

Victoria Abroad Evaluation Form

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

A: Student Information

VUW degree(s)	BSc
Major(s)	Computer Science/Japanese
Exchange Institution	Gakushuin University
VUW Tri & Year of Exchange	2014 Tri 1 & 2

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	\$200
Accommodation	\$320/month
Return Airfare	\$2000
Local Transportation	\$50/month (commuting to school) + \$40/month (other trips)
Meals	\$70/week (~\$300/month)
Visa	\$120
Health & Insurance	\$300
Personal Spending	\$2400 (miscellaneous activities) + \$4000 (travel/holidays)
Communications (phone, etc.)	\$1200
Other fees (specify)	
What unexpected costs did you encounter? What items were more or less than expected?	Food and amenities in general were cheaper than I expected (aside from specific items such as meat and fruit). Accommodation is also quite reasonable, if you choose the options Gakushuin provides. However, my phone bills and general spending (on activities, events, etc) were more expensive than I thought.

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

I kept within my budget reasonably well – some things were cheaper than I expected and others were more expensive so it balanced out. I definitely could have spent less if I needed to.

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

I ended up just using my NZ credit card to get cash out of ATMs periodically. Japan is a very cash-based society, so I didn't feel the need to set up a bank account/credit card/etc while I was there, although it's apparently quite straightforward.

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

Get lunch at the university dining hall – it's cheap, plentiful and reasonably tasty. Make sure you get a

“teiki” (commuter pass) since it makes the train ride to uni vastly cheaper.

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

120 yen (about \$1.50)

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?

I did have to apply, but Gakushuin sent me a package of documents which included a visa application form and proof of student status which made it fairly straightforward. I basically just had to take the Gakushuin documents to the Japanese embassy, fill out a form and wait a couple of weeks for my visa to arrive. The total cost was about \$120.

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

There are a lot of confusing and incomplete explanations in various documents online and on paper, so if you don't understand them (like me) then just go and ask at the embassy. The process for me was actually much simpler than it first seemed.

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, the standard national health insurance was mandatory and was part of the process of moving into my accommodation. It cost about 1000 yen (\$12) per month. You don't pay when you sign up, you get a bill halfway through the year which you can then choose to pay all at once or in monthly instalments.

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

I just had the mandatory health insurance while I was there, and used 1Cover NZ for travel insurance. I never had to make any claims, but the signup process was quite straightforward at least ...

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					
Japanese Elementary x4	Japanese	JAPA304	20	3	Excellent teachers and very small classes – I learned a lot
		Unspecified	20		I was unable to get

		Arts			specific credit for all my Japanese courses, but I would still recommend taking as many as you can
A History of War	English	Unspecified Arts	10	1	Easy but fascinating – temporary lecturer so unlikely to be offered again
German Elementary	Japanese	Unspecified Arts	10	3	Easy assessment but hard to understand and too much rote learning for my liking
VUW Trimester 2/YEAR					
Japanese Intermediate x4	Japanese	JAPA305	20	4	Hard but manageable
		Unspecified Arts	20		
A History of Human Rights	English	Unspecified Arts	10	1	As above; fascinating but done by a temporary lecturer
Japanese Culture, Society and Science	English	Unspecified Arts	10	2	Interesting, but more about Gakushuin's current research topics than Japanese society in general

Course Registration/Enrolment

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

Almost nothing until I arrived. However, when I did arrive people were happy to sit down with me and recommend courses, find English-taught ones and so on. Gakushuin does very little online compared to Victoria, so instead of being able to look at courses online, I got a massive book of the syllabus upon arrival.

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 would have liked to do some Japanese culture courses as well (or instead of the English ones) but I don't think my language skills were up to it, so I'm fairly happy with what I took. I would suggest trying out (ie. going to the lectures of) a couple of Japanese courses, then asking the staff about English-taught courses if they seem too difficult.

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

You don't need to think about it much until you arrive.

Academic Experience

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

There were fewer classes and tutorials than I expected, and I generally had quite a relaxed year. This wasn't what I was expecting (I expected to have to do a lot of work just to keep up), but it gave me time to do club activities and explore Tokyo, so it wasn't necessarily a bad thing.

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 Japanese courses seemed more like high school classes due to the smaller number of students, and I found I learned more as a result. Other courses were more similar to VUW. Like I say, I found I had a smaller workload than I expected, although for me the exam period was more stressful than VUW.

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?

I would recommend taking four Japanese language courses per semester – if you take several teachers' courses you cover a good variety of topics. I especially recommend Kobayashi-sensei's elementary courses (even for people closer to intermediate level overall) because you build up a great toolbox of ways to learn kanji (one of the hardest parts of studying the language, at least for me). Aside from that, I would consult the CIE (Center for International Exchange) staff, who tend to be good at matching you to courses that fit your skill level.

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

Basically the same advice as at VUW – keeping up with course material is the most important thing, because it's even harder to catch up in a second language. Join the SA (Student Assistant) programme, especially if you are taking any essay-based courses. If you sign up for it you get two hours a week one-on-one time with a Japanese student studying how to teach Japanese, so they can help a lot with homework, speeches, essays and so on.

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

The library is small compared to VUW, but there is a separate Foreign Language Center library which has some good resources for learning Japanese. There is some wifi on campus but it doesn't cover everywhere. You need to learn how to use the Japanese-language version of Windows, but the computer facilities are generally quite good and there is free printing available on campus.

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?

I spent the whole year studying the language in a fairly intensive way. I prepared by talking to Japanese

friends, watching anime, reading manga and suchlike, but I'm not sure how much help it was. Most people speak a small amount of English so I never felt totally unable to communicate.

E: Accommodation

What form of accommodation did you stay in?

Azalea House, a university hostel similar to VUW's Halls of Residence.

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

Pros: Very cheap, fully furnished room (including bed sheets), own kitchen and bathroom, many other exchange students in the same building, 40-minute commute to uni (which is very short for Tokyo), in a quiet suburb.

Cons: Small room, limited kitchen facilities (unless you buy a microwave, kettle and so on), tiny bathroom.

What accommodation would you recommend to future students?

The room size is quite standard for Tokyo, so there's not much you can do about that. I would definitely recommend Azalea based on the price, convenience and the help/companionship you can get from other exchange students.

How early can you move into accommodation?

For me, 1st April (roughly a week before the start of term)

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

Only one ring on the stove, depending on the room you may have a rice cooker/kettle/microwave as well (and you can buy them if you don't) but it's still quite limiting. Good enough for simple student meals though so I was reasonably satisfied, and ready-made food at convenience stores/supermarkets is very cheap so I didn't feel the need to cook every night.

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

Not too hard, you just need to figure out Tokyo's train system. Detailed instructions were provided so I didn't have any problems.

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

Unless there's an unusually large number of exchange students you're very likely to get into Azalea House, but apply early just in case you end up needing to make your own arrangements.

F: Personal & Cultural Connections

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

Much easier than I thought. I would recommend going to the CIE at lunchtime since the Japanese people who go there are more friendly than most (would start conversations with me and were prepared to listen as I explained things in broken Japanese). Students generally were easier to get to know than I thought, although it was hard making friends outside uni.

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

Japan is quite Westernised in many ways so I didn't find any major problems. If you're a foreigner, Japanese people are very hard to offend, and once you become friends they are happy to explain their culture without expecting you to instantly become an expert in it.

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

The respect culture was probably the hardest thing to adjust to, particularly in uni clubs. I would recommend you study some keigo (respectful language) if you plan to join a club or if you want to understand public announcements. People will expect you not to know this and be very impressed (and more accepting) if you can speak even a little.

What parts of the culture did you most appreciate?

Japanese people are incredibly law-abiding, which can be scary at times but means that if you lose something (on a train, for example) you have a very high chance of getting it back. I enjoyed seeing how today's students are becoming more outgoing and individual without losing their traditional way of being gentle and helping other people.

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

Respectfully by local people – people are willing to help if you're stuck but it's hard to have conversation with a stranger. University staff were much friendlier, particularly those who'd experienced Western culture before. Students also tended to be respectful and shy, but most were keen to make friends – you just have to go out of your way to talk to people in class and so forth.

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?

I didn't see anyone with obvious disabilities at my host university, but I imagine it wouldn't be too hard. The Japanese generally seem to be accepting of minorities (particularly in Tokyo) and curious about other ethnicities (although gender is not something that's discussed much). I had a gay friend among the other exchange students who didn't feel excluded or discriminated against at all.

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

I didn't experience any discrimination. The only thing I would say is that you need to make an effort to speak Japanese – people will silently judge you if you act like you have absolutely no interest in the Japanese

language/culture.

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?

There are literally hundreds of clubs and circles (casual clubs) at Gakushuin. I would recommend joining at least one – it's a good way to meet people and experience culture. There will undoubtedly be a club for what you're interested in, whether it's martial arts, traditional crafts, anime, manga, skiing, journalism, etc. I got a long and complicated book listing all the clubs when I arrived, but it was much easier just asking around (at the CIE for example) than trying to read it.

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

Explore Tokyo and go further afield if you can (to Kyoto, Hiroshima, Okinawa, whatever). Invite other exchange students or people from your club, since most of Tokyo's activities and tourist spots are much more fun with other people. It might also be a good opportunity to go to other places in Asia (Korea, China, etc.) since flights there are generally quite cheap and quick.

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

Very little on-campus. Off-campus there are plenty of English teaching schools and restaurants where you can find part time work fairly easily. Teaching English is much better paid than most student jobs in Japan (and NZ).

What volunteer or internship opportunities were there for students?

To be honest, I'm not sure. Japanese people don't seem particularly involved with volunteer work and I never saw any internship opportunities.

5 things to take to your host country or region

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| 1 | Japanese cash (you may struggle to find an ATM that works with foreign credit cards – 7Eleven is your best bet for this by the way) |
| 2 | A warm jacket. If you don't bring one you'll need to buy one because it gets bitterly cold in winter |
| 3 | Cellphone. It goes without saying, but bring your NZ one even if you plan to buy one there |
| 4 | Electronic dictionary, unless you have one on your phone |
| 5 | |

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

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| 1 | Join a club! Best way to make friends and experience Japanese student life |
| 2 | Get used to taking the train/changing trains/etc, because it's annoying if you miss your stop en route to an important appointment |

3	There are lots of cheap and fun things to do in the city. tokyocheapo.com is a great resource
4	Ask Japanese people which tourist activities they recommend – they'll probably want to go with you and it's a good way to make friends
5	Stay on good terms with the people at the CIE

Top 5 Things to do

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

1	Tokyo Skytree (the surrounding shops and aquarium as well as the tower)
2	Day trips to places like Yokohama and Kamakura
3	Go to the university festival (daigakusai) in September/October
4	Get a yukata (summer kimono) and go to fireworks
5	Christmas illuminations

H: Personal Experience

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

This exchange has been the best year of my life. My Japanese improved massively and it's really inspired me to keep learning and go back there one day. I made heaps of friends and visited all sorts of places around Tokyo and around Japan. I also didn't experience the major culture shock I was expecting, and my exchange as a whole went much more smoothly than I first thought. Joining the Aikido club was a particular highlight – although the training was hard, it was a great way to make friends and a fascinating window into Japanese culture. I'd definitely recommend Gakushuin University to anyone studying Japanese regardless of your language level: the people, places and opportunities you discover make it a truly amazing experience.



