their weekends or holidays?

There's not a whole lot to do in Akita so I recommend taking a weekend trip somewhere else.

What opportunities were there for students to work on-campus? Off-campus?

Students have the ability to work doing small English-teaching jobs every so often. The pay is not very much

so it is more about the experience.

What volunteer or internship opportunities were there for students?

None for exchange students.

5 things to take to your host country or region

1	Towels (Japan does not make very good towels)
2	Deodorant (it might sound silly, but deodorant is pretty poor here too, given that apparently Japanese people don't sweat as much as Westerners. This isn't scientific so please don't quote me on this)
3	Some rudimentary language skills. Japanese people love to help you out in English, but in sticky situations, they might not be able to properly convey some things. Also, they appreciate if you give it a go.
4	Something warm for winter. Akita is really cold in winter.
5	

5 pieces of useful advice would tell a VUW student going to your host university

1	Join a club.
2	Don't expect to meet Japanese friends right away, and don't expect them to be too close with you.
3	Be quiet, courteous, and work hard. I think that people in Japan respect that.
4	Make sure you have a lot to occupy yourself with on the weekends. AIU is a little isolated so you have to bear this in mind.
5	The small, close-knit campus makes it easy to make friends, but also easy to get sick of them, so be wary of that too.

Top 5 Things to do

What are your 'Top 5 Things To Do' future VUW students at your host university or city/country?

1	Participate in, or at least attend the AIU festival. The atmosphere and hard work that goes into it is amazing and nothing like I've ever seen, and people from around the prefecture come to look so it really buzzes.
2	Explore Akita city. Since the campus is off the beaten track a little bit, and getting to the city can be a little bit of a hassle, it can be easy to forget about what the city has to offer, but it's well worth going to. There's abundant gardens, a great art gallery, and the ruins of a castle right in the middle of the city.
3	Explore the surrounding areas, too. There are a lot of lovely parks that are only a couple of train stops away from the city.
4	Go to Manga Souko. People don't tell you about this place, but it's a massive shop that sells second-hand comics, DVDs, and video games, among other things. Everything is very cheap, so if comics and such are your thing, then it is well worth taking the trip to Kamiijima, which is two train stops from Akita City. It's open 24 hours, just in case you want comics at 3am.

5

Take a trip on a long weekend. It's important to take some time out from country living to look at other parts of Japan. We had a week off and so went to Tokyo, which was great, and made me appreciate how quiet and peaceful Akita was. If you don't have a week off, there's plenty of other places to go too.

H: Personal Experience

Please write one paragraph about your exchange experience. Plus, don't forget to submit some photos to the exchange office!!

Akita International University was a unique and interesting experience. It was small, and everybody lived on campus, much like a boarding school, so there were plenty of opportunities to meet people. The classes were small, and the teaching and assessment style was very different to Victoria. Everything was in English, even for Japanese students, so that was interesting. Schoolwork actually kept me pretty busy, especially the Japanese language classes, but the payoff was excellent as I think my Japanese has improved a lot as a result. I still had time to join some clubs, a traditional/modern Japanese fusion dance-type thing, and an event-planning committee, where I made some great friends and got to participate in some awesome events, like our school festival, and also being invited to perform at the neighboring university's festival too. Japanese culture is a little odd when compared to the very relaxed way Kiwis do things, but once I got used to it, it was plain sailing, and there's lots of little things I miss! It was an experience that I don't think I would have had anywhere else in Japan, and I am very thankful to have been given the opportunity to go!